

London
18 November – 26 November 2016

18 Nov 2016 – Friday

Dallas

After what seemed like eons of planning this trip is upon us! Kathleen has been so busy researching our options discussed with Mary and Lorraine it almost feels like we have been there already.

But of course, we haven't, so we are going through a leisurely day of packing and final preparations. Our flight leaves at 6:40 pm, so we have all day to pack.

We drove to the airport (used frequent parker miles at Park N Fly to cover most of the cost of our parking - only paid \$35) and zipped through check-in and security in next to no time.

Had an enjoyable late lunch at Cru, a fun restaurant with a great wine selection. We arrived really early (4:00 pm) so Kathleen had time for a massage while I waited in the Admirals Club.

We met up at the gate, only to find that our flight was mysteriously delayed. Apparently, it took longer than expected to clean the aircraft (and to replace two very dirty seat covers). Boarding turned into a free for all, so we were near the end of the queue to get onboard.

Luckily for us there was still some room in the overhead bins as we were unexpectedly seated in bulkhead row seats that had no overhead storage available. The airplane plan we looked at showed a row or two of seats in front of us.

The good news was that we had lots of leg room. We were seated right at the exit, near the gallery. The bad news was that they ran completely out of wine before dinner was served! Kathleen got the last glass in our section!

Otherwise the flight passed relatively quickly, even though my attempts to download movies failed miserably. I had a good eBook to read as a backup.

19 Nov 2016 – Saturday

London

Arrived bright sunshine at London Heathrow. It was a long walk to customs, where we were greeted by a long queue of people. We hadn't been there more than a few minutes when Mary and Lorraine appeared, so we moved back to the end of the line to be with them.

It took a while, but once cleared we got our bags and were free to roam about the country. We got a SIM for our iPhone 4, bought an Onion card (with a cheap London Eye add-on: £19 each with any-time admission) and agreed to take the tube into London (we had considered getting a cab).

That worked out well – had to change lines once but were soon at the Pimlico tube station. We found our way to Dolphin Square hotel easily but could not get access to our rooms (by this time it was 1:00 pm) so we left our bags at the hotel and headed back out again.

Since it was still sunny, we decided to go to the London Eye. We took the tube back towards Westminster and walked across the bridge.

London
18 November – 26 November 2016

There were tons of people out: more than Kathleen a I ever remember seeing in London. The line at the Eye was long. Mary, Lorraine and I waited while Kathleen cashed in our cheap tickets for time specific tickets, which took some time due to the length of that line.

We got into the queue and wound our way towards the ride itself. It had clouded over by the time finally did get on, but the experience and the view were well worth the effort.

After that we were all very hungry and walked over to Leister Square and had dinner at Belle Italia (again), which we all enjoyed greatly (we must have – we shared 3 bottles of wine!). Walking around after dinner we decided to purchase tickets for The Jersey Boys tomorrow evening. We caught the #24 bus back to our hotel, bought some wine at a near-by wine store and checked into our rooms.

The rooms were everything we hoped they would be. Mary and Lorraine have a great 2-bedroom apartment with a large sitting room and a kitchenette. Our 1-bedroom suite is just as nice.

20 Nov 2016 – Sunday
London

We slept late! Mary & Lorraine got up earlier and went to church. Kathleen got up around 10:00 and roused me. We were a few minutes late for our 10:15 meetup for breakfast.

The whole hotel has undergone an extensive renovation since the last time we were here. The rooms are very updated, and the dining area now overlooks the pool. Breakfast is included, so we had a full choice of what to eat. Mary & Lorraine had omelets: We went continental. Coffee refills were a bit slow, but much appreciated by all.

We took the bus to Victoria Station to scout out things for Mary & Lorraine's but tour tomorrow. We also stopped to try (without success) to get texting figured out on our iPhone 4. As a result, it was late by the time we resumed our Northbound journey to Camden Market on bus #24. The trip was greatly delayed by numerous street closures and associated re-routes caused by a Remembrance Day observation North of Big Ben. As a result, it was very late by the time reached the Market.

