

MY LONG OVERSEAS HOLIDAY -- KYLIE WALFORD

It was early on a mid-September morning in 2004 when my mum (Cheryl), dad (Terry, or Terence as Mum prefers to call him) and I set off for Canberra Airport to begin our ten week holiday, and dialysis tour, of Europe and Japan. We were visiting nine cities and I was dialysing in eight of them.

It was a long and exciting but tiring trip and I have a long story to tell. First, some background information. Our dialysis planning had started six months earlier in March when we decided that it would be so much easier if we could somehow just book all the necessary dialysis sessions without going through a long drawn out process. We had heard of a dialysis booking agency listed on the internet which would do that. It was a service offered by Fresenius, the dialysis machine makers.

The ladies at the agency were very pleasant when contacted either through the internet or by telephone but, for some reason, over a period of more than six months were unable to confirm bookings, or were changing details of confirmed arrangements, even after we had left Australia. To be fair, we did change our itinerary about six weeks before we left as we decided to shorten the trip from twelve to ten weeks. We were forced to change it again shortly before we left because we had no confirmations at all for two cities in Spain. It appears that the problem was that the agency had little control over bookings with the individual units making all the decisions.

As you would appreciate, my dialysis had to take priority over bookings for travel and accommodation in our travels around Europe and Japan. The booking agency even informed us that they had previously booked dialysis sessions for a client who then booked travel and accommodation, only to then have the dialysis cancelled. We were determined to avoid such a disaster.

Eventually the penny dropped that the only way we were going to achieve a satisfactory dialysis regime was to book it ourselves at each individual city. In the end, we used only one dialysis centre booked by the booking agency and that was in Venice. It turned out to be one of my favourite places for my dialysis.

Our approach to finding a good dialysis centre was to go into Google on the net and enter something like "Holiday dialysis in London (or Paris, or Florence etc)". Sometimes it was very easy to find the right place as in London and Amsterdam. On other occasions it was more difficult but it wasn't impossible. We eventually found out that Gambro have a centre available to visitors in Barcelona. The internet site globaldialysis.com was a reasonably good source of information although details were scarce. All we were really looking for was the names of units and their contact details.

Our trip to Europe was via Tokyo. All our air travel was with Japan Air Lines and they looked after us wonderfully. We had made them aware that I was a dialysis patient and they made it their business to check that I was OK both before and during flights. They refrigerated my perishable medicines and made sure we were allocated the most

comfortable seats available. Unfortunately, our own international carrier does not go to such trouble, as we have subsequently discovered in respect of our next trip to Hong Kong.

In our planning we discovered that triple rooms in hotels are no cheaper than short stay apartments. The minimum stay for apartments generally is three days. When we arrived in London we had to deal with being allocated a substandard apartment but mum, being the assertive person she sometimes has to be, stuck to her guns and we were shifted to a clean, modern apartment on top of Paddington Rail Station. As we were to be in London for 16 days our comfort there was going to be most important.

Our search for a dialysis unit in London very quickly led us to The London Clinic. The London Clinic is situated in Harley Street which is, as you may know, the famous street of medical specialists in London. The Clinic is a hospital but is cleverly disguised not to look like a hospital. We walked past it twice before we realised that it was where we were meant to be going. It is much like every other building in the street, ie four stories and looking like an apartment building of considerable size.

The Clinic is an exclusive establishment catering mostly for wealthy clients, many of whom were of Arab origin. The dialysis unit was an afterthought at the hospital after it was realized that they had patients who went into kidney failure and would need dialysis treatment. It is small with only four beds but very well staffed with most competent nurses and a variety of machines as per your choice. I saw my nominated specialist on only one occasion in seven dialysis sessions and that was as he walked past me. Dialysing in London was certainly not a culture shock after experiencing dialysis in Australia, which is what you would expect.

The Clinic is very near Regents Park station on the Bakerloo underground line which was a direct line for us from Paddington. It was only a four station trip and was an excellent and comfortable way to travel if you could avoid peak hour. The only drawback is that it can get very hot on the underground even in mid-Autumn. I understand that there are plans underway for cooling to be fitted to the trains.

The London Clinic was like everything else you buy in London – it was not a cheap dialysis. Depending on the clerk at the counter I had to pay amounts for my seven dialyses ranging from GBP250 to GBP315, ie A\$640 to A\$790. I could never figure out why there were these differences. We just lived with it. Paying by card was OK.

