

Tuesday, June 5

Dear relatives and friends,

Greetings from Scotland. As I write this, we are traveling along the coast near South Queens-ferry, near Edinburgh. We are due to come to rest about 8:00 AM (it is 7:30 now) and we will have to take a tender to land.

We are Orange ticket holders with the group "Alan's Travel", and as such we will meet with the group at 8:30 in the Culinary Arts lounge. The pink tickets will meet at 8:15, and all the other colors (like us) will meet later.

Yesterday we Orange-Ticket-holders (about 45 strong) met first and got the early buses from Newcastle ("Don't take coal to ...") to Hadrian's wall. They rotate the ticket colors to be fair to everyone.

Time to catch a tender...



[Resuming at 10:00PM after spending 8 hours climbing up and down a castle.]

The trip to Amsterdam from the United States of North America five days ago was relatively uneventful—not interrupted by sleep. We were met at the airport by the travel company, who whisked us off for a bus tour where we looked at the canals and the traffic congestion in the city and queued up to visit the Anne Frank house. Interesting side-note: The line to get in ran the length of a block and around the corner. While in line someone shouted “There's Ted Danson”! Sure enough, I saw him, wearing a black suit and a white shirt without a tie, entering the side of a building. Later, going up a steep staircase on about the 3rd floor, I saw him coming down a nearby staircase. Later, Sue and I both saw him with his wife, Mary Steenberg, as we were in the gift shop area. He had had a special escort through the house.

Finally we got to the hotel and crashed for a nap. Later we had a dinner buffet and called it a night. The next day we toured the world's largest flower auction—it sort of reminded me of the Board of Trade—then we toured a Gouda cheese farm, Sue took pictures of a windmill, and we had a dinner river boat cruise. It was some sort of special day: the police and fire people had impromptu convoys with fire truck and police cars' purple lights flashing and sirens blaring. Then on the river there were dozens of police boats running with their flashing lights. Someone said it was a charity thing for disabled children. One of the police boats pulled up right next to our boat. Someone opened a window and held out a plate of Belgian chocolates we were eating and the police grabbed a handful. One of the police almost fell off the boat while he was eating a chocolate. Must have forgotten to hold on.

Next day we took 4 buses over to the ship terminal. It took us over 3 hours to go through customs and take care of the paperwork. There are a lot of people on our ship, the Eurodam. We didn't really have a lunch that day, but to the best of my knowledge no one has ever starved on a cruise ship, so we had a gargantuan dinner that night and sailed for Newcastle.

Sunday was a day “at sea”, so we had a chance to explore the boat. Don't expect to get a daily update, or for us to reply quickly to any email you send us. While Internet access is easy and reasonably fast, it costs 75¢ a minute. If we read email, check news, Facebook, and the comics, it runs about \$100 a day

for Sue and I. So we need to streamline our time we spend online.

On Monday in Newcastle we went to see Hadrian's Wall for a Roman-era fortress. The wall and the fortress were mostly conceptual: the stones were “recycled” by the locals. We could easily visualize the wall: the stones were *everywhere*, reused to build houses, pasture fences and so on.

Those Romans sure liked 'high'. The fort/wall was at the top of a hill that Sue and I were barely able to climb, and the wind and cold were something to behold. Sue crashed after dinner, but I went to watch a bunch of entertainers building up their resume so they can qualify to perform in Branson, Missouri and get off the cruise-ship circuit. They did well and I was entertained.

After dinner the ship left for Edinburgh. We docked this morning and I started this note. The locals pronounce the city “Edinburry”. We had a local guide who took us through the castle. I had seen many castles on the Rhine river trip, but this one was particularly built vertically. It was uphill all the way to where we toured the Crown Jewel room. The Queen's scepter, sword, crown, and the “holyrood” were on display. The holy rood is a rock that was used as part of the ceremony when a new king or queen is crowned. Apparently Britain took it from Scotland hundreds of years ago and it was returned in the 1990s. Sue took lots of pictures of the castle which she plans to post online in a while. We had lunch at a local Scottish restaurant. Fish and chips, a half-pint of local beer, and a slice of apple pie with a lemon sauce. Back to the boat about 5:00, a nap, dinner and here we are.

