

Europe 2007

A tale of two people roaming a continent
europebackpack2007.blogspot.com



Air: 8749 miles
Train: 2983 miles
Boat: 408 miles
Foot: 143 miles

5/27/2007 Hotel in Paris, France

We left Mystic around 10:30AM after final efforts to seal the house and prepare for departure (tray tables stowed and seats in their full upright position, etc). Right now I sit in the Hotel Jarry near Gare del Est in Paris, that peculiar feeling that's always been associated with road trips when you get up in one state and go to sleep a thousand miles away, amplified 5 fold. We somehow managed a balcony and private shower, here, for our 40 euro/night and we're not complaining one bit. I hear a boy playing soccer 5 stories below in the cobblestone street that's barely wide enough for a Hyundai Accent. Did I mention that I'm in Paris, France?

After dropping off Clancy, we took a combination of train and subway to JFK, waited a few hours, and soon found North America releasing its grip under the road of two turbine engines. We had prepped for this critical portion of the trip (6:05PM) because



how it was managed would determine how deeply the ill effects of jet lag would, well, leg. Eye masks, ear plugs, and two sleeping pills successfully negotiated about 4 hours of sleep in between fits of turbulence and other bits of plane noise. Just enough to help ease the lost 6 hours of sleep.

We land in Brussels, a clean and friendly, albeit largely empty airport and after a friendly conversation with customs (seriously), the abrupt 'thump-click' of the passport stamp announces our admission to the continent. Finally, we board a plane for Charles De Gaulle on the final leg of this journey across an ocean.

I am impressed and, at the same time, shamed by most people's ability to handle two or three or four languages over here. You start to butcher something in French, and the slightly impatient

person on the other end picks up in English. The only payment demanded (at least in Paris) is tolerance of a bit of attitude.

Arriving in Paris, tired, hungry, lugging packs that weigh as much as they ever will, we struggle to find our hotel. A blast of disorientation. Mundane things are suddenly exotic. Street signs, license plates, store fronts, cars. MaryBeth gets hit by a moped. We eventually make our way to our hotel and drop our packs. A quick study of the metro map and we're immediately off, immersed in the subway system of Paris on our way to the Palace of Versailles.

The most striking thing about Versailles is just how incredibly massive it is. A tree lined pedestrian way terminates at the entrance of a huge cobblestone court. Off in the distance (yes, that far) on top of the slight hill, the wings of the palace stretch off to right and left. Brownish stone, capped with countless statues give the appearance of crenellations, guarding the opulence and ego of Le Roy inside its walls. It took something like 25% of the income of all of France to run this place in its peak and as we walk up the court to buy tickets in a cold drizzle, I try to place myself as an attendant of a party 430 years ago. Horse drawn carriages, illumination

provided by thousands of burning candles. The extravagant and, from a modern perspective, ridiculously looking dress. I don't have to imagine the intricate stone carvings that decorate almost all exposed surfaces. Fireplaces that could fit small cars. Mirrors, lots of mirrors, when obtaining such things were not as simple as heading to a local Walmart. Paintings the size of my front yard. Gardens that stretch to the horizon, lined with fountains and marble statues. Unbelievable scale.



A distinctly European 'hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo' ambulance horn outside, the Doppler effect blurring its tone as it passes. Paris spends 3-4 times what cities like London or New York spend on street sanitation. I hear a garbage truck on the street, diesel grumbling mixed with the Arabic voices of the area and someone actually playing a trumpet in the distance. I try to interpret a weather report on the TV for Normandy. I'm thinking in Euros and French. I'm in Europe. My world is getting smaller with every moment here.

5/28/2007 Hotel in Paris, France

"After a few sips its starting to taste better!". 50 cl, or about 1 pint, of beer for less than \$1.50. I sit writing this in our hotel room again after a long day exploring this awesome city. My lips numbing from the empty aluminum cans. It's cool and drizzling, as it's been all day long - not really enough to keep you inside, but enough to get you wet without a raincoat. MaryBeth is showering. I can hear the dribble of water that passes for pressure here. If we were at home I would assume a need to call a plumber to track down a clogged pipe.

Today we started early and arrived at the Louvre before anyone else populated the large square which houses the subterranean entrance. 3rd in line, we spent the next hour talking to an American and Canadian couple, both on their own European adventures, and watching the line slowly grow as tour buses unload their cargo.

Another swig of "1664".

The Louvre was as expected, but no less impressive. Leveraging our position at the beginning of the line, we dashed in 'Amazing Race' style to the Mona Lisa. Its location and the museum configuration making such a journey a 10 minute affair despite our expedient gait. But there's something to be said about being in the front row, gazing into the eyes of one of the world's most



famous paintings in a largely empty room. The rest of our time was spent strolling through the sculptures of Roman and Greek antiquity, through French and Northern European paintings, and Islamic art. Back out of the glass pyramid, a crowded square is capped by broken skies.

Next stop was the Eiffel Tower via Trocadore Square. "I bet its right around.. this.. corner." And then the tower, previously unseen, blasts into view. A rare occurrence for something as well published as this former World's Fair exhibition is, it appears larger and more impressive in person. Ribbons of steel, dense enough to give the appears of a solid structure thread down to a huge earth base. Too many tourists and beggars, and the rain starts to fall again.



Hopping the subway system thanks to a "Paris visite" pass (overpriced 24 hour subway fare), next up was the Arc de Triumph. Built in the early 1800s under the auspices of Napoleon as a monument to France's then formidable fighting forces, it was modeled after the Roman Arch de Titus (which we should be seeing later in the trip in Rome) and stands as the second largest triumphal arch in the world (second to one in North Korea, which we should not be seeing later in the trip). It doesn't really transmit in picture, but its wide enough that they flew a biplane through it at one point. Maybe more notably, through, is that it sits at the center of a traffic circle which connects 13, yes, 13 separate roads.

Most of the subway cars in Paris run on rubber tires. A great improvement in ride quality and noise over the deafening subways in New York, a virtue we enjoyed all the way to Ile d' Cite, a small island in the middle of Paris, stuck out in the middle of the Seine River. Home to the Notre Dame cathedral, it was too soaked with tourists even at this early stage of the season to be very impressive. I do though remember reading about its "flying buttresses" back in high school and today I slowly meandered through the walls that they support.

Our final, and most satisfying, activity of the day was wandering the charming, narrow streets of Paris. I don't know why they're especially attractive, whether they fit some stereotype, or something else, but by the simple act of mindfully being there we were rewarded.

