

Harriet Report #13 -

Whirlwind Stephanie and Girls Trip

Six Days seeing Amsterdam, Delft, Paris, and Florence

Thursday, February 15 to Tuesday February 20, 2001

What an amazing trip! I had the blankest expectations. I was pretty sure that rushing through Paris in two days and Florence in two days would be crazy, and seeing Amsterdam and Delft in one afternoon was ridiculous. Well, and honestly, I was so blank and dead feeling from my impending divorce and in-house separation and waiting in limbo to move home to Houghton, and already, before she even came, sad about Stephanie leaving at the end of the trip to go home, so . . .surprise!

What a treat and happy event. It wasn't too sad, it wasn't too crazy, it wasn't even hard! It was easy and great and full of laughs thanks to the Girls!

What am I talking about? My little sister, Stephanie King Wondolleck, an accomplished landscape architect, all grown up, more than me, from Marin with two daughters, left Dad Jim at home in San Rafael and came to visit Aunt Harriet while she still lives in Delft. I actually gave Steph a free plane ticket to come and she added the girls when she saw they could travel round trip from San Francisco to Amsterdam for only \$400 each. It was Emily (age ten) and Janice's (freshly age eight) Big Surprise Christmas Present, complete with new rolling suitcases and winter hats and gloves for cold old Europe and spending money from both Grandmothers. They were coming! And they wanted to see Europe with Aunt Harriet, but in only six days. So Steph and I picked a few destinations and then I let her figure out the transport logistics.

It was a puzzle. How to get from Paris to Florence in the shortest time for the least money, and then back to Amsterdam. Because Steph works, and American's who work get two weeks off a year and they have other commitments like annual family reunions at Tahoe and national sailing championships and stuff and it's hard to have TIME to do something for not much reason, like take your daughters on their first trip to Europe. Will they ever forget it? Not some parts, I bet.

But the fast train takes eight to fourteen hours between Paris and Florence and again to Amsterdam. So we flew! It felt decadent and cost the same as coming over from San Francisco, but we got around quicker. We took the bullet train from Delft to Paris (four hours, two of them at 300 kilometers an hour) and flew from Paris to Florence (two hours, in a plane) and flew from Florence to Amsterdam (two hours), and that left all those other hours to PLAY in the wonderful land we were visiting.

But with such a tight schedule, you'd think we'd stress out, a lot, right? One can't forget the effect of travel with kids, flexibility is the rule and there's so much to joke about when someone is whining and I won't tell who because it might have been me! And we didn't have to SEE everything because Art Doesn't Matter (even to "artist" Aunt Harriet) so that left lots of time on the edges.

All credit must be given to the remarkable Wondollecks who did not have the slightest visible signs of jet lag. They arrived in Amsterdam in the late morning after flying eleven hours and nine time zones and were ready to follow Aunt Harriet in touring Amsterdam and Delft right away. The next day, maybe then they'd break up with jet lag, or something. Nope, not those guys. Perfectly ready and usually cheerful, every morning pulling their own weight AND suitcases and off on the next round of sights and tastes. Because travel involves a lot of stopping to taste as we all know; pastries, ice creams, potato chips, and maybe even healthy food like roast boar, rabbit, frogs legs (no thank you).

So the four of us were all happy, being ourselves, and getting along fine. Aunt Harriet talks in her sleep, Emily snores like a broken blender but it helps Harriet sleep, Janice can be an eight year old, and Stephanie, well, there's nothing ever wrong with her. Really!

Although there was nothing wrong about the four humans on this trip, there were a few external troubles. They sound like a big deal, but somehow didn't really seem like it. Bomb scare, attempted robbery, eating spit out food, there, now you know.

We put the Wondo luggage in lockers in the Amsterdam train station so we could have a quick tram through town and get a feel for basic Amsterdam sights and sounds. We did get off the tram and walk around the massive Rijksmuseum, across a few canals, a little taste of the surroundings. They were pleasantly impressed. But when we returned for the bags, friendly police were blocking our way because ... there was a bomb in the lockers! Or so the friendly policeman told us. So we went to lunch, across the street on the pier for the tour boat. It was really sunny and warm and nice on the water. Emily was worried that her possessions would get blown up. Aunt Harriet was worried we were wasting day light hours we needed for showing off Delft. We went back after lunch and voila, no more police, no problems (except we'd missed the train and had to wait 25 more minutes).