We only had about 90 minutes to shop (Kathleen bought a scarf: I bought a butterfly necklace for mom) before we had to had back to London in order to be at the Piccadilly Theatre in time for our 5:00 performance of The Jersey Boys.

As the bus was so slow we decided to take the tube back, only to discover that don't allow people to enter the Camden Market tube station on Sunday afternoons to avoid congestions, we had to hoof it about 1/3 of a mile to the nearest station. We had hoped to have time to eat something on the way to the theatre but did not have enough time, so had to settle for wine before the show (and more wine at the break) which seemed to work well for us all.

The show was fantastic: great music and a good story line, and we all really enjoyed it. We tumbled into the nearest pub and an enjoyable meal after a short (5 – 10 minutes) wait for a table.

We bussed our way back to the hotel (#24 again) in the increasingly heavy rain (something we had all better get used to according to the forecast) and returned to our respective rooms for the evening.

21 Nov 2016 – Monday

London
18 November – 26 November 2016

London

Ugh... we set an alarm for 6:00 am so we could see Mary and Lorraine on their way to Bath, Stonehenge and Windsor Palace on their bus tour which departed across from Victoria Station. We met at 7:00 for breakfast and headed out the door at 7:30 to catch our favorite bus route (#24).

Left them to walk to their tour meeting location and tried to get onto the tube to go to Euston Station to catch our train to Bletchley Park. Just as we were approaching the tube entrance in Victoria Station, they shut it down to incoming passengers and re-directed us to another entrance. Apparently, this is part of their crowd control strategy during peak periods. We stood around in front of the other (locked) entrance with a growing crowd before deciding that the bus sounded a lot more appealing. After a quick look at the map to find the best route we were soon outside looking for the #73 bus.

It was easy to find (there were 4 of them queued up) and we were soon on our way. It took a little longer than the tube would have taken but we had plenty of time to spare.

We caught the 9:24 train and enjoyed the 40-minute ride. We were both a little tired – still not used to the time zone - and it was a short night.

Bletchley Park is a town, and the museum is just a short walk from the train station. It was an amazing place. At its peak, some 10,000 people worked here on all manner of top-secret war-related activities.

We caught up with a tour group that was just starting out and so had the benefit of a real historian's perspective on everything. It was a cloudy, overcast day and we endured frequent rain showers throughout the day, but nobody in our little group seemed to mind much. The tour broke up around lunch time, so we ducked into the little cafeteria (sat behind our guide) and had a Broccoli and Mushroom Stroganoff (no beef!) over rice. It was a good meal for a cool and damp day.

We spent the rest of the afternoon going from building to building, enjoying the exhibits. Got to see a demonstration of the device they built to crack the daily Enigma code – a replica of the original (well, one of the originals) as apparently all of the originals were destroyed after the war.

I was really struck by how accessible the offices in the huts were. Granted, most of the materials were not original, but you could walk into and through each office area and, if you wanted to, pick up and touch everything that was being displayed. I'll bet if we come back in the future, we will find that the offices are all blocked off behind plexiglass or something.

We watched a video about the role of carrier pigeons in WWII. It was kind of gruesome to watch at times: pigeons being shot, thrown out of airplanes or mauled by hawks specially trained to intercept them. Let's just say that some pigeons definitely WERE harmed during the filming of that video!

Before we knew it it was 4:00 and we were being hustled out of the building we were in and off of the premises. Time just flew by!

It was nearly 6:00 by the time we got back to London and decide to enjoy a nice meal, then proceeded to walk all over, turning our noses up at every restaurant we came to for one reason or another. We finally settled on the Ivy Market Grill near Convent Garden and enjoyed Sole and Chicken with a nice bottle of red wine.

London
18 November – 26 November 2016

Got a text from Mary as we were heading boarding our bus back to the hotel telling us that they had just gotten back from their tour. I texted her back and said that we would join them for dinner (she didn't see the message). I saw them walking up the street as we approached Victoria Station, so we got off the bus and walked back to meet them.

We ended up taking the bus back to Pimlico, missing our stop, and walking for a while before finally settling into a pub 5 minutes before the kitchen closed so they finally got to eat.