More "1664", this time with dinner. Moving into true backpacking mode, we dine gourmet. Fresh bread, spreadable cheese.

Tomorrow, Omaha Beach.

5/30/2007 High speed train in northern France

The thing that's most striking about Omaha beach is just how big it is. After 5 or 6 minutes of purposeful walking we were only halfway across the giant expanse of sand between sea and lush ridgeline. With clear blue skies and sparkling green water it was difficult to immediately place myself there that morning. I look out at gentle waves washing against the shore and turn around. Along the entire horizon, a green cliff from which 87 machine guns, a half dozen canon, and dozens of mortars laid down hell in this now apparent, idyllic spot. To my right, I can see Pointe du Hoc and my left the American Cemetery. I grab some sand and put it into a plastic bag, something I've wanted to do since high school at this beach.

Pointe du Hoc is a location and a story so extraordinary that a Hollywood script writer probably couldn't touch it. Place yourself as a US Army Ranger, standing on the plywood deck of a landing craft in the darkness of pre-dawn on June 6, 1944. Its cold. Its raining. Stormy seas rock the flat bottomed Higgins boat like the proverbial bathtub. You, and hundreds of thousands of others, are embarking on one of the greatest battles of all time, fighting to gain a foothold in Europe and wage a land war against Nazi Germany. 225 people are in your unit, and your task as one of the elite 2nd Rangers is to take out 6 155mm cannon at the top of a 100 foot sheer cliff. The heavy seas push the landing craft miles off course, and when the metal gate finally crashes down you're 40 minutes late. The element of surprise is gone. Using ladders and rocket propelled grappling hooks, fighting against gravity, machine gun, rifle, and mortar fire, taking grenades tossed down from above, you slowly ascend the rocky cliffs. As you breach the edge you see that the huge, steel tubes that threatened the entire invasion are in fact, *telephone poles*. For the next two days you fight off vicious German counterattacks, isolated from support by any other unit. On D-Day+2, only 90 men out of 225 are still able to bear arms.



The 2nd Rangers did find the guns (about a mile from shore where they were destroyed), and the land at Pointe du Hoc has been left as it was in 1944. Incredible 30 ft craters, from the weeks of aerial bombardment are everywhere. Gun encasements destroyed by those bombings lay in the places they fell, tangles of reinforcing bar and crumbling concrete. I later learn that this place is considered a military cemetery due to the dozens of bodies trapped forever under concrete which now supports the weight of curious tourists.

Other stops in this area included Arromanches where the British built massive boats made of concrete, sailed them across a storm ridden channel, sunk them, and then built a large pier through which thousands of vehicles could access the continent - cogs in the war machine to take back Europe. The German gun battery at Tracy-sur-mer with four large bore guns still point toward a long disappeared enemy, and

finally, the American Cemetery where thousands of American youth are buried under endless rows of white crosses.

The train I'm on right now is moving quite fast, around 120-130 mph. When we pass another train going the opposite direction on a parallel track an ear popping blast and instantaneous flash announces the event. We connect to a normal speed train in Brussels, and from there, arrive in Amsterdam around 1:30PM.

5/30/2007 Overnight train to Prague

Our first night in a couchette. The bunks are hard, spaced like a submarine, hot, stuffy, and the train car isn't suspended like I thought it might be- this room would be intolerable if fully loaded with 6 people. The train just came to a stop in some small German town, a crescendo of squeaking and shaking followed by a jarring final halt. This will be a fun night.

Today we arrived in Amsterdam and set off to absorb as much, as fast as possible. Due to some train problems, we got there later than desired (1:30PM instead of 11:00AM) and were unable to compensate with a later departure train (booked full). Walking down Dam Street from the station, we stop off at a convenience store and grab a sandwich, washed down with a liter of Heineken. Pulling out the 'Amsterdam' bundle of information copied out of an assortment of guidebooks from my pack, we head out on one of Rick Steve's tour routes terminating at Anne Frank's house all through wonderfully stereotypical Amsterdam scenery: thousands and thousands of bikes, parked in groups along the city's narrow streets or startling you from behind with a terse "ring ring"; rounded bridges that cross both narrow and wide canals which span the entire area; both tourist filled cruise boats and local filled dinghies guided by 5hp motors on their way to get some groceries. The weather, perfect - sunny, cool, trees swaying in slight, spring fresh breezes.



After taking an hour walk through the Anne Frank house (who's story becomes even more incredible when you walk through the room in which she lived for the duration; her posters and drawings still tacked to the aged wall paper) we move into the red light district. A flush of mild embarrassment keeps me from overtly gawking at the barely clothed women a foot or two away. A final pint of something along an Amsterdam canal outside the red light district and we jump onto our train headed south by southeast.

5/31/2007 Pension in Prague, Czech Republic

A scene: I heft my 0.5L of beer and take a sip. We sit in the Quattro Bar, where the bartender speaks enough English to communicate 'large?' or 'small?' and financial transactions are handled by transferring a receipt. This bar is near Vysehrad, a non-tourist area in southern Praha where our pension is situated. As with most things in Prague, beer is cheap, less than a dollar for 0.5L (20 koruna), and good. The decor is surprising modern given its relative location and American pop music is playing on the sound system in the mostly empty room. My foot starts tapping to a Black Eyed Peas song. I wonder if my enthusiasm for the familiar music validates a presumed perception by the owner of being up to date with America, then I wonder if that's just being ethnocentric. MaryBeth is flipping through a gossip magazine, written in Czech. She flips past an mug shot image of a Barbie doll dressed in black and white stripes: it appears that Paris Hilton is a global phenomena. A train passes by outside only a dozen feet from the bar, drowning out the music.

Our entrance into the Czech Republic was heralded with an abrupt and insistent knock at our berth's door, pulling us both out of a drowsy, ear-plug assisted sleep. Night trains make for an interesting experience. After getting our passports stamped by our loud and curt border control agent, I get some fresh air at an open hallway window. The Czech country side slides past, hazy with the start of a new day's sun. Sounds are drowned out by the rhythmic "thunk thunk" of our train wheels moving over rail joints.

On arrival to the station (after an oh-so-unique panic feeling of "oh shit, is this our stop??") we take a controlled plunge into our new environs. Get some money, water, map, make reservations for our departure in a couple days to Munich and then, soon enough, we're on the metro, headed to our temporary home in Pension Beta, another score for lodging. Surprising spacious, clean, manned by a helpful staff, we deposit our packs, gear up, and head out for the afternoon.

