

FROM LONDON TO THE BALTIC SEA

London – Amsterdam - Kiel Canal – Bornholm – Gotland –Stockholm – Tallin –
St Petersburg – Helsinki - Copenhagen

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London

Our trip starts from London. I lived in London in the late 1950s-early 60s. I had occasional trips thereafter but with specific short term purposes that didn't allow me get to grips with the awful architectural changes that had taken place: The Shard, The Gherkin, The Walkie-Talkie, The Slug, The London Eye, post-modern horrors that seemed an ill fit to the real London sights: The Tower of



London, Tower Bridge, The Houses of Parliament and Big Ben, Trafalgar Square (My god they didn't ride on Sir Edward Landseer's lions in those days) and of course, The Changing of the Guard.

We arrive at Heathrow in brilliant sunshine and 20 degrees. We board a bus to our overnight at the Savoy Hotel stuck between the Embankment and The Strand. After severe traffic on the freeway we go through quiet Sunday traffic to the Embankment to Savoy Street where our hotel is. Richard D'Oyley Carte built the Savoy Hotel in 1904 next to the Savoy Theatre after he became stinking rich on the Gilbert and Sullivan's respective backs because as he said, "I wanted a decent hotel to stay in." It was then the best hotel in London, if not now. It had retained a retro look including a retro bathroom but then I don't think I've been in a British hotel that didn't have a retro bathroom. A view from our window tells me that the most striking examples of postmodern architecture are located in the City of London, the finance sector where it's ok to flaunt your wealth.

Despite being heavily jet lagged we can't stay indoors on such a glorious afternoon, so we venture across Waterloo Bridge to South Bank. Under the Festival Hall plinth are people sunning their legs, a vast book sale, street art, kids on skateboards, restaurants, and above is the Festival Hall much frequented by me over fifty years ago seeing it now from the Hungerford Bridge. The whole South Bank area and the Embankment was then minus the skateboards and its busy multicultural population. Here's the Sphinx and the 5,000 year old Cleopatra's needle

Dinner that night was in a restaurant on a boat that took us downriver, to Greenwich and beyond, in glorious late sunshine, cursing that had I known we would have brought our cameras. Here was a different London: once the East end meant poverty, cheerful little cockney battlers, crime, Limehouse; now it means high rise apartments, giant office blocks and a great deal of wealth.

Next morning a tour of the London sights. Not much time to get off the bus so we capture our route through the West End out of the bus window. St James is the street of gentleman's clubs dating from Regency times when Beau Brummel took 5 hours to be encased in his finery, so that he could sit in the bow window of his club affecting to watch the world go by, but in reality allowing the world to admire him in his finery. The son of a shopkeeper his affectations gave him admission to aristocratic circles including the Prince Regent later George IV. When asked how much it would cost to keep a single man in clothes, he was said to have replied: "Why, with tolerable economy, I think it might be done with £800." That is, approximately £103,000 today. His legacy survives although at cut rates: St James St is strictly for gentlemen's *accoutrements*: shirts, shoes, wine.



We arrive at St James Royal Palace built by Henry VIII and cross to Green Park in time to see the closing of the Changing of the Guard. Some shots as go: a memorial to women in WW2, Eros, a bony horse meant as spoof of these memorials to war at Trafalgar Square. Lunch at Covent Garden Market, the market is still a market but now selling trashy things, mostly fake antiques, not the tonnes of fruit and vegetables that used to supply London. Covent Garden Opera House is now marked with a twirling doll on the side of the building and the box office area much enlarged entrance no longer on Floral Street. A masochistic cockney clown allows himself to be sandwiched between two beds of nails, the nails surely made of plastic or sponge.

Our bus to the ship moored at the Southwark cruises slowly through the City of London. We pass the Halls of Justice for civil cases only, a dragon whose job is to guard the City, St Pauls, Christopher Wren's monument to the Great Fire. Cross via Tower Bridge, where in the 50s we were told that a bus driver had inadvertently entered the lane as the bridge began to be raised. He could either stop and possibly roll back into the traffic behind, or accelerate and jump the gap – which he did. The gap was probably only a matter of an inch or two but retelling the story has made it an Evel Knievel job.



Around the tower we go, passing St Hallows church where Samuel Pepys stood on the roof and watched the fire of London. As we board our ship we see what looks awfully like a boat load of asylum seekers, but as this is Britain and not Australia they are allowed to go ashore.

We sail under Tower Bridge, past the Prospect of Whitby (why does that ring a bell?), our tug lets us go to find our own way to Amsterdam. Then we pass the Greenwich Observatory, time for lifebelt drill, dinner, and we sail off into the sunset.