The London Clinic was the only place that wanted a compulsory blood test before you dialysed. Their main concern was with Hepatitis B. Hepatitis C is not a concern to them. The blood test cost GBP95 – definitely not cheap. Although The London Clinic was by far the most expensive dialysis I had on our trip, the quality of service matched the price.

A couple of tips if you are going to London for the first time. Because of cost we ate only once at a restaurant in London. The main reason for this was that we lived near two food outlets (both on Paddington Station) – Sainsburys and Marks & Spencer. At both

stores we were able to purchase fresh (not frozen) meals on special at about three pounds 50p. These meals were of very high quality and always on special as they have a brief shelf life.

Our other discovery (on our first day, thankfully) was the hop-on, hop-off tourist bus which takes about two hours to transport you on a circuit of all the main attractions of London. It was very helpful in our orientation and gave us an insight into what to explore more fully on further trips around on the bus. The ticket gave us an option of two consecutive days of travel for little extra cost. Also you can purchase discount tickets for other London attractions on the bus. We liked the hop-on, hop-off concept so much that these buses were our first choice in each of the cities we visited. In both London and Paris, river tours were included as part of the service.

In our planning we decided that we would use train travel to move around both Europe and Japan. We thought that this was a smart move to keep us away as much as possible from airports and the usual long trips into the city. We also wanted to see as much of the countryside as possible. We purchased a Eurail pass to help us along. If you do this, be aware of how many countries you wish to pass through as it affects the cost. We did not realise that our trip from Paris to Venice would take us through Switzerland and we had to pay extra when booking this trip to overcome our error.

Our first rail trip was on the Eurostar from London to Paris. We found that it was a little disappointing as the train was cramped, not very clean and not that glamorous. Still it is an experience that we are glad to have had. Going under the Channel took only about 20 minutes and I did not realise we had done it because I was so focused on making purchases at the buffet car.

We located a nice apartment in Paris on the internet. It was close to the Eiffel Tower, the sight of which filled our bathroom window. It was brilliantly lit at night. The apartment is owned by a dentist from Bondi. Being able to make the arrangements within Australia was a big help. The apartment cost \$1600 for a week. The weekly tariff in London was GBP750. Believe it or not this was at the lower end of the range of prices.

Again the internet was most helpful in locating a satisfactory dialysis centre. This large and busy centre is at the Parc Monceau hospital which is a couple of kilometres from the Arc de Triomphe. It was a 40 minute walk each dialysis morning from our apartment to the hospital, but what a walk. First, it was a short distance to the River Seine which we crossed at the Pont de l'Alma (above the tunnel where Diana, Princess of Wales was killed). It was then up Avenue George V past very fashionable restaurants and stores including Louis Vuitton, into the Champs Elysees, past the Arc de Triomphe and then down Avenue de Wagram to the hospital. It was a walk that you never tired of and it always passed quickly. The trip back to the apartment after dialysis was a quicker one by taxi.

Before we left Australia we decided that I should take a supply of some dialysis items in case they were not stocked at some of the various units. Accordingly, I took some

kidneys, going on packs, some Aranesp, Fragmin and a number of cannulas. Because my graft is in my left thigh I am obliged to use 15 gauge cannulas to ensure that I am able to have a proper blood pump pressure. Cannulas proved to be my problem area as 15 gauge were rarely available at the units I attended. In Europe I got by with the largest gauge they had but, in Japan, I began to have real problems.

I didn't have real language problems at the Parc Monceau as the head nurse had a good grasp of English and my personal nurse, a very nice man named Idris from Mali in Africa was able to freely converse with me but he had real problems in trying to understand dad. Just as well it was me on the bed and not dad.

Talking about the bed, that is one thing we could do with in Australia. The bed had scales on it and it was very helpful in being able to monitor my weight's progress as my dialysis progressed. Dialysis at Parc Monceau was very professional. It was certainly at the same level as in London and being a visitor I was provided with a single room for dialysis instead of being in one of the two large wards. I had four dialysis sessions in Paris. The cost per dialysis was 360 Euros, about A\$615. It was necessary that I paid at the hospital's finance office before each dialysis. This was the hardest thing to do from the language point of view.