At 2:30, finally off on the one hour train ride to Delft to see the sights important to Harriet; canals, main market square where boys have recess, leaning church tower on our street, great ice cream store, the cool cow bridge with elegant lift mechanism, the video store, the grocery store, waving or chatting to Harriet's favorite shop keepers along the way; the bagel man, the middle eastern pizza man, the ice cream store men who always tease me. That night Harriet's few friends came for after dinner coffee. That's practically another story. Most

interestingly none of them know each other or are friends of each other. Margreet wore wonderful leopard print pumps. They didn't eat the cake and cookies but it was way fun. The kids played really loud but upstairs out of the way. Aaron, Jamie, Callum, and Renzo were there as well as Peter and Arthur, Janice and Emily. All the boys ignored the girl cousins. Emily was caught snoring in front of the TV by Peter, but she told him she always breathed like that when she was bored watching TV.

We did almost miss our reserved bullet train to Paris because, god forbid, the Dutch trains were running late! We all took the boys to school so Steph and the Girls could see it. Then we had coffee with Marie, Karen, Hetty and their respective toddlers. Arriving at the train station to ride to Rotterdam, the trains were running LATE! But we did make it by walking very rapidly when we got to Rotterdam and Aunt Harriet knew the platform from having taken the same train twice before with the boys and with Cynthia. We arrived three breaths before the bullet train pulled up to the platform.

When we arrived in Gare du Nord, Paris, I was targeted by a classic scam. One robber was "helpfully" telling me to put my bag under the turnstile, and trying to "help" push it under and the other robber had his hand in my purse. But I was annoyed at this guy being so "helpful" since I already knew what to do with my bag and then felt the tug on my purse and swung my free right hand around into the hand-in-my-purse guy's stomach, then grabbed his shirt front with the same hand thinking to hold him close until I could see if my wallet and passport were still there. They were. So I let go. He put his hands up with a big smile like a kid caught eating candy in bed. Then just after I went through the turnstile, one of them returned to me making kissy lips at me and I said "Fuck Off!". The Girls looked at me like I was a Martian because neither they nor Stephanie had even seen the robbery attempt. I explained to them and was shaking for a while. But I tied a knot in my purse strap and wore it under my coat the rest of the trip. Am I glad I noticed!! Especially since I'm taking a trip with the boys to Italy three days after returning to Delft with Steph and I need my passport!

You know how bad things sometimes go in threes? Well I can't think of an obvious third except maybe when I ate an unknown dark food, expecting duck breast, from Emily's plate and it turned out to be a big piece of black mushroom that she'd just spit out. That WAS a slippery piece of mushroom, but like a good Auntie, I just swallowed it. It was my fault really for taking food off her plate. Can that count as the third bad thing? Or maybe when Emily almost threw up at the table because she ate some dessert, tiramisu, containing alcohol and wasn't warned. I just put my hands over my eyes. That was the beauty of traveling with Stephanie and the Girls. They're Stephanie's Girls! And we laughed so much with them all along the way. Thank you Emily and Janice for all the fun and laughs!

That first metro journey was grubby, crowded, and still feeling scared, but our hotel on the edge of the Marais area by the Bastille was very clean and perfectly comfortable; small, well located, and not at all like an Embassy Suites, which was unfortunate for Emily because she later revealed that a big hotel like her birthday party stay in Embassy Suites had been her ideal. I explained that when I arranged the hotels in Paris and Florence, I was exactly aiming to get the opposite of Embassy Suites. I valued location (not by the freeway but in a convenient neighborly place), low price, cleanliness, and a small hotel full of personal character. Sorry Em!