Amsterdam

The ship's tour director said: "Here is a Trivial Pursuit Question: What is the capital of The Netherlands? Amsterdam you say? Wrong, it is the Hague." But our Dutch guide said Wrong, it is Amsterdam. The Dutch Parliament is in the Hague, the capital is Amsterdam, the greatest population and the business centre. Wikipedia agrees with our guide: Amsterdam it is.

Holland has had a glorious history of wealth and world domination, starting probably with the Hanseatic League of the 14 century. Although Hanse means German and it was German merchants who formed the free trade agreement, hopefully with no ISDS clauses, it was the Dutch who rose to be the most powerful in the League.



Today the Netherlands have a population of 16 million, 2.6 living in Amsterdam. Despite appearances, only 16% work in industry and only 3% in agriculture although this is one of their largest exports. Like most of the countries we visit, Holland is a social democracy. There are 30 political parties 9 in power at the moment, including an Animal Party with 3 seats. We too have an Animal Party only we call it Party (you can fill in the blank). Taxes in Holland are relatively

high: income tax just over 50% with VAT at 21% with 6% on essentials. That is offset by the fact that education is virtually free right up to University with a living allowance, health care is free, infrastructure is marvellous. This is a pattern we also saw across the Scandinavian countries we visited.

The windmills were originally built to pump water back into the sea, after canals were created to drain the land. In 1953 however the dykes holding back the sea broke killing 2,000 people. In these days of rising sea levels you would think this would be a huge worry. However, hi tech systems of gates and levees are designed to prevent such a catastrophe again.

We bus to the city for a canal boat ride. Many people live in house boats because they are cheaper than apartments. Some buildings look out of kilter because they are built on mud and the pilings sink a little deeper with time. Here is swing a bridge and then 8 bridges in a row, like needles waiting to be threaded.

We walk into a close that was built for genteel unmarried ladies. They needed cheap, safe accommodation and this is it. The conditions were that they dress appropriately and modestly and do not entertain gentlemen in their rooms.

We pass the Concertgebouw Hall on our way to the Rijks Museum, which backs on to the Railway Station built in similar style. The Rijks is built beside an overpass to the Station, you drop down a flight of stairs to enter the Museum and from there you can see the traffic going by overheard. Originally a religious building, it is now determinedly secular, the stained glass windows portray Dutch intellectuals.



The museum is huge and we only have time to look at the high point of the Dutch masters of 16th-17th century. Until now I hadn't seen why they were so highly acclaimed. The first view is of precision, light and realism. On closer look, the detail is extraordinary and many are loaded with metaphor.

Here is a still life by Heda (early 17th century). Two things stand out: the plates are nearly falling off the table, as are we mere mortals due to fall off the table of life. And like this peel of lemon, we are withering already (most of us that is to say). A still life by van Dijk has the same hortatory message, when the feast is over, we wither like the apple peel, we like the remaining half of apple are about to topple off the table. Then there is the milkmaid by Vemeer: so much attention to the detail of the surrounding with the light playing on the girls face and the milk as it is poured. This is centuries before The Girl with the Pearl Earring with Scarlett Johansson's help made Vemeer a household word. I finish with Rembrandt's the Night Watch. Rembrandt did a selfie at the back there, which may have promoted one viewer to think the picture would be even more enhanced with a selfie of his own.



Other art works include a room of middle class pastimes: an extraordinarily detailed cross section of a model house, not a doll's house for children but a talk-piece to chat about at soirees before TV came along. A quick view of the library in 17th century style.

Next day we go rural. A grinding of windmills, some canals below the dykes, and a cheese factory. This mill makes peanut oil. Callington mill is an English design but it all seems very familiar. Some street scenes then we see how dramatic the dykes are. We walk onto a splendid esplanade one side the open sea – on the other a drop of about 2-3 metres to the streets of the town. You can see with a couple of metres rise in sea level, the whole town would be flooded out.



We walk through the flower market, tulips of course but many other flowers and some street scenes. We pass the Railway Station, with its massive parking lot of bicycles. We are told that Amsterdam has the highest bicycle usage (and bicycle theft) in Europe but we heard a similar story about Copenhagen. I'll return to this

later.

Kiel Canal

This canal crosses Northern Germany at Schleswig Holstein allowing access from the North Sea to the Baltic Sea in order to avoid the long and rough journey around the Skagerrak. A smaller canal was built by the Dutch in 1784, in the heady days of the Hanseatic League, following the Eider River. The Germans built a larger one using the Elba in 1887-95, which Kaiser Wilhelm widened to take German battleships up to 1914. This may not have been prescient on KW's behalf but it certainly helped the Germans in both WW1 and WW2. After WW2 the UN saw that it became international. It is 98 km long and must be taken slowly to avoid damage from the wash of ships.