Prague is awesome. Highly accessible, cheap, friendly, and charming. The locals struggle with enough English for us both to get by, while not enough to make the country seem Western homogenized.

Fundamentally I can't put my finger on just what makes the city what it is, but its got it. Its one of the few major cities in Europe that got off somewhat easy during the wars of this past century and no matter where you walk in the Old Quarter there are colorful

buildings with decorated stonework facades ranging hundreds of years in architectural styles. The city is called one of a hundred spires, and that may be an understatement. Dark, looming, and ubiquitous, puncturing the city skyline.



We first stroll down Wenscalas Square, which is more a boulevard than a square. Modern shops line the street where one of the first massive political demonstrations preceded the Republic's separation from the USSR 20 years ago. But its the Old Town Square where Prague really starts to shine. A maze of narrow cobblestone streets dump into a highly photogenic square, replete with a famed astronomical clock, the dark spires of Tyn church, and the old Town Hall. Cafes line the edges of the large open court, the same as they do everywhere in Europe, with people sipping espresso or beer watching the buzz of activity from locals and tourists alike. Cutting through more of the narrow streets drops us at Charles Bridge, a famous link over the Vltava River built in the 1300s. Thirty, age blackened statues line the stone bridge, depicting saints and other religious scenes. While it once served not only as a major link between the two sides of the quarter mile wide river, it more importantly also served as an east/west link for all of Europe. Today its lined with licensed vendors and street performers and while stopping to take in the view across east bank, the sounds of a ragtime band incongruously complete the scene.

Back to the hotel, we stop off and grab a milkshake to go along with another dinner of bread, cheese, and salami. Tomorrow we'll be spending all day in Praha and then headed out on an 8pm train to Munich.

6/1/2007 Night train to Munich

This morning we took our time getting ready after a sumptuous breakfast of bread, yogurt, coffee, and orange drink. Using the last ride available on our metro ticket we swung by the train station to stow our bags in some lockers and again consulting the 'Prague' packet of guide book copies, we take ride on tram 22 - part cheap tour of the city, part transportation to Prague Castle. Tram cars half as wide as a normal automobile, creak and rattle along tracks laid in the street surface, drawing electricity from a spiderweb of power lines above that make a 'wahn wahn wahn' sound of tensioned metal as the commentator passes.

Standing above the rest of the city on a domineering hill, Prague Castle is by some accounts the largest in the world. Positioned in the main courtyard and moving your eyes past the overwhelming towers of St. Vitus, you wonder why that statement has to even be qualified.

One of the 'things we do' on this trip is forming up to be sampling local snacks in addition to our standard fare. For lunch this was a bag of unsalted rice puffs of likeness to cheese puffs but about 2-3 times the size. With nothing planned before our 8pm train, we head back out into the comfortable streets of Prague where a cluster of stores catch MaryBeth's eye. After walking through an enclosed shopping area we emerge in a small park, square, each dimension about 100 feet. Neatly cut shrubs line gravel walkways



that cut diagonals, and a smaller square in the center of the area. We take up a position on glossy white park benches in the shade. There appear to be very few, if any, tourists around; we've stumbled onto a local's retreat. People's heels click as they walk over the 2" square stones that comprise most of the city's sidewalks and in one corner, a series of trellises support an elaborately maintained rose garden, sunlight trickling through red and pink blooms reaching 10 feet above the ground. A pregnant woman stops, quite literally, to smell the roses as she passes through the park to somewhere more pressing than this relaxing refuge. While only a 100 meters away, the bustle of Wenscalas Square threatens to invade, this small park is almost completely insulated from the din. We sit and read and watch, a soundtrack provided by birds and rustling leaves and a little girl sitting next to us quietly singing something in Czech.

Our couchette out of Prague is shared with a couple from New Jersey, Mike and BJ. They're on their way up to Munich for a week, after moving through Amsterdam and Prague. After an hour or so of conversation, we four sit contently reading and looking out the windows as the train rocks back and forth through a darkening countryside. Small Czech towns pass by in dusk. A country that stood intimidating on arrival only a days before now beckons to be explored. This is how things go I guess.

Our train arrives in Munich at 6:20AM, the start of a new chapter.

6/3/2007 Hotel room in Munich, Germany

After waking up from the night train and being roughly deposited into a still sleeping city, we find some baggage lockers and head out. On a 3 hour long walk, we have almost to ourselves classic Munich sights like the well manicured and welcoming gardens of Hofgarten, a market area dating back to the Middle Ages of Marienplatz, the yellow expanse of Odeonplatz, and countless little shops with owners busily preparing for the work day. A chilly morning mist hangs in the air, and periodic spurts of rain keep our umbrellas handy, but we get a perspective of the waking city while most tourists haven't stirred.



When you walk into the Dachau concentration camp, there's a message cast into the iron gates: "Work sets you free". We walked through that gate, the same as hundreds of thousands of others did

70 years ago. A sweeping view of the camp: to the left you can see two rows of symmetric and identical rectangular building foundations from old barracks stretching off towards the far edge of the camp. Your center view is of a massive gravel field, the assembly area, completely unobstructed to the opposite side. Further right stands the old headquarter buildings, shaped like a horizontally stretched U. Surrounding the entire camp is an 8 foot high wall of concrete and a 8 foot high wall of barbed and previously electrified wire. We read that the 10 or 15 feet in front of that barbed wire was no mans land and anyone caught entering the

region was shot on sight by camp guards. Small placards tell us that this was a popular method of suicide for camp inmates.

Dachau was the Third Reich's first concentration camp and served as a model for all others. Originally set up for the reeducation of political prisoners, over 200,000 eventually passed through its ranks with over 30,000 never making it home.

We walk through the camp, listening to the audioguides and picking through the life of a prisoner as told in their own words. Eventually you walk to a far corner of the camp and see a sign for Barrack X. Inside are a series of chambers in which inmates were stripped, 'showered', piled, and then loaded into 4 furnaces that vented through pipework laid in the floor. The oven doors stand gaping open, waiting. As Bill Bryson said, its not a great idea to immerse yourself or read about that sort of stuff before venturing out into Germany. Kind of puts a slightly 'bad spin' on things.