Thursday, June 7

Yesterday was a long day, but today we are “at sea”, which means no excursions, long coach rides or whatever.

Wednesday was Loch Ness day. We traveled for about an hour, through Invergordon to the home of Nessie. First stop was the Nessie Center, which was a series of rooms with multiple projectors detailing the history and science of the search for the Loch (means 'lake' in Scottish) Ness monster. The lake is about 230 meters deep at its deepest, which means it is deeper than the North Sea. It holds more fresh water than all the lakes in England and Wales combined. However, it is mineral-deficient, which means that there is not enough nutrients to support things like a lot of algae or other bottom-of-the-food-chain food, thus not much in the way of middle-sized food, leaving the largest, top-of-the food chain predator as a not very large or numerous trout. Probably no Nessie.

Next stop, the nearby Urquhart Castle. It was severely damaged in a series of battles in the 1400s or whatever, and was not in such good shape, but was a lot of fun going up and down in the tower and battlements. Sue took a bunch of pictures as it was very photogenic, and she will put some out on the web site she is building.

Finally, we stopped for lunch in Inverness, the “Capital of the Highlands” for lunch. We had a very nice pizza á la California Pizza Kitchen with a nice red wine (Chilean). Inverness reminded me of when we stopped in Travers City back around 2001—it is rapidly growing, with a preponderance of young people and lots of new construction. We did some shopping but I didn't look all that good in kilts, so we came back to the boat empty-handed.

Written on Saturday, June 9

On Friday we dropped anchor at Ålesund Norway at 8:00 in the morning. Before I left home, I looked

up each of the ports and points of note so I could figure out what to expect. It just goes to show that even the best Google and Wikipedia info doesn't do justice. Here are the three most important points I got from actually going on the tour:

1. Ålesund, because of the weird little “o” over the top of the A is pronounced like “Olson” as in the Olson Rug company. If they want us to pronounce it Olson, why didn't they just use an O in the first place?
2. There are a bunch of islands that make up Ålesund, and in order to improve things, the collection of island that make up Ålesund built tunnels between the islands. At one point in time, one of the tunnels was the longest in the world, until they built the one under the English Channel. Their other agenda was to facilitate the ability of the people who live in the big cities in Norway to spend time (money) in Ålesund, by making it much easier to get here by driving.
3. I'm glad I was there in early June rather than August. As you will (eventually) see from Sue's pictures, there is an incredibly cool overlook that is about 400 steps up from the city park. No one except for durable natives walk the steps: all tourists take buses. The parking lot is about the size of the one by our Subway restaurant. WAY cooler than the view is to watch 6 buses, one tourist train, and a dozen cars jockeying for position in a parking lot the size of a postage stamp, perched a little above any eagle nests if there were eagles. Our bus almost took out the only street light. Cruuuunnnnch!

Ålesund is apparently a summer resort for the rest of Norway and much of Europe. About August the temperature gets over 10° C. and everyone heads north. We saw a bunch of stadiums all over the place, so Europeans pack their tents and recreate a Norwegian version of Woodstock. Every year. Hold the drugs, bring on the fish heads. Hold the nudity, strip down to the light woolen skivvies.

Oh yeah, there were lots of boring things too, like the whole town burned down overnight in 1906, Kaiser Wilhelm (I like to call him 'Bill') sent a boat of stuff over to feed and clothe the townies (only one lady was a casualty—she ran back in her house to get some photographs or something). So they built a statue to Kaiser Bill. And when they rebuilt, they did it in Art Nouveau style. And it is a UNESCO World Heritage site and blah, blah, blah.

Back to the boat, dinner, and an 11:30 departure up the fjord to Geiranger. OK, so they needed an “o” over the “a” for Ålesund, why did they fall short on Fjord? Couldn't they put a “~” over the “F” since they are going to say Feeyourd anyway? Our American Fjord motor company would be all over that in a heartbeat. And I imagine Čevy wouldn't be far behind.