In midsummer, the slow progress of about 8 knots is idyllic. It is narrow and you feel you are in the middle of the Germany countryside, farms, villages. Beside the canal people picnic, fish and ride bicycles, while on either bank, small car ferries wait patiently for the big ships to pass so they can deliver the locals to the other side. Several rail and road bridge cross, linking South Germany to the North and to Jutland.

Bornholm

Bornholm is a small, beautiful island with fertile farmlands on the plains and some genuine wilderness in the steep granite highlands. The inhabitants have a laid back lifestyle now but they didn't in years previous. Bornholm being at the mouth of the Baltic Sea has strategic implications: several countries – Germany, Denmark, Sweden – have all fought over it. Although nearer to Germany and Sweden than Denmark, it now belongs to Denmark.

Bornholm was occupied by the Germans during the war and when Germany surrendered to the Western Powers the Nazi Commandment of Bornholm refused to surrender because the invading Soviets were from the East not the West and his orders were to surrender to the Western powers. The Soviet air force pounded the two main cities Rønne and Naxe into ruins and a year later than in

other occupied countries, the German commandant finally surrendered. There were hundreds of homeless as a result, which prompted the Swedes to donate 300 wooden houses to help the dispossessed. The houses were meant to be temporary but the locals liked them so much they are still there today, sitting oddly with the stone and brickwork of the Danish houses.



Denmark has a social democrat government like Holland's: the Danes prefer the high taxes and the ensuing benefits and vote that way every time. In in this free swinging society even the church is financed by the state, including clergy and staff salaries and upkeep of church gardens and property. The state is virtually corruption free, government and politicians are respected and trusted: Danish politicians are in fact the most trusted in the world, Sweden and Norway close behind.

In Denmark there are several political parties, coalitions forming around issues. There is a one house government but given all of the above, politicians are trusted to rule for the benefit of the people: an upper house to keep the bastards honest is unnecessary.

The population of Bornholm is only 40,000 with Rønne the capital at 13,000. The Island is almost self-sufficient, importing some electricity from Sweden and the national dish, herring, imported from Scotland, (That unlikely factoid was told to me by a passenger so I can't vouch for it). What garbage cannot be recycled is burnt, supplying house heating to all houses on the island. In all, it sounded a stress free and healthy lifestyle.

We went on a short bus tour in lovely weather. First stop an 11th century church, originally Catholic but now Lutheran. The building is circular, has walls feet thick and slots for arrows up near the roof making it look more like a fortress than a church. That's because it is both a fortress and a church. In the old days, in the event of an attack from warring tribes or Vikings the parishioners rushed to the church with their belongings and barricaded themselves in till the danger was over. It and its gardens are beautifully kept, thanks to a generous government. Inside at the centre of the circle is a font, with pews circling around it like spectators at a holy coliseum; a plain altar, but more pictures here than many Lutheran churches. There is also a remnant of Viking beliefs. The top windows in the church are so sited that shortly after sunrise in midsummer the sun's rays go through the windows on both sides; in midwinter the same happens the other way. Just like Stonehenge. A rune stone stands beside the door of the church.

We tour through seaside villages, once dedicated to fishing, but that industry was severely curtailed by the EU in order to prevent overfishing. Tourism is now replacing fishing. We drive slowly through the villages of Gudhjem and other jaw breaking names until we reach the northern tip of the Island, to an ancient fortress of Hammerhus, from which there are splendid coastal views.

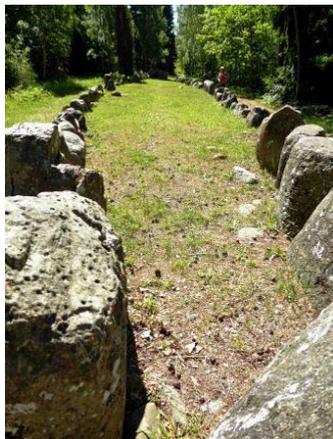


Then to a fish smoking factory at Hasle where we sample just-smoked herrings, the flesh melting with chewable bones. The herring is salty but oddly enough it is better still dipped in salt as you eat. A strong Tuborg ale completes the experience.

The coastline off Halse is beautiful, calm and colourful. The houses too I thought worth putting on record. Bornholm was a surprise, wonderfully peaceful and, in summer, a beautiful place.

Gotland

Gotland is an island off the coast of Sweden, 125 km by 52 km. Gotland means home of the Goths the fierce tribe that overwhelmed Europe and sacked Rome in 420 AD . Gotland was settled from the Early Bronze Age , 5000 BC, leaving dolmens and boat shaped graveyards containing men, women and children half of whom were cremated but half were not for reasons unknown. About 300 such graves are in Gotland.