But, beer makes it better! The Hofbräuhaus is a state owned brewery in Munich. One liter sized mugs, delicious sausage and mashed potatoes, the largest pretzels you've



ever seen, and a reputation for rowdiness. The tables are made of thick planks of wood, and the general layout is that of a cafeteria. Even arriving at the relatively early hour of 5:00PM, the place is alive and rocking with shouting and laughing and the "thunks" of mugs being slammed against tables during "Probst!". What begins as a moderate dinner of sausage and potatoes with a single mug of local brew turns into a full out "night". The large serving units short circuit built in moderation sense. "Hey this is only my

fourth beer!". Conversation begins with people sharing the table with us (Paul, an American who is doing undergraduate research in superconductors in Munich, Andre and Andre's girlfriend, both local Munich(ians?). By the end of the night, our table has grown to include two young American chicks, and 4 more unnamed Germans. 4 liters of beer later, I'm drunk, happy with new friends, and yelling out that I love Germany and Germany is #1 on the metro home.

I love Germany.

6/3/2007 Train station, Munich, Germany

The pretzels here in the heart of Bavaria are incredible. They're huge (some over 2 inches in diameter) with a there's a perfect hard flaky crust surrounding a soft and chewy interior. You can get them plain or salted, covered in melted cheese and ham, with dipping sauces, or, if you want to go truly hardcore, some sliced in half and filled with creamy butter. Heaven.

We're sitting now in the waiting lounge of the train station. It's 9:30PM and our train doesn't leave for another 2 hours.

After a slow morning (ahem, over a gallon of beer..) we headed back into downtown Munich. Meandering through Hofgarten, we eventually headed over to the English Gardens. One of the first of its kind, Munich's Englischer Landschaftspark is also one of the largest, stretching from Munich's city center to its outskirts. A bit like New York's Central Park, English Gardens got popular on the continent a couple hundred years ago when throwing up Greek temples, Japanese tea houses, and Chinese Pagodas on well maintained park land was an 'in' thing to do. Munich's version also contains several nude sunbathing areas (which we sadly didn't see), a large biergarten (duh), and of all things, a spot on the fast moving river where people actually surf (how freaking cool is that?! The threat of rain was assuaged by bright blue skies littered with a few white puffy clouds and the oversized, paved paths were high amiable to aimless strolling. After watching the surfers for awhile we chomped down on yet another pretzel in the biergarten.

This is an interesting perch here in the train station. Its on a second floor and it overlooks the boarding area through large plate glass windows. European train stations have tended to be like nothing we have back home. Rather than a subterranean fortress like Grand Central or Penn Station, these train stations are huge open areas with a curved roofs high overhead. 20 or more tracks and their associated loading platforms are neatly arranged in a straight rows. I see people moving about between the departing and arriving trains, some not going for long (small packs), some on business (full suits at 9pm), and some like us hauling backpacks with an odd combination of weariness and excitement. Hundreds of stories down there - transportation centers are so cool.

The walk from the gardens to the Deutsch museum was longer than we thought, but took us through a pretty and yet unseen part of the city along the Isar River, down a wide tree lined sidewalk spotted with park benches. The Deutsch Museum is the largest science and technology museum in the world - basically what you'd get if you tried to come up with a museum that an engineer would love. Jet engines, big diesels, complete planes, a V1 rocket, an ME262 from WWII, and countless other exhibits that were strangely able to pique my interest while diametrically serving as a sedative for MaryBeth. We burn off the rest of the day strolling back towards the train station, stopping to get some ice cream, and catching one of the daily exhibitions of the Glockenspiel (an animated clock with knights jousting - actually quite lame). We relax in Marienplatz and people watch for over an hour.

Its been about a week since that tumultuous first step off the plane in Charles de Gaulle airport. We're tired and missing the white dog, and I fear that desensitization is already seeping into our days. As the novelty of being here wears off, we'll have to find a new, more substantive, groove.

Another train squeaks to a halt, a surge of people crowd the floor, moving in line toward the exits. Then, momentary silence. Soon we'll be hearing the hiss and clunk of closing train doors and initial gentle motion as the train creeps away from the platform. And then we'll say goodbye to another country that exists no longer as just a name on a map, but rather, sights and sounds and smells and experiences. Vienna, here we come.

6/4/2007 Hotel room in Vienna, Austria

The TV in our hotel room is tuned to CNN International. The main story is about Bush's current Europe/G8 tour, on which he's currently positioned in Prague. During a pan of an assembled crowd, MaryBeth and I pick out churches and buildings that we had walked past just a few days ago.

We awoke this morning to the shrill 'beep beep' of my pocket alarm clock, followed shortly by a more abrupt and louder announcement over the train speakers for our approaching stop. Time = 5:50AM. We tensely bundle our stuff and hurry out of the couchette into the car hallway. If we miss our stop, our trip to Vienna will become a trip to Budapest, Hungary where the train's terminus is. While pausing in the station, an elderly New Zealander stops and asks us if we drink. Its a peculiar question for a complete stranger to ask, and combined with sleep deprivation, it takes a couple seconds to reply, "well yes, of course." The lady smiles and pulls out a bottle of red wine. "Our hotel gave this to us to celebrate my husbands birthday - we don't drink. Here, its yours." An exchange of smiles and thanks. Its one hell of a way to start off a city stop.



A 30 minute walk in a still waking city drops us into the Museum Quarter of Vienna. Here the density of towering hunks of extravagant (and apparently old) architecture skyrockets, with palaces, museums, government buildings, and opera houses no matter where you look. While wandering through the vast courtyard of Schönbrunn Palace, a bus of Austrian military unloads. In full dress, they assemble into ranks with sharp clicking of their metallic soles against cobblestone. A

marching band joins in and we're treated to an almost exclusive demonstration while the guard moves off to greet some dignitary.

We've been trying to manage a real clothes wash (as opposed to the hand wash in a stoppered sink) for days and our failure to do so has manifested itself in a bag of half washed, half dry clothes. After rising from an badly needed nap, we shoulder the bag of clothes in search of a Laundromat, or as its appropriately called here, wash center. This task, if tackled in the United States, would probably not warrant comment. But of course, the novelty of being overseas tends to pop up in the most mundane of places. The washers all look like they should, lined up and in the wall. But not so fast, there's no place to put coins. How the hell do you work this thing? A quick scan of the room reveals a large panel in the center of the bank of machines. Poorly labeled buttons are linked to poorly drawn illustrations by faint decals. Procedure: First, you load your clothes into the washer. Next, you return to what will henceforth be referred to as the Central Washing Computer Unit (CWCU) to obtain a

cup of soap. This is then loaded into 1 of 3 positions on the top of the washer. The correct position is chosen at random by the washer, so you may want to spread the soap out evenly between them. Next, you return to the CWCU and deposit your money, in this case an ungodly 5 dollars for a single wash. After depositing your money, you must punch in the number of your washer and press enter. Finally, you return to your washer and further select water temperature, duration, type of clothes, type of soap, the chemical formula of constituent materials in your clothes, number of atoms of soap deposited, etc. This process is then repeated for the dryers. With this completed we pass the time drinking peach soda and reading on top of folding tables.