We spent 9 days in Paris. Our first stop was at Le Open Tour (hop-on, hop-off) which we caught at a stop in the Champs Elysees on the first day and at the Eiffel Tower on the second day. The tour certainly helped us to appreciate the notion that Paris is a most beautiful city. The only sad part about Paris is that we were ripped off only twice in the whole ten weeks and both times it was in Paris, and the second time was only one hour after the first. We also had an unpleasant incident with a rail official at the station at Disneyland Paris when two of us inadvertently used our rail tickets incorrectly – not me! Disneyland was a very good experience for us because we managed to be there on a quiet day and we were able to walk straight onto various rides. We understand that the place is having some financial trouble. For one thing, it is 40 minutes out of town on the train.

What impressed us the most in Paris was our visit to Eglise du Dome, the golden domed church building which houses Napoleon's tomb. Napoleon's coffin is actually enclosed in five other coffins with the outer "shell" being a huge red granite construction. It is situated below the ground floor level and can be viewed from above or below. Either way it is very impressive. Right next door is Les Invalides which houses the Museum of the French Army. There is a very large array of military equipment with thousands of spectacular uniforms from all periods of French history but it was some of the unique items such as Napoleon's death mask which grabs your attention.

Like the London Tour's ride on the Thames, the Paris Tour included a barge ride on the Seine. This should not be missed. Paris is especially wonderful when viewed from the river. Finally, I should mention that the view from the top of the Arc de Triomphe is every bit as good as that from the Eiffel Tower, if not better. The only problem for a dialysis patient is that there are a number of stairs to climb to get to the top.

We travelled from Paris to Venice by a night train. When we booked we were unable to get sleepers and had to settle for couchettes, a sort of sitting up bed. We ended up being very lucky and found that we were the only people in a compartment for six persons. That being so the conductor allowed us to use the seats as beds. The compartment was arranged such that there were upper bunks also. We had a restless night's sleep as we stopped on a number of occasions and we usually wanted to know where we were. It was certainly interesting looking at Switzerland in the dead of night. The cities and towns looked very nice.

The rail approach to Venice is wonderful. The last few kilometres were across a long bridge and the water views on the approach to the city were beautiful. The railway station is very close to the Grand Canal and we had to catch a vaporetto (water bus) to get close to our apartment which wasn't too far away though. Our biggest problem was that our 20 kilogram bags plus backpacks didn't endear us to some other passengers. They all spoke with North American accents and didn't seem to realise that our bags were paying passengers also. We soon let them know that fact though!

Again on the internet we had found an apartment leasing organisation called Sleep In Italy and it was through them that we found our accommodation in Venice, Rome and Florence. Our apartment in Venice was on the second floor of an old building next door to an even older building (14th century) which is regarded as a monument because of its exterior stone spiral staircase. On the other side was a canal. Every night we were serenaded by the various gondoliers who had singers and musicians on board. Honeymooners would have been thrilled with the romanticism of it all – as it was we were pretty impressed.

As I mentioned earlier, my dialysis sessions in Venice were the only ones arranged by the booking agency. These were at the unit situated in the Ospedale SS Giovanni e Paolo (St John and St Paul Hospital). This hospital took some finding. We knew from the map that it was located close to a monastery of the same name. What we didn't realise at first was that it is actually located within the monastery. I suppose you could be a little worried at first by a hospital inside a crumbling monastery but we soon found that the medical facilities were being upgraded all the time. The building was lovely with wonderful gardens and ceilings, with very relaxed cats everywhere in the gardens.

I was very well looked after at this unit by two of the nurses and certainly by the doctor in charge, Dr de Cecco who went very much out of his way to assist me and my parents. He had a pretty good grasp of English having been born in Montreal and coming to Italy when he was 12 years old. They don't believe in using local in Europe but I had some with me and I was permitted to use it. The funny thing is that since coming home I have not been using local and found that it gives me a better dialysis.

Another feature of dialysis in Italy is that they turn off the fluid drawing capacity of the machine well before completion to leave on only the toxins removal capacity. I found that doing this did not leave me feeling as washed out at the end. I had two dialysis sessions in Venice at a cost of 350 Euros each (A\$600). Before each session I had to go

and put the money into a cash machine. Dr de Cecco helped me each time – again being his usual very helpful self.