Gotland like Bornholm has a special attraction as an island, a mild climate compared to mainland Denmark and Sweden, and is also strategically important being in the middle of the Baltic. The Goths spread all over Europe. Originally pagan they converted to Christianity in the 4th century. The Goths accepted the creed of Aryanism, a doctrine that challenged the doctrine of the trinity. Aryanism is based on the reasonable point that the son couldn't be the same age or have the same powers as the father. Both doctrines prevailed until the

Council of Nicea in 4th century ruled in favour of the Trinity as stated in the Nicene Creed and Aryanism was proclaimed a heresy. The Goths were considered heretics from then on, and were persecuted by the Catholic Church, the last lot being murdered in 15th century in Languedoc in France.

The Vikings occupied Gotland in the 7th to 11 centuries, who in turn then converted to Christianity. 120 churches date back to 11th century but all turned Lutheran in 16th century.

Our bus takes us first to visit Hoglint a cliff top view of Visby and along the coast. Next we view the Dolmens. Our driver who is something of an archaeological expert explains the structure, function, and mythology surrounding the shapes. He explains that the ancients held an geocentric view with the earth at the centre. When the sun sets it catches a boat and rises in the East, so the funeral boats sail into the rising sun in the East. Likewise the head of a corpse is laid to rest in West the feet facing east but about half face the other way east to west, I missed the subtle reasoning why this should be so. Our driver has an extraordinary dead pan delivery of the most amazing range of knowledge, etymology of remote words, their meaning in languages ranging from Old English, Icelandic, Swedish, German to Old Norse, while drawing parallels of the creation and sun myths in China, Egypt and Mesopotamia. He also pointed out that the dogs buried in the dolmens were from China, not the N European dogs that are descended from wolves. The ancient world was clearly more cosmopolitan than I had thought. On being praised for his knowledge of prehistory by an academic from Uppsala he replied with a touch of Swedish cynicism: "It seems that you and I are of the same opinion." Uppsala University has a campus at Visby which is world famous for its archaeology faculty.

We drive through a pretty little seaside town to Klinterberget, where a granite ridge extends NE for 60 km. There are fine views here including some wind generators and a not so fine defaced bronze age tablet . Otherwise Gotland is dead flat, with limestone soil that is very fertile, yielding up to 3

crops a year. The hay is baled in these white plastic wrappings, called tractor eggs, that keeps it dry for winter.

Through rich farmland and villages to Eskelhem where we visit an 12th century Church, originally catholic, but the locals didn't paint out all the frescoes or crucifix as they were instructed to do because they liked them and wouldn't be party to vandalism. So as in other Lutheran churches in Scandinavia they still contain remnants of Catholicism.

We are dropped off at Almadalen Park and walk through the old town of Visby, the capital of Gotland, population 20,000. We walk through a medieval gateway and climb through narrow cobbled streets to the Town Square. At one end is St Catherine's Church, which fell on hard times and was neglected until now only the shell remains. It is used for open air drama. Crossing the Square we come to St Maria's Cathedral, and behind that we keep climbing to a plateau protected by the old medieval wall still largely intact. Here is an impeccably kept house in the favourite Swedish colours: red walls and cream trimmings. We walk back through to the town to the ship.



Stockholm

The Old Town of Stockholm was first occupied in about 1000 AD by Vikings who created many trade routes which ultimately developed strong economic and cultural linkages with Holland, Germany, Norway and Poland and other members of the Hanseatic League. Sweden grew into a major European power in the 17th century, Stockholm becoming the official capital of the Swedish empire. Stockholm includes 14 islands of the Stockholm archipelago, the metropolitan area comprising 2.2 million people Sweden itself nearly 10 million.

The day before we arrived in Stockholm was hot and a day of celebration: a royal wedding between Prince Carl Philip and former model Sofia Hellqvist and a royal birth but not involving the same couple. Sailing into Stockholm should be one of the highlights but rotten weather sees that it isn't. We dock next to the old quarter. We bus through the Old City to the Royal Palace to view the remains of the celebrations and a weak changing of the guard compared to London's. Stockholm is one of the world's most sophisticated and visually rich cities but the edge is taken off by viewing through rain and steamed up bus windows. We pass famous sights: the Nobel museum in the Academy and another famous sight.

Sweden is also a social democracy with relatively high taxes. Mothers get a year's maternity leave on near full pay then when they are back at work, fathers too get paternity leave after which the child goes to a child minding centre.



The Vasa was a warship built on the orders of the King of Sweden Gustavus Adolphus for war against Poland-Lithuania (1621–1629), the most heavily armed in the world. However, the heavy cannons and its low draft made it dangerously unstable. Minutes after launching on 10 August 1628, a wind simply blew it over, with almost all the crew drowning. In 1960 it was finally raised and placed in a

museum, relatively undamaged being encased in mud for over 330 years. However it needed lots of TLC and spraying to remove the mud – it was in that conditions that I saw it in a visit to Sweden in 1968. Later it was sprayed with polyethylene glycol and is now almost back to new and one of the most visited tourist attractions in Stockholm.