The thing about cheap hotels (besides the odors that are sometimes as pervasive as they are unidentifiable) is that they're usually located outside the city in a significantly non-tourist area. This provides a valuable, albeit small, view into what life is like outside the domain of tourist dollars. This evening we took a walk through the Keplerplatz part of Vienna where dinner consisted of shaved meat at a corner Turkish cafe, washed down with a mix of seltzer and iced tea.

Tomorrow, Vienna take two.

6/5/2007 Night train to Zurich

One thing Vienna is known for is its coffee houses. I guess this harks back to the early 20th century when some wild and crazy people like Trotsky came up with some wild and crazy ideas while drinking Viennese caffeine

My coffee house experience was regrettably less world changing. Café Sperl is one of Vienna's top coffee destinations (at least according to one of the photocopied pages from our tour books), and offers the novelty of having not changed its décor or furniture in a 130 years. Its pouring rain when we walk through the wood foyer and deposit our umbrellas in a cast iron stand.

You can feel individual springs accepting weight as you sit down on the ancient red, blue, and grey upholstery. Above, the high plaster arched ceilings are decorated with small ornamental designs, both slightly yellowed with age. The walls are dark hardwood paneling and as people walk by, the wood floors warmly creak. My coffee (a tall mocca) and MaryBeth's tea come on a small, shiny tin tray, deposited with a "bitte" from our pleasant waitress and a clink against the marble table top. In the din of a room full of people you can here small metal spoons against porcelain cups and the crinkling of newspaper.



A tall mocca in the United States might come in a large cup and be a sweet chocolate flavored coffee. Here, though, it apparently translates into a double shot of espresso with mild undertones of cocoa. Behind me is a large table illuminated by low hanging brass lamps. Laid out across the entire surface are dozens of newspapers, free for perusal, a tradition for Viennese coffee houses. I grab a Financial Times and with the assistance of a another round of coffee, read it cover to cover. Its stopped raining outside with the sun poling through the tall glass windows by the time I'm done and we had back out into the city.

This morning after a breakfast of bread and cheese, we climbed the 374 steps of Stephansdom. An endless spiral staircase made of stone, polished glass smooth by years of use, it leads to the top of the north tower of Vienna's famous Stephan's Cathedral. Despite being crowded by a dozen teenage school kids on a field trip, we get unparalleled views across Vienna all the way to the foothills that surround it.

Vienna supposedly has a long tradition of trams, a tradition we partake on via the #1 line for a cheap tour of the city. We eventually make it up to Schloss Belvedere, the former residence of a Austrian war hero who at some point did something good to wind up with a huge house. As only European palaces can do, a vast garden stretches down from a building whose façade is as ornate as it is large. A shaded bench provides an hour to two of respite, reading and nodding off.

Our farewell dinner in Vienna is two sausages, two pretzels smothered in sweet mustard, and local beer. While waiting for the train we sketch out the final leg of the trip and struggle with international calls to try and make reservations. Tomorrow, we make our way to Gimmelwald, Switzerland.

6/7/2007 Train from Bern to Zurich, en route to Chur, Switzerland

Our small travel alarm goes off. Its 5:50AM and our train should arrive in about 20 minutes. We fumble in morning grogginess to get our stuff quietly together and ready to disembark. MaryBeth slides the couchette door open and takes a step into the gently rocking hallway. She comes back a moment later and looks up at me: "Mountains." Our welcome to Switzerland was that of an emerald and seemingly endlessly long lake, a small town just waking up, and the sharp peaks of the Alps poking up across our view. Love at first sight.



There's something artificially profound about hearing your name called in a totally foreign place (for example the ticketing line at Zurich's central train station). It appears that our route has overlapped again with a guy named Charles that we met on our way to Prague. Having recently completed his Bachelors, Charles is on a two month, classic ultra cheap, backpacking trip. The train to Interlaken Ost (where we hop two more trains and a gondola to get to Gimmelwald) takes about 2.5 hours, and to pass the time we talk

about where we've been, where we're going, and stuff back home. Soon enough the expansive waters of Lake Brienz start rolling past, and shortly after that, we go our separate ways at Interlaken with plans to meet up in Milan a few days later.

Its difficult to describe our journey from Interlaken to Gimmelwald, as words do only slightly less injustice than pictures and video. We depart Interlaken on a slower train that pulls out of the large valley where the 'city between the lakes' sits and as we roll along next to a silt filled, fast moving river, rock walls slowly build on either side of the train. Every once and a while, through a break here or there, a glimpse of snow covered peaks, a tease of what's to come. In Lauterbernan, we're in the heart of it. Massive rock walls fill your vision around 360 degrees, snow crusted ridges tower overhead, large waterfalls fueled by spring run off tumble down a thousand feet. We have just ended up in some sort of fantasy novel.

But the journey doesn't end there. To get to Gimmelwald we then board a gondola for a 4 minute ascent *up* one of those towering faces. Next, a slow train ride strains and groans to Murren, where our final leg is a 40 minute walk.

While researching an ideal Swiss hiking destination several sites came on the radar. On one webpage, though, there's a quote, "If Heaven isn't what it's cracked up to be, send me back to Gimmelwald." Of course it's easy to dismiss such effusiveness while sitting at a desk in Connecticut, after all, I think you could find similar quotes for just about any vacation destination.

Gimmelwald, though, is a place you find in your dreams. A small cluster of a couple dozen buildings, mostly farmhouses, sit on an incongruously steep slope. Terraced fields provide grazing for goats and cows and ponies, their bells ringing as they lumber along in the mountain air. You're surrounded by peaks in the heart of the Alps: Eiger, Jungfrau, and Monch. A look across the vast valley and you stare at an indescribably huge rock face littered with the white streaks of waterfalls (of which, most will disappear by summer).

