

July 2001

Cheryll and I just returned from Amsterdam after two weeks spent driving around northern Europe. We rented a car and visited The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Luxemburg, Belgium, France and Sweden. We had no hotel reservations, but only two hotels we checked out of twelve could not accommodate us. The temperatures were generally in the seventies and it rained a few days. Our first night was spent at a hotel in a small town near the beautiful sand dunes on the North Sea. It was easy to see why the Dutch settled in western Michigan.

The next day we drove across the northern part of the country, and the engineer in me couldn't help but marvel at the complicated network of dikes, locks, pumps and canals which allow major portions of the country to be below sea level. We crossed the border into Germany and spent the night at a North Sea resort town. It was windy and cool, but that didn't seem to stop the Germans from heading to the beach. We saw bicycles being used for transportation in all of the countries we visited. Young and old, city and country, the people were riding them and there was usually a designated bike path along the road.

We took a couple of ferries and the back roads to Odense; the home of Hans Christian Andersen and, according to family lore, a small village called Odendahl where my ancestors lived until the latter part of the 18th century. We were there to visit the place from which my relatives emigrated. The first stop was at a phone book. No Odendahls were listed. We checked a very detailed map and found no place called Odendahl. This was confirmed by a computer check by the man in the tourist office. Our next stop was at the Odense central library where we were shown to a section of historical maps. We spent hours examining centuries old maps and could find nothing. I can say with confidence that no one important or owning significant tracts of land by the name Odendahl had left a trace. We did find a region called "Oden" west of Odense on a 1763 map at the Danish Maritime museum a few days later, and "dahl" is a common suffix, but we never found the two together in the name of a place.

We enjoyed two nights in Copenhagen. Our first evening was spent at an open-air ballet in Tivoli Park. The program was in Danish, but we figured out that Queen Magarethe had designed the set and was in the audience at the premiere we just happened upon. She sat in the third row and joined the cast on stage for a bow after the performance to the delight of the crowd. We visited several monuments, museums, castles and cathedrals. We drank expensive drinks at sidewalk cafes and looked for Danish pastry with limited success. The Danish seem polite, gracious, disciplined and somewhat quiet. It was tough to find anything out of its place or requiring paint or fixing.

We drove the Autobahn back down through Germany on the way to Luxemburg. Sorry folks, but Europeans are way better drivers than Americans. I'm not sure why, but everyone is disciplined and things happen at high speed, but in a disciplined and predictable manner. Trucks drive 100 KPH in the right lane. No one passes on the right. People drive up to 150 MPH in the left lane. People only move left in order to pass. The

lanes are about a foot narrower and most cars have manual transmissions. It takes some getting used to, but it works very well. By the way, most cars are smaller and fuel-efficient. This is probably due to the fact that gas is taxed heavily and costs \$2.50 to \$4.00 per gallon depending on which country you're in. This seems much more effective at encouraging fuel conservation than the United States' Environmental Protection Agency's Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) law. The roads were uniformly excellent.

The Luxemburgers are looking to be the financiers to the rest of Europe. The countryside is beautiful with vineyards and castles along beautiful rivers.

The Belgians seem to be struggling with what it means to be Belgian. I'm not sure I figured it out for them, but here are my observations. The country is really two: the very French laissez-faire eastern rolling hills called Walloon and the very Dutch neat and meticulous western lowlands called Flanders. You can buy Belgian waffles in the tourist areas, but no Belgians seem to be eating them, so it's hard to attribute this to the local culture. The Belgian Block roadways are nowhere near as rough as the road by that name at GM's Milford Proving Ground. The national symbol is a bronze statue in Brussels of a boy urinating in public. The nation has two flags for the two sections. Speaking of Brussels, we didn't find any of the expected sprouts in town. English is rarely spoken in the French side, but everybody knows a little in Flanders. They could probably annex Flanders to The Netherlands and Walloon to France and nobody would notice. When you think about it, the European Union may have already. We enjoyed a stay in the touristy town of Bruges. It's sort of a medieval Mackinac Island with chocolate shops, horse drawn carriages and hordes of tourists that thin out in the evening.

We spent our last two nights in Amsterdam. The Van Gogh museum was the busiest art museum we've visited anywhere. Not bad for a genius who committed suicide at 37. The real crowds were in the red-light district in the evening. Each "coffee house" we walked by reeked of legal marijuana I haven't smelled since college. People on the street were openly selling cocaine and ecstasy. The hookers sat in their lingerie behind glass doors under red neon waiting short periods until the next potential customer showed interest. She would open the door to negotiate the details of the transaction usually loud enough for the listening of anyone strolling by. Amazing. The Dutch seem so uptight, but all of this is legal, and the streets were crowded with people who felt perfectly comfortable walking around, soaking up the atmosphere.

It was fascinating to compare the cultural differences. The Dutch are tolerant, but disciplined. The Germans take pride in their efficiency and engineering. We found the Danish to be polite, but somewhat quiet. The people of Luxemburg impressed us as inconsiderate and patronizing. The Belgians are confused about what being Belgian means

The Top Ten Lessons We Learned in Northern Europe:

10. The Flemish and the French people in Belgium have little in common apart from a flag.
9. The Dutch may win for style, but the German engineers win for quantity of windmills along the North Sea coast.
8. The Odendahls were never important enough to own significant amounts of land on Denmark's Island of Fyn or get mentioned on any maps.
7. Bikes can be an efficient means of transportation by people of all ages.
6. If politicians want to encourage fuel consumption, \$3.50/gallon gas is much more effective than CAFE (Corporate Average Fuel Economy).
5. You can confirm that you are looking at the Queen by checking her picture on the coins in your pocket.
4. To play golf at most courses in Europe, they expect you to be a member of a golf club in your home country, and sign in as a guest with your handicap and your club's name. They don't, however, ask to see a membership card.
3. Amsterdam is full of three kinds of people: burnouts, tourists looking at burnouts, and people waiting on tourists looking at burnouts.
2. The good news: Tipping is not customary in Northern Europe.
1. The bad news: The service generally sucks in Northern Europe.

The Statistics:

2300 Miles driven

-20 feet; the elevation of Amsterdam

180 KPH was the maximum speed we reached on the German Autobahn with our four-cylinder Mitsubishi Spacestar

7 countries visited

\$27 toll for the 11-mile bridge/tunnel from Sweden to Denmark

Handicap we wrote on the guest sheet in order for Cheryll to be allowed to play at the Faaborg Golf Club; 26

\$5 for a pint of draft beer in Copenhagen

24 centuries old maps we pored over to try to find the town of “Odendahl”

Zero “Secret Service” or body guards with Queen Magarethe of Denmark when she goes out in public

15 guilders (six dollars) to legally purchase a gram of marijuana in an Amsterdam “coffee house”

50 to 100 guilders; price overheard to spend a short time in the company of an Amsterdam Red Light District “professional”

Zero Odendahls found in the Odense Denmark phone book

Back to <http://www.odendahls.com/>