We have a splendid Swedish lunch in the Skansen theme park: fish, different herrings, rollmops, salmon, meatballs, and fruit based desserts. Skansen is like old Sydney Town except that it is authentic: old buildings lovingly removed and reconstructed on a hill in Stockholm. There are villages an old store and a rune stone which tells marvellous stories if you read it correctly: you start at the dragon's tail.

The sun tries valiantly to see us off and sometimes succeeds, showing us the islands of the Stockholm Archipelago and the houses of the rich.

I think a return visit to Stockholm later in summer is warranted.



Tallinn

Estonia is now only 1.4 million, Tallinn the capital 400,000. Once an important Hanseatic Port in



medieval times, Estonia has been conquered and reconquered by Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Tsarist Russia then a brief period of independence until WW2 when it became part of the Soviet Union until 1991. Yet Estonia is one of the most hi tech countries of all, having produced Skype as they proudly tell us, but the

Swedes proudly told us the same thing. It turns out both are correct: it was a joint venture. The country is currently in deep recession and losing population. There are more people of Estonian decent living in Australia than in Estonia itself, mainly as a result of postwar migration (at that time the politically acceptable “blue eyed Balts”, you might remember).

St Olof's 13th century church at the harbour has a very tall spire which served as a lighthouse. The old city is in two parts, the upper old town where the aristocrats lived: a Russian cathedral facing the king's palace now the house of parliament, with a lookout to see if the peasants are behaving themselves. We pass a drama school to a church. Inside social class jumps out at you. That little house is for the aristocrats to attend service out of sight of all those smelly lower orders in the congregation; those coats of arms on the walls celebrate a death within an aristocratic family, even for the death of a baby never mind that coats of arms are about battlefields. Such feudalism in Estonia lasted into the 20th century. Once Catholic the Churches are now Lutheran, but some still retain much of the ornamentation of Catholic days.



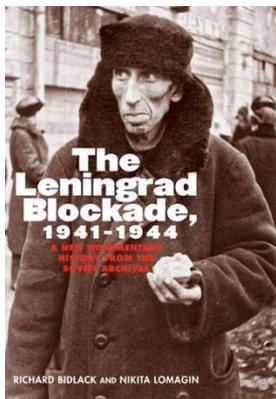
The Upper City for all its feudal glory is not the most interesting. The Lower City where the peasants lived is more interesting. We descend a narrow path lined with artists' drawings and enter an old gate into the Lower city. You can tell where the wall of the Lower City begins: it is marked by a long boot, which is what the peasants wore. A craft shop sells a herbal Estonian liqueur; we buy a bottle,

a very strong herbal taste but too sweet – but a dash in the never ending supply of complimentary white wine in our cabin fridge creates an exceedingly nice aperitif.

The buildings here date back to the 15th century. A play is going on celebrating the Dutch invasion and conquest of Estonia with musical accompaniment. I wondered why the Estonians would celebrate a Dutch invasion in English? “It was a long time ago,” someone explained. Certainly they celebrate the more recent German and Russian invasions differently: here a statue marks the Estonian’s struggle against the red army in the 1907 and 1917 revolutions. But hang on, I see evidence of an American invasion as we exit the city relics: those dreaded three golden arches.

St Petersburg

Two Russian views of Russia: “Russia is not a country, it is the world.” “Poor Russia, it is so far from God, so close to Siberia.” Both I think mean the same thing, an impression confirmed after we visited Archangel and Murmansk.



In the horrific three-year siege of Leningrad by the Germans, over one million citizens died, mostly from starvation, and 85% of buildings were badly damaged or destroyed. Today, almost all the heritage buildings created in just two short centuries have been completely restored most in the last twenty years since *perestroika*, which is remarkable given that St. Petersburg in particular suffered very high unemployment and poverty from the early years of privatization following *perestroika*.

St. Petersburg is built on a broad swampy delta from which water has been drained by many canals. Founded by Peter the Great in 1703, it had been the capital of the Russian Empire for more than two hundred years but after the Russian Revolution Moscow became the capital. Following Lenin’s death in 1924 St. Petersburg became Leningrad, becoming St. Petersburg again in 1991 by popular vote.

Peter the Great was not originally educated to be Tsar but he educated himself, visiting European countries incognito to learn various trades including surgery. Later, as Tsar, he put his learning to effect in the design of his palaces and choice of artwork, and to the terror of his subjects his surgical skills. He had the healthiest court in Europe, for none dared to admit to illness, even toothache – especially toothache – for fear Peter would get to work on them. He especially delighted in extracting teeth; we see his special forceps.