We originally intended to stay at the Mountain Hostel whose reviews include comments like "the best hostel in Europe," but instead elected to splurge on a room in a chalet. After settling in (with all the sights described above clear and unimpeded through our balcony doors), we head over to the hostel to let them know to we aren't coming. Here we meet Mike, a San Franciscan who is rounding up a group to climb Tanzbodeli, a rock formation that looks like a shark fin on top of one of the nearby ridges. We start out with Mike; ourselves; James, an Australian who works his stay off at the hostel; and Esther, a cute Ohio-an (is that a word?) on her own for a segment of a month long trip.

Our hiking mates are true travelers, the kind you read about in Lonely Planet books. As we trudge along, they swap stories about this place or that,



talking about sleeping on the same picnic bench somewhere hundreds of miles away, chuckling at the coincidence. I eye Esther's sandals. Someone later on asks her about climbing with them and she replies that they've served her well everywhere she's been, including hiking in Cinque Terre. I eye my own footwear – running sneakers. I hope I'm as lucky. Smooth downhill soon changes into quad busting ascent, and the party breaks into two groups. One continues heading to the sharks fin, the other heads out to Chilchbalm, a meadow nestled in an amphitheater of rock.

The guys I'm hiking with are hardcore and the Swiss apparently don't believe in switchbacks. I'd like to blame it on the thinner air, but I can't. The climb to Tanzbodeli is a grueling uphill push and after what seems like countless 'I wonder if it flattens out any over the next hill', the last leg is a short climb up a rock face where you find yourself on a small clearing. The steep face surrounding it makes it appear as if you are floating in the vast valley that stretches below. Small pools of snow are spread around and Mike comments on how his attempt a few days ago was thwarted by snow. As guys do things, we scramble out onto a rocky ridge between the fins and survey the environs we now find ourselves in.

Later that day, a dinner of bread, salami, and cheese with a desert of wine and Swiss chocolate. Outside, the Alps breath red in alpine glow.

It's a peculiar feeling to wake up in a foreign place. The familiarity of sleep against the abrupt unfamiliarity of being thousands of miles from home in a foreign land. After breakfast, MaryBeth and I head out on a repeat of the hike that her and Esther did yesterday to Chilchbalm. A bit tamer than Tanzbodeli, the path takes us next to a river that transforms from fast moving and silt filled to a small stream near the end. Meadows in full bloom dot our progress and soon we've emptied into the huge amphitheater that is this hike's destination. A perfect alpine meadow surrounded by sheer and steep faces, waterfalls, a snow capped ridgeline. It forms the perfect note to leave on.

6/8/2007 Hotel room in Milan, Italy

We leave our dorm hostel by 8am. During the day, you walk down the street oblivious to the red lights that consume the windows at night. It appears that the Just Be Nice hostel of Chur, Switzerland, with its modern accoutrements, is located next to the small but active red light district.

This town is one of the oldest in Switzerland, having been populated thousands of years before even the Romans. Think of that the next time you see an apparently old 'Established in' sign while driving through a New England town. Under a street lined with the white cross on red background of Switzerland's flag, we head to the train station to catch the morning's Bernina Express. There are several scenic trains in Switzerland (this being one of them), but only one that crosses from north to south to deposit us in Italy. Packed full, the train makes it way into the mountains. Through the panoramic windows we can see blue sky poking through some low level clouds and as we head further south, lush forest envelopes the tracks. Large hulks of green earth move past us, scenery akin to New Hampshire and gradually glimpses of snow capped peaks again return to our view. This train crosses the highest train bridge in Switzerland and ascends the steepest, non-cog, track. In some tricky spots, engineers gained and released elevation in large circular sections like huge spiral staircases for trains – the only implementation of something like it in the world.

After an hour or two, we reach the ceiling of our ride into an alpine wonderland of glassy lakes, glacier erratics, and meadow grasses. This area is also akin to the Continental Divide in the US, where an invisible line separates water headed for the Mediterranean and Atlantic.

In what seems like a final slow nudge, the train starts its downhill track, the hugely powerful electric motors now working backwards as they strain to brake the train. We move from German Switzerland, to Italian Switzerland, and finally, to Italy itself. This is marked by a change from the aforementioned alpine meadow to, believe it or not, palm trees. It's also marked by the commentary of an extremely nice Swiss couple, in their 60s, sharing the train booth with us. Through knowledge gleaned from years in the area (their first time on this route was when they were six), we track our descent by noting wild roses, Chestnut trees in bloom, and houses with stone roofs.

A tight connection to a train bound for Milan and a 3 hour train ride start our Italian leg of the adventure. Outside drips with stereotypical Italy. A bright sun lights up vineyards that run in straight lines on the steep hillsides surrounding the exceptionally flat and broad valley that the train speeds through. Small towns with plain houses and red ceramic roof tiles, mopeds scurrying next to and away from the tracks. On the train a group of Italian teenage girls chat back and forth, their language sounding like music.

As just a waypoint on our way to Venice, Milan is little more than a place to drink a couple 50c's of cheap beer while people watching near the train station. It's hot, and will only get hotter as we move south. The cool, crisp air of Switzerland now just a memory, tomorrow we continue on into our second to last country.

6/9/2007 Hotel in Venice-Mestre

Venice sounds → Beauty from a string quartet as one of the two battling sides of San Marco square takes up its eternal fight. The 'thwap-thwap' of swarms of pigeons ascending or maneuvering, looking for an outstretched, corn filled hand. The soft din of people talking and laughing in a cacophony of languages. The unique sound, dripping cliché, of an accordion played by an elderly man who smiles at people passing by, even



the ones that don't leave coin. The click of heels on cobblestones streets, water lapping against canal walls. The exuberant (and uniquely Italian) laughs and greetings of a group of locals meeting another.

Venice sights → Charming, aged buildings that somehow pull off peeling paint and splintered wood. Tight alleyways, barely wide enough for two people that look like urban slot canyons. Groups of gondolas pushing through 2 foot waves in the Grand Canal. A crowded San Marcos square; an abandoned side street.

Venice smells → The smell of the ocean, mixed with gas vapors from the passing boats. Fresh baked bread at a random bakery along a confused path through the small streets. Strong coffee at a café in San Marcos.

Venice tastes → The ice cream, oh, the ice cream. Fresh pizza, eaten while sitting on a fountain ledge in a hidden (shaded) square.

6/11/2007 Hotel room in Florence, Italy

Ah, Italy. My hands fuzzy with a carafe of house red and my stomach full from a delicious pizza.

Yesterday we took the train from Venice to La Spezia, a long, unrewarding, but mostly problem free trek. On approach to La Spezia, the previously boring scenery that blurs outside the window begins to offer glimpses of ocean cliffs; smells of ocean air. The Italian Riviera.