22 Nov 2016 – Tuesday

London

Started out going to Harrods We had intended to take the bus then got confused about which bus to catch at Victoria Station so hopped on the tube instead.

It was different to be at Harrods without a zillion other people: being there early, and a weekday, is nice. We all bought some gifts: rather than lugging them around all day I offered to drop our purchases off back at the hotel while everybody else went to St. Martins in the Field to buy tickets for tonight's concert and agreed to meet at the Pier near Big Ben for a boat tour.

We were all a little surprised to be greeted by rain as the forecast failed to mention it, so I picked up Kathleen's my umbrella's (newly purchased last night as the one I brought from Dallas was falling apart) and took the bus towards Westminster Pier. Unfortunately, the route ended at Victoria Station, so I walked the rest of the way.

We met up again, bought our boat tour tickets, then boarded the boat for our cruise to Greenwich and back, which we all thoroughly enjoyed. It was a nice break from all of the walking (even though Lorraine and Kathleen got off during our 20 minute stop at Greenwich and to purchase a few things at the nearby gift shop).

On our return we walked to Trafalgar Square and ate dinner in the Crypt below the church. I was not interested in the food choices only had a bowl of soup. I had some cashews we brought on the trip and they filled me up.

The music at the concert was not my type of music, and the pew we were seated in was not very comfortable, but by all accounts, the musicians were very good and everybody else loved it.

Bussed home, made plans for tomorrow, and went our separate ways.

23 Nov 2016 – Wednesday

London

Started out realizing that Kathleen had lost her umbrella yesterday and that I needed some Sudafed for cold I developed over night. Kathleen agreed to do a bit shopping while Lorraine, Mary and I went to Westminster Abby.

Things got derailed when we arrived at the Abby only to discover that it was closed for a special service. We considered going to St. Paul's instead but had to give that up due to a lack of time. Kathleen arrived and we waited a while Mary and Lorraine spent some time in the Abby gift shop. We went to the nearby St. Margaret's as a consolation prize, bought some Christmas cards, then walked to the St. James tube to go out to Kew Gardens.

London
18 November – 26 November 2016

Got there with time to spare to catch what turned out to be an excellent tour given by a retired immunologist. The 1+ hours we spent with her was time well spent. After the tour we wandered around before heading into the snack area to rest, snack and warm up while waiting for the 5:00 light show to begin.

Started that by eating a rather disappointing pork dinner from one of the food vendors, but the light show was really wonderful, in spite of the cool and breezy weather. Fortunately the predicted rain held off so the day was fun and dry.

The entrance to Kew Gardens was very different from what Kathleen and I remembered from our previous visit. We finally figured out that we had traveled by train then and had entered by a different gate.

We were all beat by this time so we headed back to Pimlico, picked up some more wine for the rooms, negotiated our start time for tomorrow (8:30) and called it a night.

We all have really enjoyed the luxury of our rooms. It is really nice to be able to come “home”, have some wine and relax a bit before going to bed each night.

24 Nov 2016 – Thursday – Thanksgiving Day (US)

London

I haven't talked much about the breakfasts here. It is included with our room and is pretty good: a nice selection of breads, cereals, juices, meat and packaged cheeses available as a self-serve, plus anything from the kitchen. The omelets have been enjoyable.

We met as planned and were on our way around 9:00. Took the tube to Tower Hill and beat the crowd into the Tower of London. Started out viewing the Crown Jewels yet still managed to catch the 10:30 tour (shortly after it started) which was as enjoyable as ever. Toured the Armory in the White Tower (except Mary – too many stairs for her) but joined her a light lunch afterwards. Viewed a few more things, did some shopping at the gift shop, then tubed it back to Westminster Abby.

There was a considerable line formed to get in, but it moved quickly, and we were soon inside and out of the increasingly cool and windy weather.

They have self-guided audio tours available which were hugely informative and gave us all a very great appreciation for all of the history literally buried at that church We all really enjoyed the experience.