Our Paris hotel rooms had french doors opening to wrought iron railing and the fresh air of our quiet side street. We had two doubles and Emily bravely stayed with Aunt Harriet. Her snoring put me to sleep, which was nice symbiosis. The hotel in Florence was even better located, between the Duomo and the Uffizi, clean and simple, an old palazzo. Still not at all Embassy Suites. We all shared a quad room that had two separate bathrooms, both with bidet, mistaken for toilets at first. And there was a TV showing "Dawson's Creek" dubbed in Italian, a bizarre first exposure to this teen dream show for me. One of the bathroom windows opened to a mini courtyard crowded by muted orange buildings interrupted by dark green window shutters, bright primary colored clothespins, and a few winter geraniums, no sign of sky at all. I was shy when I looked out later and a few shutters were open to the lives inside.

On Friday when we first arrived in Paris, we'd left our bags at our hotel and by 2:30 were off on foot to Notre Dame. We stopped for lunch in a sidewalk bistro enclosed in glass. The waitress was thin and small and seemed shriveled and old but full of energy like a dancer. We had our worst meal here. Too salty scrambled eggs for the Girls, some too salty fake seafood thing for the Women. Stale bread, flat soda. I hoped it would go uphill from that meal and it did, phew.

We walked along the Seine (the monster river, flowing hard between it's massive high stone block walls, onto the islands and to Notre Dame, that most impressive of churches. Then to St. Chapelle, the strange two story cathedral with basically no walls on the upstairs, or royalty, level, just high roof support columns and the rest stained glass in such elaborate patterns, it was hard to see the designs. Each section of glass wall had a different lead pattern between the glass. The floor was elaborate mosaic. The Girls were playing crack the whip with the plasticized window explanation cards.

We continued walking across the Seine again towards Hotel de Ville, stopping for coffee and treats in a nice cafe on the river's edge. Continued through the pedestrian shopping streets to the Pompidou. By now I'm really fading and spend time watching some "art TV" in the huge interior courtyard of the Pompidou while the Girls browse the gift shop. Time to go towards dinner, we enjoy the primary colored sculptures in the fountain beside the Pompidou and then walk the narrow streets of the Marais with me leading us hopefully to the

restaurant where Cynthia and I had wonderful pots de creme in October. What a directional girl, I found the restaurant on it's side street first try! But it doesn't open until seven, so we all wander the nice shops on the street. First the custom scented soap and makeup store, then the comfortable arty shoe store where I bought birkenstock shoes.

Dinner is calculated to be early by Parisian standards so we aren't a bother with restless Girls. We all share cream of bean and truffle soup, ravioli gratineed with strong mushroom, salad with strong melty goat cheese and mushroomy foie gras type chopped stuff, cold vegie tart on fresh chunky tomato, lots of FRESH bread, and Aunt Harriet boldly gets up to ask kind waiter if we can cancel the stuffed duck thigh because we're already getting too full with all the food the Girls aren't eating. Harriet has a glass of delicious wine, we all play the spelling game, have the famed pots de creme which are more uniform in texture then remembered but still delicious, and leave before we're "in the way".

Start to look for more kid food on the big boulevard, since they didn't eat much yet. Nothing jumps out at us, decide to take a taxi to the Eiffel Tower, the driver says it's too cold and to go in the daylight, so we have him drive us home to the hotel instead. It's nine and we read and sleep.

Breakfast in the hotel is nice and then off by metro to the Tuilleries Gardens. Steph has expressed an interest in seeing gardens, which seems like a good idea to me and the Girls. We walk the garden, bundled up in mittens and hats against the cold wind. Drawn to the ferris wheel we realize we're looking over an ancient obelisk at a major Parisian fountain, the Arc de Triomphe, and in the distance the arch of La Defense. Wow, what a sight! And so freezing in the wind!

We walk back to the Louvre, line up patiently, and as soon as we're settled inside with tickets, go to the cafe for doughnuts for the Girls and coffee for poor Aunt Harriet who is already drooping. Soon we enter this largest of all museums and wander past the excavated old castle walls, into some ancient Egypt, the Venus de Milo (by accident), amazement at every turn at the grand rooms and collasal collection. We're looking for the crown jewels on our map but find instead some 1700's elaborate rooms with incredible inlaid furniture and some beautiful dutch paintings, before returning to the cafe for lunch: French version of salad bar, spinach tart, and salmon shared between us, including strawberry mousse in a lady finger edge to celebrate Stephanie's BIRTHDAY! Delicious!