This morning we got up early to catch an early train outbound. The plan, get off at Monterosso, the furthest of the 5 small towns that make up Cinque Terre, and then hike the #2 trail back. We walk to the train station, sun bright (and hot) in clear blue skies before 7am, the low angle light reflecting brilliantly off the building faces. After only a few minutes of shouldering our packs in the humid air, we start sweating. Breakfast consist of more bread and cheese and as a treat, custard donuts.

After stowing our bags, the 7:55 train carries us north and 20 minutes later we push two water bottles into our daypack. We stroll through Monterosso, pick up the #2 trailhead, and start to immediately go up. But unlike previous hikes, this isn't on a rocky trail, rather, an ancient looking stone stair case, hemmed in on both sides by tall stone walls. Bright green leaves of grape vines line the path which cuts through and over huge terraced ledges in the shaded hillside



We move in and out of cool, humid air and eventually start climbing on a trail of dirt and broken stone. On our right, a perpetual view of turquoise waters wash against the bottom of 100 foot cliffs lined with briars and shrubs. Rounding a bend the second of five towns, Vernazza, pops into view. From a distance, the precariousness of the town's position looks like someone superglued pastel painted boxes onto a cliff face. The trail leads down to, and then through, the quaint traffic free town. Those superglued boxes are accessible

only via steep segments of stairs that run perpendicular to the town's main street. After a brief stop to relax and refuel our water stock, we had back out to be greeted immediately by a steep climb out of the ravine that cradles the town.

The rest of our hike takes us through similar scenery and terrain. The sound of waves crashing against rocks grows quiet and louder as we gain and lose elevation, and the trail leads us through several more vineyards on its windy path along the coast. Up to the last of the five towns, Riomaggiore, we grab some gelato and shade before setting off for our 4 hour train ride south through the heart of Tuscany.

6/12/2007 Room in Rome, Italy

When you make it to the Sistine Chapel, after endless corridors of intricate paintings, wall hangings, al fresco ceilings, and mosaics, the first thing that strikes you is how big the thing is. In the center of a massive room, high above, is the scene that everyone associates with this place, a white haired God earnestly reaching out to touch mortal man who lies with lazy countenance. But its only one small scene on a huge ceiling that tells the story of creation.

In comparison to something like the Lourve, not too many museums are impressive, or maybe its just inevitable museum desensitization. The Vatican Museum, while achieving its partial role of preserving Roman Glory, fails to stimulate. For its part though, it does do a good job of presenting extraordinary amounts of statues. Roman examples of snarling dogs, smiling babies, half naked women, and noble old men whose intricacies are even more astounding when considering that the final touches were put on by artisans some two thousand years ago.

After the neck pain got too much in the Sistine Chapel we exited via a convenient exclusive door (thanks Rick Steves!) that dropped directly to St. Peter's Basilica. This church is massive beyond words. Meticulously and extravagantly decorated, the voices of gawking tourist reflecting off the marble floors and stone walls like a man made canyon. A large dome admits a brilliant shaft of light that illuminates a chair in which the pope has solitary access.



We arrived in Rome after a short trip on a high speed train from Florence, the second of these that we've ridden on. The sleek aerodynamic cowling combined with separate tracks allows these things to go up to 130mph on standard runs. We enjoy the well adorned 1st class seats as the countryside blurs by, rows of grapes and clusters of red tile roofs around a church steeple.

We'll be basing from a bed and breakfast here in Rome that's really just a two bedroom apartment rented out. For 54 euros a night, it's as cheap as it comes in this city but is relatively spacious, has a nice bathroom, and a full kitchen. Not to mention that it feels like we're part of a Roman suburb 100 meters from the Vatican.

Tomorrow, a full day of Rome.

6/14/2007 Room in Rome, Italy

Mopeds. They outnumber cars on the chaotic streets of this city. They duck around, weave in and out of precipitously small spaces, dodging cars, people, and themselves as they zip past you. Seemingly normal and respectable people, some wearing business suits, hop onto one of these things and become wannabe Evil Knives. At red lights they all filter through gaps in traffic and line up. Like a NHRA drag race, when the light drops to green a hellish roar of small bore engines is unleashed as the bikes lurch forward as a pack, leaving cars and pedestrians in a wake of blue smoke.

Yesterday we headed out early to try and beat the day's heat. First stop on our 'Caesar Shuffle', the Coliseum. By scoring tickets from an auxiliary vendor, we bypassed the long line already queued in the buildings arcade. Breezing through the entrance gate, we emptied out into the 2000 year old arena and had it mostly to ourselves. Of course, it's hard to be at the Coliseum in Rome and not think of *Gladiator*, but in a far departure from the computer enhanced movie version, the floor on which thousands of Romans watched bloody games is gone, probably pieced away and residing in some long forgotten building nearby (after the fall of Rome, remaining locals used the Coliseum as a quarry – the main reason for its apparent state of disrepair). Brickwork laid down by slaves so long ago sits exposed by missing facades. This place, among a small list of such places, is one that everyone recognizes and now we were there, looking at a clear blue sky through its arches.

The Roman Forum occupies grounds next to the Coliseum and was, until a couple hundred years ago, underneath dozens of feet of dust and silt that slowly (and quite unbelievably) accumulated after the fall of Rome. After the 'barbarians' finally took over the joint, the once great empire, in fact *the* sprawling center of civilization, of over a million dwindled to a candle flame of 10,000 men. Some of it preserved in the Vatican (which was left untouched by the conquerors) some of it under a dozen feet of dirt. It's an incredulous walk through history, quite literally on top of the same basalt stones that Julius Caesar once walked on. Temples and basilicas and government buildings in a dense area, connected by roads that bear chariot ruts, the center of the world for 1000 years.

The sun forces us onward to our third stop of the day, the Pantheon. What has become a Christian church since its original construction, the Pantheon was the largest dome in the world for some period of time. While no longer holding that title, it's still rated as the best preserved piece of humanity of its time (built around 125 AD). We linger for a little while under the sunlight illuminated interior and then continue on.

As is apparently standard, people in Rome follow the siesta schedule, requiring inhabitants to return home and nap during the hottest part of the day. After one such refreshing nap we head back out for a stroll through Rome's outdoor nightlife. Past Piazza Navona, Trevis Fountain, and the Spanish Steps, we witness swarms of

locals and tourists alike enjoying gelato, wine, and food at one of dozens of candlelit café fronts while watching street performers in a pervasive party atmosphere akin to a adult Spring Weekend. When we finish our walk up (which includes some of the best pizza ever at a couldn't-find-this-place-again-if-you-wanted restaurant), the metro is closed. The taxi ride plays out like a video game, with our driver barreling down on nearly stopped cars, flashing his lights, swerving into oncoming traffic, etc all the way home.

