

Europe 2022 - Change of Plans

On our trip around the British Isles on Princess, I looked at the options. The original plan was to leave the ship at the end of the cruise in Southampton, take a bus trip from the port to Salisbury Cathedral, Stonehenge, Windsor Castle, and back to London. Then we would take the Chunnel train from St. Pancras in London all the way to Amsterdam. Then problems arose: Windsor Castle was closed on Tuesdays, The Chunnel train was inconvenient and expensive along with rumors of a British rail strike. Since the last cruise stop was Le Havre in France, we would already be across the English Channel. It did not make any sense to travel back across the channel and then back to the continent.

We informed the tour desk on the cruise that we would be leaving in Le Havre in advance, and we were subjected to a private half-hour interview with two staff members to explain our choice. This procedure seemed rather strange and the questioning was personally invasive. There were many others who also were leaving the ship in Le Havre to continue their vacation. We walked off with our own luggage after dinner on the evening before we were due to dock back in Southampton. We took an Uber to our hotel and rented a car from SIXT (they have bright orange signage).

Now what? Here we are in France without any maps or routing plans. Aha, the car has a screen with a connection to Chris cell phone for using the navigation system. We decide we are going first to Calais and then to Bruges. I thought the route would be along the coast of France, but the navigation routed us along the fastest route using limited access roads through the countryside. I had no idea where we were, but eventually we arrived in Calais. We looked online for a place in Bruges that said canal side with car parking. Success! The swans swam by in the evening and morning, while the many tour boats motored by during the middle of the day. Bruges is like a trip back to the year 1500 in the medieval times: large Catholic Churches, horse-drawn carriages, narrow cobblestone streets, waffles, chocolate, lace, museums, fish dinners.

The next stop was the every 10-year Floriade in Holland. This year they had developed a new park outside of Amsterdam in Almere. We stayed in the closest hotel and took taxi/Uber to get to the event since the parking/shuttle to the event was even further away than the hotel. Forty years ago, I had gone to Floriade on my first trip to Europe and was so enthralled by the floral displays that I thought I should go back every 10 years for the event. This year was different; the event had transformed into a mini-world-green-movement exposition. Because of the season, there were no tulips or daffodils in sight. There was a nice grouping of fancy dahlias. I was able to recognize most of the flowers that were there; several countries sponsored small exhibits with their local handicrafts and cuisine. There was emphasis about how the green world could be integrated into urban environments.

Off to Iceland. Icelandic Airlines left from the disorganized Brussels airport and offered a free stayover in Iceland. We stayed in the Viking Village on the coast outside of Reykjavik. We drove around the Golden Circle, admiring the waterfalls, geysers, and thermal features; swam in the Blue Lagoon; and went on the excellent Flight Over Iceland. We really wanted to take the helicopter ride over the previously active Meradalir volcano, but the lava flow there had stopped.

We stopped off for three days in Chicago on the way back: Schaumburg History and Nature Center, Illinois State Railroad Museum on a very active demonstration day, and an architectural tour of skyscrapers viewed from an open boat on Lake Michigan. We went to the Northwest side of Chicago, where Chris' mother grew up, and had a traditional Polish dinner.