The hardest part about dialysis in Venice was getting there. As you probably know Venice is a mass of alleyways and lanes. Even after holding a map and carefully checking it, it was still very easy to find yourself straying from the path you were meant to take. It didn't seem to matter how many times we made this journey, either on our way to dialysis or simply exploring the city, it never meant being able to easily repeat it the next time. At least we continued to find new and exciting things to see.

There was no hop-on, hop-off tour in Venice but the next best thing was to take the vaporetto on its Grand Canal route. This is a regular water bus route. That certainly gave us a good look at the spectacular views of Venice from the water. We, of course, did the two things that all visitors to Venice should do and that was go to the Rialto Bridge and St Marks Square.

The view of Venice from the centre of the Rialto Bridge at sunset is a sight not easily forgotten. We had a number of different views of St Marks Square. First when it was dry and then on two occasions when it was flooded and criss-crossed by duckboards. Naturally I did the really tourist thing and bought packets of corn to feed the pigeons. I had that many birds on me that I was nearly lost to view. There was a certain old-world charm to the Square with string orchestras playing at some of the restaurants adding a touch of refinement.

Flooding in Venice is certainly becoming a problem. The day after we left the water reached new levels. As it was when we were there passing through some of the lanes people were ankle deep in water and wearing gumboots. At least there is now work being undertaken to build better barriers to the water entering the city.

From Venice we had an about five hours train trip to Rome. Being a day trip we had a chance to have a good look at some of the countryside. We even had a sneak preview of Florence as we passed through that city to reach Rome. Like most other European cities the area around the Rome Termini seemed definitely seedy.

We were in Rome only for the weekend. We had received a bad report about the dialysis facilities we had been offered in that city and declined to accept the offer. It was one of the few places where we were unable to find a satisfactory alternative so we made the decision to have only a weekend in Rome and then head off for dialysis in Florence on the Monday. I stuck all the way through our trip with Monday, Wednesday and Friday dialysis. This worked well.

Being in Rome for less than two days, we had to settle for a bed and breakfast place. This was situated about five kilometres outside the city centre but at first it could have been at the back of Bourke. The area seemed deserted with no supermarkets or shops in the immediate vicinity. We had been spoiled by the facilities available close by in the cities we had so far visited. Eventually after a fifteen minutes walk we arrived at the

Piazza del Popolo which turned out to be a large meeting area for the young of Rome. The girls and boys in separate packs, under the watchful eye of motorcycle police draped like Fabio across their bikes, parade down a three kilometres long, mostly pedestrian, mall. Fortunately for us the mall was also the site for various food stalls. The bonus came when mum spotted an Open Tour bus. This was to be our carriage around Rome the next day.

Our sightseeing in Rome was based around our standby the hop-on, hop-off bus. We thought that Rome was pretty enough but was spoiled by being grubby. Our main interest was in the Coliseum and the Forum nearby. The bus bypassed this area and we found out later that this was because the roads to it are closed on Sundays. The archaeological excavation that is ongoing at the Forum is very interesting and is well documented on billboards outside the site. The Coliseum is fascinating. We opted not to take the tour inside because we could see inside well enough through the gaps between the columns. A sight we will remember more than anything else though is the lady who feeds the dozen or so cats that make their home inside the ruin. She operates as a charity and we happened to be present as she was feeding the felines of all colours, sizes and personalities, keeping this one separated from that one and so on. Being cat people it was a charity that was dear to our heart.

One thing to be careful of at the Coliseum is the vast number of people trying to sell you something. They were the most aggressive we had encountered so far in our trip, although the sellers at the Eiffel Tower gave them a run for their money.

An early start the next morning meant that we were in for a long day – it was now 18th October meaning we had been on the road for 33 days. We weren't sorry to be leaving Rome. A weekend was long enough for us. One thing to be aware of in Rome is that it is hard to get something to eat between 2pm and 7pm, on a weekend at least. I don't know how many times we were told "the kitchen is closed".

The train trip to Florence is relatively short – not even two hours. Our apartment was very interesting as it was situated in an old former theatre. My bedroom was in a basement and contained a spa which I happily used. When we tried to book dialysis through the agency, I was booked into a unit at a place called Montecatini Terme. When my dad was looking through maps trying to find where this "suburb" was situated, he discovered that Montecatini Terme is a spa resort 40 kilometres from Florence. This did not sit well with us especially as we had not been given any indication of its distance from the city. That spurred us to search out an alternative and again we turned to the internet.