Then a quick trip straight to Mona Lisa, accidentally seeing Winged Victory on the way and then we're out of there! Walk over the river Seine to Musee D'Orsay which has a humongous line. Catch a taxi and go to Eiffel Tower instead. Wait in the big line and go up the elevator to the incredible second level. Aunt Harriet almost doesn't go up for fear of heights, but is so glad she did. It's amazing even

if it is freezing. The elevator itself is amazing. After coming down, look for a warmup cafe and find the metro instead.

Ride over to Jardin Luxembourg in the Left Bank. Walk to the main fountain and then over to a hidden grotto that turns out to be some incredible Medici sculpture thing. Then a long cafe stop in a beautiful spot on the edge of the garden where we have crepes for Steph and strange Tart Tatin for Harriet. Sit a long time. Can't think where to go next. Have we run out of Parisian sights we care about? Decide to wander/walk some more in the general direction of the Seine. Go past the most americanized part we've seen, with MacDonald's and Gap, and the ancient Pantheon, then come out by the ancient Roman Baths lit up in the dark, it's six already, and a warren of little pedestrian tourist streets crowded with restaurant hawkers, food displayed in the open windows with skewers of giant shrimp big as lobster tails, kind of obscene!

Finally get a taxi and go back to the Eiffel Tower to see it lit up in the dark. It's 6:45 and our driver tells us at seven, the lights on the Tower will turn blue. We have him drive us to the hill across the river from the Tower, at the top of the hill where Musee d'Homme is. Lots of other people are up there too, street vendors and a drummer, and then, Ah! the Eiffel Tower starts to sparkle! Cool! But we're freezing, so we duck into the nearby metro and ride to Bastille. There's a cafe/bakery by our hotel that Steph thinks might be a good dinner option for all four of us. It's her birthday and we're still a little full from crepes. The Bakery becomes the best meal we've had; croque monsieur for the Girls, salmon, green bean and white asparagus salad, french onion soup gratinee, good bread, frites for all, cheese quiche so subtle and delicious, strawberry tart with creme fraiche, chocolate cake rolled around chocolate mousse with melt in your mouth chocolate curls on top served with creme anglaise, and Emily has cheese cake that disappoints and ice cream for Janice. This cafe meal becomes our most expensive at US\$80. The Girls end the meal with a major giggle fit. Home by nine and all asleep.

Next morning I have permission to wake everyone up and do so at 7:30. Pack up, pay up, go up to the Musee D'Orsay where the line is long but moving fast. Inside we see the post impressionist paintings and then have early lunch in the elegant and incredible chandeliered, sunny restaurant. It's a nice meal with fancy french buffet for one meal and fish with vegies in puff pastry and lobster sauce for the other, and the Girls seem to enjoy their kid's meal deal with steak and frites. Good creme caramel and amazing sorbet for Girls. What a beautiful setting. Then we see some impressionists, gift shop as usual, and then quick on metro back to hotel where the airporter comes a few minutes later.

Our plane to Florence gets goofed up when some lady gets on the wrong plane, ours, and causes another terrorist scare. After a long wait on the plane, we all have to get off with our carry on bags, onto the pavement, and identify our checked bags spread on carts around the plane, then we can get back on. Sort

of like a chinese fire drill. Finally we're off. They actually serve a meal on this short flight and soon enough we're in Florence taxi-ing to our new hotel. It's dark, it's late, we opt to just go to sleep.

The next day I'm down to breakfast early by myself and finally decide to wake the others. We walk today. To the striped marble faced Duomo first and inside I wait an hour on the bench absorbing the sights of people and cathedral while Steph and the Girls climb the tower for the view. Then we walk past some excavations of ancient city walls, the Neptune fountain, into a palace courtyard, the copied David sculpture and others in front of the Uffizi, the River Arno, stopping for some amazing gelatto (ice cream) and a walk across the Ponte Vecchio, admiring the jewelry shops, over to the Pitti Palace and Boboli Gardens, into the Gardens and then the hardest yet! Up the steep hill and through the extensive shaped gardens, lots of lovely planned woods and sun, much warmer in Florence than Paris's cold wind, but no flower beds. Lots of cool fountains and the Girls are entertained.