Bussed up to Convent Gardens to see the lights and things for sale. Stopped at an outdoor cafe (with radiant heaters!) and enjoyed the semi-warmth and some wine before walking down to Simpson's on the Strand for our Thanksgiving meal.

The traditional American Turkey Dinner was on the menu, but not available to us because we did not pre-order it. Most of us made do with Prime Rib (except Kathleen who had the Beef Wellington) accompanied by excellent wine (a ½ bottle of white to start, followed by a delicious red). It was a meal to remember, even though the service was a little less than attentive: They were slow to follow up and offer drinks or desert after we had finished eating – not that we had room or desire for either.

London
18 November – 26 November 2016

We walked the short distance to Trafalgar Square and arrived just in time to catch the passing #24 and were soon back in Pimlico and in our hotel.

25 Nov 2016 – Friday

London

Hard to believe that our last day is here already! We have done a lot, but the time has gone by quickly.

After breakfast at the hotel we took our favorite #24 bus towards Westminster Abbey and walked the few blocks North to the Churchill War Rooms. The day is cool breezy but breathtakingly sunny.

We had a bit of a wait to get in and toured the place with a steady stream of other visitors. The rooms themselves are unchanged from our last visit, but we think that the Churchill Museum is new, and quite interesting. We all left quite pleased that we had made the effort to visit the place.

Bussed to the British Museum and walked a bit more to get there. We could not get the all-museum tour we had hoped to catch, so we split up and followed their paper guide whirlwind tour of the major highlights of their holdings. Kathleen was really struck by the Rosetta Stone this time (much as I was on our previous visit). It is now encased in a glass cabinet: the last time we were here I was able touch it (I knew then that I shouldn't, but could not stop myself from touching such an ancient and valuable piece of history).

We met up with Lorraine and Mary at the museum store – we seem to have this odd knack of ending up at the same place at the same time for some reason.

Decided we had just enough time for dinner at Belgo Central and walked the 6 – 8 blocks there and were seated immediately (we just beat the dinner crowd: it filled up around us quickly) and enjoyed good food and several bottles of wine.

We walked out to Charring Cross Road to catch a bus towards Victoria Station to watch the play we had booked (Wicked) but found ourselves in the middle of a mini blackout that had traffic snarled and badly backed up. As we were not seeing any South-bound bussed we dove down into the subway and got to the theatre that way instead. We ended up with very little time to spare – we arrived about 10 minutes before the play started.

Which (no pun intended) was excellent. I thought it was a much better performance than we say in Dallas. Kathleen thought that parts of what she saw in New York were as good – or better.

It is a long show, so by the time it ended we headed directly back to the hotel anticipating an early start for the airport in the morning.

26 Nov 2016 – Saturday

London -> Dallas

Got up, packed, had breakfast, checked out and headed out the door by 8:30. Took the tube to Heathrow again (as an aside, Onion card has been fantastic! Love the ease of jumping on any bus or subway). The first train was empty, but when the Circle Line train pulled in it was jam-packed with people. We had to work a bit to get in and stood for several stops before it thinned out enough to get seats. That was not expected.

London
18 November – 26 November 2016

When we checked in at the airport we discovered that we had lost our exit-row seats due to “an equipment change”. It was still a 777 so I couldn’t figure out exactly what had changed (our agent could not explain it either). We ended up sitting in different areas of the plane (I was in the LAST row) just so we could both have aisle row seats.

The boarding process was just as messed up as Dallas – we had to take a bus to the plane, and there was no attempt to control the order of who went when – just chaos!

I talked to the family behind us – their flight had been cancelled and they were re-booked onto this (earlier) flight. I guess that was the “equipment change”.

I talked to the couple sitting in the exit row seats we had reserved: asked them how far in advance they had to request them. They said they hadn’t even asked for them – they had been rebooked from another flight and were just assigned the exit row seats. Arrgh!

Otherwise it was an uneventful, 9-hour flight directly back to Dallas. We were through customs quickly (now a fully automated process), collected our bags and were soon on the Park N Fly bus heading back to our car and ordinary lives by 6:00 pm.