On Google maps, Geiranger looks like it is about in the middle of the Norwegian land mass—it is only if you zoom in you see there is a trickle of water that allows us to cruise to Geiranger. As I write this, we are anchored just off land, but far enough that we have to be “tendered” (meaning boated) over to the village. Geiranger, too, is a UNESCO World site (what isn't around here?) and it is at the end of the water, surrounded by gargantuan mountains with waterfalls. Patience, Sue will eventually publish pictures. What it mostly means to me is that we have no satellite connection. When we drove around Ålesund yesterday, lots of houses had satellite TV antennas. They looked like they were pointed at the ground.

I don't know if you knew this, but the only way to get a geosynchronous satellite (one that rotates at the same speed as the earth, in a fixed location) is to put it over the equator. We are way away from the equator: about 62° North. So the satellite is behind the mountains that surround us, and the folks in Ålesund, located high up on the mountain, are aiming at the horizon, not at something up in the air. So I'll finish this later, when I have some hope of finding an Internet connection.

Just to say we did it, we took a tender to Geiranger and walked around for a while. It is strictly a resort town with lots of gift shops and lots of restaurants and not much else. So we came back to the ship for (a free) lunch.

As we pulled up anchor in Geiranger I sat on our back veranda and watched the mountains roll by. Our stateroom is at the top of the ship on the 8th deck, just below the Lido deck, and all the way at the back of the ship (aft).

Written on Wednesday, June 13

Today we took the tour of Oslo. We walked on the roof of the brand new white marble, Opera House. We toured the city, saw some amazing art work in the Vigeland park (Google it—some of the sculptures are worth your looking them up), and saw the museum of Viking Ships. Turns out, when the owner of a Viking Longboat dies, the Viking is expected to continue fighting up in Valhalla. Of course, they need their weapons and supporting crew, so they are buried in their boat, with their weapons, their gold and silver, along with their horses and household staff! Bad luck to work for a dying Viking. Anyhow, the boat, owner, weapons, horses, wife, retainers and all are then buried in a mound. If scavengers don't open the mound to steal gold and silver, everything seems to stay in pretty good shape, hence the boat museum. The museum also emphasized how the boats of that generation went on past Iceland and were in America 400 years before Kris Columbus. Take that!, Italians.

On Sunday the 10th we visited Flåm, another tourist town (Today, in Oslo, they kept remarking about how Osloians (Is that a real word?) often keep summer cottages on the “Western Islands” of Norway—Flåm is a perfect example of that). It was a picturesque, incredible view—just like Geiranger—but yet another tourist resort. What's wrong with that? Relaxing, beautiful, but the souvenir shops sell Norwegian wool sweaters for \$650 US dollars, hamburgers for \$20 bucks. Worth visiting from a ship but way too pricey to spend much time there.

On Monday the 11th the boat stopped in Bergen. I had developed what turned out to be the granddaddy of all head colds, so I went to see the ship's doctor and spent the day sleeping, knocked out with decongestants. The cold broke the same day and I felt much better after a day in which I didn't do much except to relax. I think it is possible to try too hard to do too much—the down time was good.

By Tuesday the 12th, in Kristensand we were back to doing the excursions, which we had already paid for. Once again a pretty little town. We visited a house museum(!), pretty much like the house museum we visited in Iceland. What is it with Scandinavians and this fond memory for cramped, uncomfortable old houses? Sue took pictures, so you can see what teeny wood houses with sod roofs looked like. It was interesting to compare them with the Icelandic house museum. When Vikings settled Iceland about 900-whatever, they, being good Norwegians, built wood houses. Bad idea. Iceland didn't have much wood, and they deforested the place. They had NO trees while they were isolated for the next 800 years or so. Only today is Iceland having much success in reforesting the place. So Iceland's house museum had primarily stone buildings with sod roofs, built underground with tunnels between the houses. Lovely.