Peter built the enormous Winter Palace, designed by the architect Rastrelli in the highly ornate Russian baroque style, within which, and using adjoining palaces, he established The Hermitage, now one of the largest museums in the world, housing the art collections of tsars down to Nicholas II in 1917: over 3 million works, of which only five percent are on display at any one time. We spent a morning there with a guide who whisked us through Titian’s *The penitence of Mary Magdalene*, Correggio’s *Portrait of Woman*, Spada’s *the martyrdom of St Peter*, Mazzuolaa’s *Death of Adonis*, Murillo’s *Boy with a Dog*, Rembrandt’s *Portrait of an old Man in Red* (his father I think). Many ancient Greek and Roman pieces, walls with old masters jammed together



as ‘wallpaper’, chandeliers, painted ceilings, rooms heated with huge blue-and-white delft ceramic heaters, each small panel different from any other. All this stuff collected probably not for the love of art or out of caring for the artist, but to feed monstrous egos. ‘See how rich and powerful I am!’ the collections say on behalf of the respective collectors. Peter the Great built the Hermitage and Winter Palace comprising 300 rooms but Catherine the Great needed over 1,000 rooms. She bought art from all over Europe so that “Me and my mice can enjoy them.” Did she just mean rodents, or were “her mice” her many lovers, who if they performed satisfactorily in her strange L-shaped bed, were given awards, promotions and property – and thus access to her art collections.



Peter also built the Peterhof or Summer Palace on the edge of the Baltic. His wife Catherine didn't like it so he divorced her by the simple expedient of sending her to a convent. Elisabeth his next wife loved it and entertained there lavishly. There are 30

buildings and pavilions and over one hundred sculptures. We were not allowed to photograph inside the Grand Palace, but outside dropping away is the Grand Cascade leading to the Grand Canal and the Baltic. The golden statues represent key events in Russian and classical history arranged to give a different array of effects with the falling water.

The ‘gate’ to St. Petersburg is the Customs House, with its quaint columns representing Roman styke where the prows of defeated ships were built into the columns. Peter the Great also built Peter and Paul Cathedral with an exceedingly tall delicate spire with a three metre high angel as a weathervane on top. Unfortunately, it became stuck and Peter offered a reward to anyone who could fix it. A peasant climbed to the top, using only ropes, and fixed it. Peter rewarded him with money and a gold goblet inscribed ‘Drink Up’. The peasant happily obeyed, dying of alcohol poisoning shortly after.

The Cathedral in the Fortress is dedicated to several generations of the Romanoffs, the last of course being Nicolas the 2nd Alexandra his wife and five children. Nicholas was cousin to George V whom he has a family resemblance. He was weak and stubborn, a fatal combination, that enraged his subjects. Alexandra's obsession with the mad monk Rasputin didn't help (Russia had a mad monk too). As is well known, Rasputin was hard to kill: he was poisoned, shot and finally drowned. The July 1917 revolution was in part because of Nicholas's intransigence and when the Bolsheviks won they captured the Romanoff family and killed them all. In 1998, their bodies were recovered and buried here in vaults in this Cathedral.

Pushkin is a village outside St Petersburg, named after the poet, where Peter built a Palace for his wife, Catherine the First. On the way, we pass through the lines where the Germans sat for three years trying to starve Leningrad into submission and nearly succeeding. They amused themselves by using a statue of Pushkin for rifle practice and looting Catherine's Palace of the most valuable stuff and trashing the rest, leaving the place a ruin.

Catherine's Palace was originally in the elaborate Russian baroque style of the Winter Palace, but Catherine I's daughter Elizabeth found it too small. When she became Empress, she ordered architect Rastrelli to design two more wings, each as large as the original. Elizabeth owned 30,000 dresses, never wearing the same dress twice, and changing up to nine times a day. Her nephew

Peter III succeeded to the throne. He married a German princess, another Catherine but she, sick of Peter's incompetence and philandering, deposed her own husband to become Catherine the Great: he mysteriously died of indigestion at a banquet. This Catherine II redesigned much of the palace in neoclassical style which she thought more fashionable than baroque. She had the Amber Room paneled with amber, which disappeared under the Nazi Occupation. The present Amber Room was reconstructed in the 1970s on. Photography was forbidden but somehow my finger pressed the wrong button.



Catherine introduced a smidgen of restraint in these royal extravaganzas – she forbade the use of real gold to plate the large domes on these buildings. She refused to live in Catherine's Palace itself, but as that had a standing staff of 300 retainers for the occasional times the Palace was used, this was hardly an economy measure. She lived in a smaller house in the grounds and built a pleasure pavilion, where she entertained guests – on the second floor so the servants couldn't peep in at what might have been going on inside. Guests dropped their dinner orders through a hole in the floor and when ready, tables loaded with their orders were hoisted up. It is said that Catherine conducted orgies in her pavilion, but as those outside couldn't look inside, and those inside weren't talking, who knows?