I take a swig of refrigerated tap water, sweating still from the day's heat that is just starting to wane. Today was a lazy day, spent reading and watching dogs play in Rome's Villa Borghese. After too much gelato and pizza, we're looking at two long travel days to Athens. Already, I



am beginning to feel the leaded shackles of real life try to reattached. At least they will give perspective to where I am and what I'm doing.

Tomorrow we make our way to our final country, Greece.

6/15/2007 Off the coast of Italy onboard the Blue Horizon ferry

The air conditioning was barely functioning when we got onto the train in Rome. More like, less hot rather than comfortable. But it was cooler than outside and after a few minutes you stopped sweating. That is until it stopped working. Then, as the Italian heartland rushed by the window, brown field after brown field, the temperature went from uncomfortable, to plaint hot, to unbearable. Then, to make matters worse, we came to a stop at a train station, waited 15 minutes, and then started going the way we had just came!. Oh what fun TrenItalia.

We made it though, and a bus ride later had us killing time in the port building, playing an improvised game of shuffleboard (using coins and a wall) waiting for our 8pm ferry departure.

We left Italy watching dock hands pull up rope lines and fill out paper work to the sound of huge engines churning water three stories beneath us. We're currently in the midst of a 16 hour cruise from the port of Bari in Italy to the port of Patra in Greece. Right now, in our 'aircraft style' seats, some movie is playing barely audible in the corner. Having watched the sun set over a foamy wake, we're reading and relaxing to the constant vibration of the engine (something is out of round and is causing about a 4Hz rhythm). The air in here, shared with a room of fellow backpackers and travelers, smells vaguely of humid farts. This will be a fun night.

I just made a final survey. On the aft portion of the ship, illuminated by harsh fluorescents, groups of 18-20 year olds are trying to be cool with the privilege of legal drinking, making noise over the wind, and snapping pictures of each other and nothing with digital cameras. I'm envious. Two diaphanous traces of smoke, faintly illuminated by wasted light from the ship, fade out behind us. Off to starboard, the lights of Italy twinkle. To port, sky and ocean are inseparable in the blackness of this night on the Mediterranean.

6/17/2007 Hotel in Athens, Greece

The sounds of waves washing against shore must be one of those things that's globally universal. The fact that we happen to be sitting on a Greek island, Poros to be exact, under an umbrella and drinking beer is of course secondary. Cool sand

between my toes as I read a thick book. A local stray dog is using our umbrella as cover from the sun and we augment that with some pieces from an energy bar. In front of us the Mediterranean stretches across a bay to mainland Greece. The hills of the island are rocky and sun parched, with blankets of pine and lemon trees covering spots around the shore.



Porostown is a relatively peaceful cluster of stereotypical white Greek houses, mopeds, and seaside shops. Sail boats hailing from ports like Nassau, Bahamas and Porthampton,

Long Island, bob with the current a few feet off the main street.

Yesterday offered yet more pleasant train riding experience. This time combined with the 100+ interior temperatures was a 2nd class car entirely full of fellow backpackers. Now, in general, backpackers are pretty cool people, in fact more so than the general population. But, also in general, they stink. Our trip finally ended in Athens around 7 pm. For dinner we found a local restaurant and where I delved into the local cuisine with some sort of lamb dish, consisting of a hunk of lamb, delicious as it was full of fat, topped with gravy, potato wedges and Feta cheese. Everything washed down with a new beer, Mythos. While enjoying the last of our beer and cooling off in the night time air, I feel something tugging against my car. I swivel around to see two guys trying to steel the camera from my bag! They quickly give it up and scurry away at having been caught, and I put an extra padlock on the zipper when we get back to the hotel room.

The language here presents a greater than normal challenge as the alphabet is different on top of a language deeply embedded with variety of tone and meaning. But surprisingly over the past couple days I've been getting better with it. Moving past seeing words as combinations of engineering values and actually seeing letters - of course I don't know what the words that I laboriously assemble in my head mean, but that's beside the point. This is our last real night on the trip. Tomorrow we begin

a multi-day return trip, and tomorrow night will find us sleeping somewhere in Brussels airport.

6/18/2007 Departure gate at Athens International Airport

Leaving: a pseudo-panic desperation as I sit waiting to walk onto the jetway. Evaporated are the desires to be back to the comforts of home.

Desensitization clears away like being hit with smelling salts. I'm in Athens, Greece! I see flights to Santorini, Greece: blue domes and blue water; Kiev, Russia: ohh wouldn't that be an adventure; London: I've wanted to go there for awhile now. Someplace to stay in my backpack. Of course, I tell myself this feeling is normal and repeated at the end of any great trip I've done. They just announced a boarding call.



Αεροπλάνο Flight Number	Προορισμός Destination	Ελεγκτής Counter	Πύλη Gate	Ώρα Time	Κατάσταση Status
OR 574	Milini	082-085	B21	1540	Boarding
EB 551	Venice	049-050	B28	1545	Boarding
A3 214	Rhodes	127-132	B13	1630	Final call
OR 245	Milan MXP	098-102	B03	1650	GateClosed
IB 3885	Madrid	153-154	B25	1655	GateClosed
OR 309	Sofia	098-102	B20	1700	Boarding
AF 1733	Paris CDG	111-114	B05	1705	GateClosed
LX 1839	Zurich	038-041	A11	1715	Boarding
IB 2029	Barcelona	155-157	B07	1720	Final call
VV 230	Kiev KBP	080-082	A07	1730	Boarding
OR 942	Alexandroupolis	082-085	B24	1750	Boarding
AZ 731	Milan MXP	137-142	B15	1755	Late 18:45

6/19/2007 35,000 feet over the Northern Atlantic

We must be rather close to Greenland right now. In between thunderheads poking out of disks of white, I can see open ocean. Interspersed are small specks of white, too big and constant to be waves. One of the accommodations on long haul international flights appears to be more comfortable seats and free music. Jimi Hendrix drowns out the numbing vibration from the plane.

3 hours ago, under the roar yet again of two jet engines, a release of forward pressure on the yoke, and we leave Europe. In 5 more hours, in a blast of tire smoke, we'll be back on American soil.

Until the next adventure.