Tomorrow, Copenhagen. Probably a majority of the EuroDam passengers end their vacation there, while the rest of us will see it as a “turnaround” day: out with the old passengers, in with the new guys that will be on the second half of our trip. We had scheduled an excursion for tomorrow, but have since canceled and will spend the day on the boat building Web pages (Sue) and writing pithy blog-like

emails (Bill). I'll send this text out tomorrow morning. For now, with Germany defeating the Netherlands 2-1 in Euro 2012 football, I'll sign off. Oh, what the heck, I need to explain this...

You see, Europe has this game they call Football, and our TV only gets about 6 channels: one is the view forward from the ship, one backward from the ship, one on the ship's position, one a channel guide (like we couldn't remember?), one talking about what's happening on the ship (great values in the art raffle tonight), and two sports channels. Every evening at 6:00 our time we have live coverage of a soccer match between, say, Spain and England. Then they have a second game about 8:45. Every night. If you don't like to watch it on your room TV it is played on the massive High-def TVs in the 'Sports Bar'. Since lots of the passengers are Europeans, this is an incredibly popular thing to do. I like watching it, but these folk take it seriously. For example, Sue and I are at least slightly concerned that Netherlands lost tonight, since the guys running our ship (and about to steer it through a tricky strait) are from the Netherlands. The tour director is British and he was cackling (on the in-house TV) about how his team beat the odds by tying Spain (a favorite). He then poked jabs at the crew's team ("All righty then, so how did you like how your team did then?") Leave them alone and let them steer, please.

Written Monday June 18

High winds of 45 MPH and greater have kept us pinned against the dock in Russia. It was interesting last night while we were trying to sleep: The ship was 'rock and rolling' like we were in the middle of the North Sea. I had to get up and look out our balcony window to assure myself we were still docked in front of another massive cruise ship. The captain was on the ship's comm a few minutes ago telling us too much information about how our clearance was reduced at higher speeds, and we only had 115 feet on each side of the ship to clear a channel, and how the wind makes us go in a diagonal, and... TMI.

Bottom line, we are not leaving until he was sure it was safe. After all that, we just 'pushed' away from the dock (I don't exactly understand how side thrusters work, allowing us to go sideways). Whatever. Dinner is in an hour (8:00 our time) and we're on our way to Finland.

We spent Thursday June 14th in the Copenhagen port. It was the end of the trip for the majority of the passengers, so they spent most of their day listening for their color/deck to be called so they could go stand in line to go through customs and thence to the airport. We, too, will debark in Copenhagen at the end of our trip, but because of airline unavailability we will have to stay overnight at a hotel in Copenhagen, then fly to Brussels to switch planes to return to O'Hare. All aboard was 4:00 and we took off for Estonia. Friday the 15th was a day at sea. On Saturday the 16th we arrived at 11:00 and debarked for a tour of the upper and lower old towns.

You have never seen so many cobblestones in such a variety of sizes, colors and arrangements, ranging from smooth to break-an-ankle, all at a steep angle. They had lots of amber that caught Sue's eye. I told her I thought she should get a souvenir. She said how much should she spend. I asked how much the amber cost. The small bracelet she liked was \$11,500, but many were in the 80,000 range. That's U.S. Dollars. There were less expensive baubles and geegaws, but she had no interest in junk.

The tour arranged for us to have lunch at a replica of a medieval inn. (You might google Olde Hansa and see where we had lunch). We went thousands of miles for a server to do an imitation of a Renaissance Fair? "Wouldst milord perchance fancy a dollop of this {unintelligible Estonian food}?" The group was split into two: one group thought they should have gotten a turkey leg to eat with their bare hands; the others thought the raw meat (Elk, one thought?) with maybe horseradish was very tasty. Everyone thought it was too dark—I had to feel around the edge of the bathroom door to try to find the

handle that would let me out. Sue and I both thought that, although we didn't have a clue what we were eating it tasted very good and was fun.