Panini lunch in the sun across from the garden, delicious! Excellent fresh orange juice made with blood oranges and fabulous coffee. That poor Parisian coffee just can't compare, sorry.

Walk to find Santo Spirito and it's closed but surrounded by hangout street looking people so we keep going, stop for bakery at a stand up cafe, across the Arno again and back to Duomo where we take the promised horse carriage "tour". Then inside the Duomo's Baptistry with it's amazing golden mosaics while the Girls romp around playing together, isn't sisterhood great! We go tourist shopping and by now I'm not the only one who has to pee desperately, so back to the hotel where I promptly fall asleep. They go back out to tourist shops seeking charms for the fabled charm bracelet. When they return we go to dinner where the hotel recommends, a walk down through the Republic Arch to a great restaurant. We play the alphabet memory food game this meal instead of our now customary spelling game which Janice especially seems to enjoy, clamoring to play even while waiting for metros etc.

I still remember the pattern: apple, bagel, cookies, dogfood, eggplant, french fries, goldfish, honey, ice cream, jelly beans, kelp, lollipops, melon, noodles, octopus, pineapple, quail, raspberries, strawberries, tuna, urchin, vanilla, watermelon, xtreme dogfood, yogurt, and zebra fruit.

It was a slow meal but delicious with many courses of pastas and roasted meats and I can't even remember it all, a plate of three desserts with the fabled tiramisu, some lemon meringue custard thing, and something else I can't remember. We promised to seek mint chip ice cream for the Girls but didn't realize it was already almost ten. We walk a number of blocks out of the way but shops are closing and we finally drag the tearful Girls home to sleep without the promised ice cream. Really sorry about that one, you guys.

Everyone got up early and went to the Uffizi Gallery, world renowned (and not open on Mondays). This is Tuesday, our last day on the trip, and we need to take a taxi to the airport from the hotel at 2:30. The Uffizi doesn't have a line, what a wonder, but one forms behind us! We look at a few bits of art with amazement while leaving the Girls in the sunny hall outside the exhibit rooms to do what kids do? Shortly enough we take our reward of coffee and fresh juice in the roof terrace cafe where we absorb sun and the view of the Duomo. Then down in the streets we shop and walk, buy Steph a watercolor birthday present, get ice cream for Girls and two streets later ice cream for Aunt Harriet, mint chip finally which is shared all around, then walk through the market, buy a mod triangular purse in blue and black leather for Aunt Harriet, then the food market which does not interest the Girls as expected. They're used to farmer's market of course.

Stop in cafe near hotel for lunch and finally are outnumbered by Italians, not Americans! Our best meal yet with buffet-like counter service, roast herbed potatos, green beans, pasta, curried rice, and yet another wonderful cappucino. Then while Steph and Janice wait at the hotel, Emily and Harriet get one last gelatto down the street at the biggest selection we've seen yet, and then off in the taxi to the airport where we have ONE more excellent cappucino, and finally fly to Amsterdam and train home to Delft.

The Girls talk with Peter and Arthur that night before bedtime and really pay attention to each other for the first time in a long time which is really nice to see. Steph spends an hour repacking to fit while Harriet makes fried potatos and scrambled eggs for the traveler's dinner. We eat the last of the vanilla ice cream in the freezer and some cookies left from the coffee party. Then a sleep and the next morning at 8:45 we're off by train, back to the Amsterdam airport and after check-in, which is super easy, we shop together, have a juice and coffee, and say our goodbyes. Man, I feel sad now writing about it.

That's our trip. We saw a lot of major stuff. We noticed very clearly the difference between the Netherlands style, Paris, and Florence, all very distinct. We enjoyed each other, we saw lots of treasures, we ate happily, we laughed, we whined a little, we shopped, we slept and dreamed and talked in our sleep and had a wonderful and rare VACATION together! Thank you Stephanie and Emily and Janice for coming to visit and taking me on the wonderful vacation with you. It was GREAT!

love, Harriet
Friday, February 23, 2001