Tsar Alexander II was assassinated as his carriage was driving along the Griboedov Canal. His son Alexander III started to build the Cathedral of Spilt Blood on the site, completed by Nicholas II in



1907. It is probably the most splendid cathedral in Russia. Catherine and I visited it twice, but each time were unable to enter because our timing was wrong. Third time was still unlucky. We then found to our chagrin that the inside is also more splendid than any other Russian church interior – but the outside is splendid enough.

Catherine's son, Paul I, built a palace for his wife Maria, behind the splendid St Isaac's Cathedral, with a statue of himself on a horse facing the cathedral, but she refused to live in her palace because the horse's bum was pointing to her palace. Paul himself went in fear of assassination in later years and he was right: he was assassinated.

But why are there so many cathedrals in Russian cities? In Russia a 'cathedral' is not the seat of a diocese but any large church. Many of these magnificent buildings were used as museums or storage warehouses during the 80 year atheistic reign of the communists but are largely now restored and used for worship, more than half the population today being practicing Orthodox Christians.

A couple of our fellow passengers wanted to try a caviar restaurant so we join them. The entrée is a special caviar tasting. When we learn the price we wonder whether to pass or to share one entrée between us. Oh well, when in Russia etc. we decide to share. This is what it is; and this is what it costs: US\$150. All three samples – sturgeon, beluga and something else – were bland. We have had far better salmon caviar in Hobart for a fifteenth of that price. For the main course we had a humble farmed duck and calves' liver, which are only dearish.



Warning. Although only this was only the beginning of summer all the major sights were phenomenally crowded. Each tour group had to wait for the next to go through, room by room, making long delays. Six years ago we just sailed through in our own time.

Finland

10,000 years ago the Finnish people emerged from no one quite knows where, with a non Indo-European language called Finno-Ugric with similarities to Estonian, Hungarian, Basque and the Sami or Laplanders of Northern Norway. Helsinki's population is 1.2 million, that of Finland 12 million.

Our guide emphasised Finland's accomplishments: Nokia the biggest industrial complex, but shipbuilding, ice breakers and passenger ships, being important. There is a centre right government in power at the moment but Finland keeps to Scandinavian tradition with higher taxes and an education system that took it to the top of the world in student performance, now it is 12th which is still pretty good. All children learn English and Swedish in school. That may be part of the reason why Finnish students achieve so well; another is that the government spending allows schools with small classes, particularly for disadvantaged students. Whereas the disadvantaged wither in other countries they thrive in Finland, pulling up the overall average and reducing the spread of attainment. In other words, with the right ethos and appropriate financing, schooling does what it is supposed to do, bring out the best in all student not just the rich and bright. Like many of the countries we visit Finland impresses as a small country that gets things done.



We had previously been in Helsinki 20 years ago. The weather then was brilliant, the city quite beautiful, we viewed beautiful angles of the city and harbour as we wandered through some lovely parks. We sat by the wharf and ate fish, reminding us of Hobart. The downside was that we stayed in a mid-city hotel and were kept awake by squealing tyres, revving car engines and smashing bottles.

The Finns had awakened from the dark winter sleep and were celebrating new life. This time the weather is still a wintry 11 degrees and pouring rain. Nothing to celebrate yet.

We are driven around Helsinki but the magic has gone. Here the main square and the public buildings, with a monument to justice, all overlooked by the Helsinki Lutheran cathedral.

We take some street shots as best we can then arrive at Porvoo a village about 50 km from Helsinki for lunch. We visit a local museum, walk the streets, and wonder why we are taken here yet even in the cold and rain the village has its charm. The local parish church has a model boat, no doubt for the fisherfolk of the region. The church has had a series of fires, most recently a young man and friends got drunk, he climbed onto the thatched roof with a lit cigarette in his mouth. He dropped it on the roof, it caught fire and nearly destroyed the church. He was charged with disorderly conduct ordered to pay hundreds of thousands of dollar in damages.

On the way back we see the strange Rock Church, tunnelled out of pure granite. Finally, we step into pouring rain to see the Sibelius memorial, erected after his death in the 1950s. The mayoress was



outraged at its modernity and demanded that his face be added, which it was, but reluctantly as it is not part of the main sculpture.