Estonia (note: no special umlauts, double dots, circles or whatever in the name) was interesting also for its mixture of cultures. At one point, waiting for the bus to take us back to the ship, we were on a cobblestone street, sitting next to a wealth of flowers (all in the special containers we recognized from the Amsterdam Flower auction—see 3 emails ago) outside a McDonalds listening to a Bob Marley song blasting from what may have been an 8-track tape in a Ford Fairlane 400. They were having what I imagine to be an antique American car show with a 1957 Chevy, the Fairlane and more, with pretty Estonian girls wearing pink blouses, everyone bopping to reggae, outside medieval towers. One of the ladies on the tour, from Yuma Arizona said “That's it, I'm moving to Estonia”!

On Sunday (Father's day) the 17th we landed at 7:00 AM in St. Petersburg. We debarked into the customs building (I now have an entry and departure stamp on my passport for Russia! Imagine that!). We went on a tour, led by an attractive Russian lady named Katherine (She pronounced her name Cot-oh-reen). Someone on the bus said Katherine the great, she said no, Katherine the guide! She was incredibly and obviously proud of her city. She said it was the most beautiful city in the world, except for the weather. We had sunshine in the morning to everyone's surprise. She said that Peter the Great had spent his youth touring the world, and wanted his city to be the Vienna of the north. It had hundreds of canals (a VERY wet place) and he allowed no bridges. They have since filled in many of the canals and have bridges all over—we visited the 7 bridges area; a point where 7 bridges all intersect. Their cathedrals have gold towers, Peter liked the Muslims (They don't drink and were always on time), he built hundreds of religious institutions from Jewish synagogues to Roman Catholic to Greek Orthodox churches and so on. We saw the Soviet-era apartments that looked very efficient: all alike, plain, massive numbers, falling apart. Their “WC”s (toilets) were superior to anything we had seen on this cruise to date. Actually, better (cleaner, more organized, more efficient) than public restrooms in the States. Our guide showed us the colleges where the Russian President and Prime Minister graduated—it is sort of like Obama and Chicago: The president and prime minister spend a LOT of time in St. Petersburg. Their families, friends and classmates all live here. Like Chicago, when they come to St. Petes, the roads are closed, slow impassible etc. But the people put up with insane traffic all the time anyway, so it is same old, same old.

That evening we went to a theater reputed to be the birthplace and heart of the Russian ballet. The show we saw was very good, with the singers in Russian Army uniforms, the male and female dancers in historic costumes. Compared to New York and Las Vegas, it was more like a Polish folk show you could see in Branson. Fun, entertaining, lots of enthusiasm, but a little 'folksy'.

We're off to Helsinki!

Written Tuesday June 19

Just a note for those not familiar with “Cruising Life”. Before we left home Holland America warned us that there would be 6 'formal nights'. What this means is that you are expected to bring formal clothes for six dinners. We called the tour company (Travel with Alan) for clarification. What is 'formal'? Some people on the cruise, including our table-mates Frank and Darlene from Yuma Arizona, go all out and Frank wears a tux, Darlene a gown. They are about our age, Frank has a British accent, and they are both widowed and re-wed.

More background: we have two primary choices of where to eat: for Breakfast and Lunch we always

go to the Lido deck, essentially three football field lengths of buffet stations with tables along the windows to the outside. For breakfast they have one 'station'—20 feet of cooking apparatus with two attendants—that serves nothing but variations of Eggs Benedict. For lunch, a grill 'station' with only cheeseburgers, hot dogs, bratwurst, salmon patties, etc. Of course they have a couple of desert stations, a foreign food stations (today, Vietnamese), salads, and “entrée”s meaning a common restaurant's complete menu.

For dinner we usually go to the Rembrandt Restaurant. They have a top level we go to where the tables are always assigned the same people (we're at table 60). The Rembrandt has two dining times, 5:30 and 8:00. We're 8:00. On the lower level, groups of people can reserve tables daily for a certain time: our friends Joan and Sy, also from Arizona, have a table for 6 at 6:15 they have invited us to.