We were unable to locate a unit in Florence that was able to take me for dialysis. We settled for a unit situated at a village called Figline Valdarno which is 30 kilometres outside Florence. Still a long way of course but better than 40 kilometres out. I had three dialyses in the Florence area and because of early starts we were forced to catch a taxi to the Figline Valdarno hospital. I was a little apprehensive about dialysing there as the area is quite rustic but the dialysis I had was of a high standard. The nurses were very

competent and we were only hampered a little by their limited English. One procedure that was different here, and in other places in Europe, is that there is no washback at the end of dialysis with an air return being used. It can be a bit scary at first but they take great care with what they are doing and I got used to it.

The ward was one for about 14 patients but it was very well set out and I felt very comfortable. In Italy, dialysis units generally allow only patients into the unit, no visitors, but at Figline Valdarno this was not imposed. In Venice, this rule was “enforced” but it was never really an issue as I felt very comfortable being by myself without my mum or dad with me.

I was told by the nurses at Figline (pronounced Filini) Valdarno that I was much better off dialysing at their unit as dialysis in the units in Florence is not at the same standard. How accurate a statement that is I don't know. With me dialysing so far out of the city it was a bit boring for mum and dad but with plenty of reading material and crosswords they were alright. As well, the hospital café made very good coffee and hot chocolate and had some reasonable food. After dialysis we always caught the regional train back to Florence, a journey of about 30 minutes. That was OK.

Dialysis at Figline Valdarno cost 276 Euros (A\$470) with money again having to be fed into a machine before you start. The taxi fare each morning was about 60 Euros but it was worth it given the transport hassles I would have had otherwise.

The area around the main station of Florence was pretty heavily populated with beggars. They were mainly gypsies. At least they didn't try any funny moves. We had read that there is quite a bit of trickery that goes on with the gypsy beggars, but none was tried with us. We were surprised earlier in the trip by the number of beggars we found in the passageways of the underground stations in London and Paris. We didn't see any evidence of people living in cardboard boxes, however.

Again we used the hop-on, hop-off bus early during our visit to Florence. It was a very special tour especially when the bus crossed the River Arno and drove up the hill to a peak high up above the back of the city. The views were spectacular and the villas we passed on the way up and down were beautiful. The highlight at the top of the peak though is a copy of the statue of David.

Many of the sights of Florence are found right in the middle of the city so it was possible to cover a lot of ground on foot. The Duomo, the Cathedral, is beautiful and we thought so much better than Notre Dame in Paris. A further highlight was San Marco Square, another beautiful area. We sat in an open café, ate a nice lunch and took it all in. After lunch we paid the 50 Euros price to have a horse and cart ride around the city. We travelled along lanes that no car could use. It was a high price to pay but the ride was worth it especially given the commentary from the driver along the way – he especially liked that we were Australians. We were finding that other English speaking visitors are not so well admired as Australians.

Most people who go to Florence visit the Uffizi Gallery. We saw that was the case when we arrived outside. The queues were enormous. Not being queuing type of people, we decided to go instead to the Palazzo Vecchio next door. This palace dates back to when the Medicis lost power in the area in the 1500s and is wonderfully decorated and preserved. We didn't think we had lost anything by visiting it and not the Uffizi. Our last must visit attraction was the Ponte Vecchio, the Golden Bridge, so called because of the proliferation of jewelry shops selling gold products. The shops sit on both sides of the bridge and on both approaches. It was lunch time but what we couldn't understand was that although there were hundreds, if not thousands, of people on the bridge half the shops were closed for lunch. Talk about being indifferent to making sales.

We loved Florence but it was time to leave for Barcelona. To get there we first had to catch a train to Milan about three hours away and then take a night train out of Italy, down through the south of France passing through towns such as Nice and then across the border into the top of Spain. Because we were travelling on a Friday night all the sleepers had been booked and we had to make do with a sitting up sleep this night. The central railway station at Milan, by the way, was by far the most frantic station we had ever encountered. It certainly made Milan seem a very lively city and we had some regrets that we weren't visiting there. It was on our original schedule but it had to go when my dialysis bookings became difficult.