Copenhagen

As we leave the ship at Copenhagen we pass the English church and the Zink Global man and head first to our Mary's little home. Queen Beatrix was away so Frederick was technically in charge. He and Mary live in a royal ghetto you might say, the Queen one side of the square, her younger son



another side, and Mary and Frederick forming a third side. Busbeed sentries stand guard, their changing of the guard ceremony is quick and businesslike. Mary and Frederick go jogging at 7 every morning before the proles are up and about, then she loads two of the four kids onto a bicycle with a kiddie carriage and takes them to a public day care. No private schools, chauffeured cars, not even helicopters for these Royals.

Denmark is the oldest monarchy in the world, starting in 720, and the oldest democracy starting from 1870 when Denmark became a constitutional monarchy. Opposite on the water front is the new opera house designed by a Dane but not an Utzon. We tour the city, past the Tivoli Gardens, dating from mid 19th century and probably the first fun park in the world, but it is raining and we don't stop. The city is attractive the buildings carefully matching, mainly 18th and 19th century but some very old buildings: only one skyscraper allowed. Here is the largest roof in Denmark.

The House of Parliament, the Courts of Justice and the executive all dwell in a cluster of buildings in a square, opposite is the Treasury. Denmark is a high tax welfare state. Sales tax on cars is especially harsh, tripling the cost of the same car in Germany, so lots of people ride bicycles as in Amsterdam. Tens of thousands are parked at the Railway Station. 60,000 bikes are stolen each year in a kind of chain reaction. If you return to find your bike pinched you pinch somebody else's. Bikes are therefore cheap and old fashioned looking but with some ingenious devices for dogs, children and shopping.



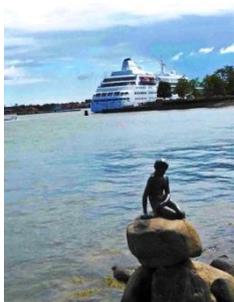
The Rosenburg Castle built by Christian 4th or 5th – the Danish kings are alternately named Frederick or Christian so it's difficult to remember what number Christian it was. Mary's Frederick will be Frederick X in due course. The Throne room is interesting. The throne is made of narwhale and the ornaments of silver. Three silver lions, gilded to look like solid gold prowl around the throne, Christian originally wanted 12 lions but he ran out of money after the 3rd. In the 17th and 18th centuries Danish Royalty seem to live constantly in penury and the poorer they were the more lavish their ceremonies to hide that basic fact. In the 17 century Denmark was very powerful, in control of Norway and Sweden but the Nordic wars put an end to that in 1720. Denmark and Sweden were fighting over Southern Sweden for a long time.



The Carlsberg brewery is adorned with elephants. Elephants have a strange role in Denmark. Once the highest civil honours were in honour of the Virgin Mary, but since Catholicism went out in the 16th century, the Danes chose the Order of the Elephant as their highest honour, because the Virgin and elephants share the characteristics of patience, gentleness and loyalty. The Honour is government property and is returned to the Danish Crown

when the recipient dies.

An ordinary apartment is about \$500,000 but salaries are high and health and education and maternity and paternity leave are free. As in Holland mothers get around 80% of their last salary before birth for a year to allow bonding with their child, after which the child goes into day care. Over 80% of women are employed. Denmark has focused on niche industries—as Tasmania is beginning to do—and is doing very well economically, which Tasmania is not yet doing. Exports include, fish, pork with 5 million pigs exported each year, Lego, medicinals, transport and shipping. Carlsberg donates 5% of profits to a Foundation for the Arts giving tens of millions of Euros to arts projects. Tuborg not to be outdone donates 5% of their profits to scientific research. Maybe we should force the Hancock Group to place 5% of profits into a Rinehart Foundation for Research into Harmonious Family Relations.



We go to a fascinating little place near the airport but miles away in ethos: the erstwhile fishing village of Dragør, population 12,000, only 12 km from central Copenhagen. Dragør was founded in the 12th century, and grew quickly as a fishing port, being a prosperous seafaring town in the latter half of the 19th century. The first part of the name, *Drag-*, refers to drawing (dragging) boats ashore, the ending *-ør* means a beach covered in sand or gravel. Thus boats were dragged onto the beach, including some boats that were stranded and dragged up and salvaged by the inhabitants. A large tower on the sea front and some houses also had watch towers in order to watch out for boats likely to be in trouble. Most of the salvaged cargo went to education and health, the rest split between those who helped in the salvaging according to their role.



In getting to Dragør, we drive through prosperous modern houses to a quaint row of what used to be fishermen's cottages and are now offices and shops on the harbour. The old part of the town is a compact, picturesque maze of alleys with yellow-painted houses, thatched roofs (and not only roofs), and cobblestone streets built in the traditional Danish style. Many of these buildings are hundreds of years old. Flowers bloom in the streets, particularly hollyhocks. All very photogenic.

A 4 km tunnel accessed near Dragør connects with the 8 km Oresund bridge linking Denmark to Malmo in Sweden.