So, if we want to go to the white tablecloth, waiter-served Rembrandt on some days, I have to wear the brown suit with tie I brought. If it is all too much, Sue and I can go, at any time from 5:00 to 9:30 to the Lido.

When we were in St. Petersburg, as I said before, we went to the Folkloric show which left the ship at 6:00 and didn't get back until after midnight Russia time. We stopped for a couple of slices of pizza (yes, there is a pizza station on the Lido) before leaving. When we got back we stopped 'upstairs' (we live on deck 8, the Lido is 9) to see if there was any food available. There was. I had a Minute steak with vegetables, rolls, and an absolutely magnificent raspberry crumb pie Sue and I shared. No one starves on a cruise.

Written Thursday June 21

We took a “Land and Sea” tour of Stockholm. It's feeling more and more like 'It's Wednesday so this must be Stockholm.' The traffic was insane in Stockholm—cars parked every which way, narrow streets, crazy bicyclists, stuck at a standstill for minutes on end. OK, so it is pretty, they have a decent economy, and are one of the tops for shopping in Europe. Unlike Finland which is, by law, bilingual (Suomi and Swedish), Sweden is just Swedish. However, they start learning English when they are 8 and continue until they graduate, so it is good for us tourists. They dropped us at a marina and we took a tour around the central district island (They have gazillions of islands in Stockholm, and a like number of bridges.) We saw what was, for many years, the tallest structure in Scandinavia: a TV tower where an elevator takes you 40-some stories at 11 miles an hour (or so I think the guide said). The boat trip was very worthwhile: they built a canal next to the high-end housing district (30-room apartments; 12 million Euros for a condo, and so on) because the land was drying out and boats couldn't navigate it. The island is a nature preserve with museums and even more expensive homes and the like. The tour boat had headphones that provided narrative on what we were seeing—you could pick any of 10 different languages, including several Asian languages.

Written Saturday June 23

This will probably be my last post. It is almost dinnertime (It's always dinnertime on a cruise ship). But what I mean is that we will meet with our table-mates Darlene and Frank from Yuma, Arizona for the last time, at table 60 at the 8:00 seating. Frank has a strong British accent, Darlene is 'down home' and would be right at place almost anywhere.

We attended the disembarkation briefing at 4:00, filled out the satisfaction surveys and dropped them off at the front desk (mid-ship Deck 1), and returned the paperback I borrowed from the library on

Deck 11 forward (a thriller by genre, interesting enough by value).

We have to pack and have our luggage to be checked outside our door by 1:00 AM—ship staff will carry it to some lower compartment overnight. We are Grey 3 tickets. That is the last group to leave the ship. Makes sense, since we don't catch a plane tomorrow. We go to some as-yet unknown hotel in Copenhagen to stay overnight, then catch a plane tomorrow morning. We were told the name of the hotel but don't have it in writing and now 20-some days later, we forgot. No matter. We will be with about 10 other couples doing the same thing. The tour leaders will load us onto a vehicle (van? Bus?) take us to the hotel, pay for the room, herd us into a van/bus/whatever tomorrow morning then go their own ways.

Yesterday and today we were in Warnemünde, Germany. We were scheduled to go on an excursion to Berlin. Sue detests “motor-coach” tours, so when she found out it was 3 hours there, 3 hours back, one hour for shopping (another less-than-favorite activity), and 2 hours of touring “The Wall” and miscellaneous churches, we dropped the excursion.

Instead we just walked 10 minutes from the ship to the local town. It was delightful! It is an old East German town (“Behind the 'Iron Curtain’”) that is now a resort by and for Germans. Virtually nobody, including the restaurateurs and shop-keepers spoke any English at all, and there were no postings in other languages. The people looked just like what you would expect in a similar resort in Door County. The food from the restaurants smelled outstanding (We think it was variations on fish, but couldn't read the menu). There was a guy on the footbridge playing glasses filled with water, kiosks selling everything everywhere and a feeling of excitement and relaxation. Excellent!