

MY LONG OVERSEAS HOLIDAY (PART 2) – KYLIE WALFORD

The overnight rail trip from Milan to Barcelona was not exactly uncomfortable but, if we ever have overnight travel in Europe again, we will be doing our best to ensure that we get a sleeper – even if that means not traveling on a Friday night, the busy night for train travel.

Space for luggage on this train was restricted but after some debate with other passengers about how to best use the luggage space, we managed to get our bags properly stowed away. Our section of six seats was occupied by ourselves and a family comprising an Italian man, his beautiful Moroccan wife and their young child. They were charming people and the child was very quiet but at the Spanish border the lady was carefully checked out by the plain clothes security police. Undoubtedly, this was because the Madrid railway station bombing had occurred only a few months previously and Moroccan insurgents were being blamed for the killings.

The cabin wasn't adequately darkened and the heating was on high until the conductor was asked to lower the temperature. On top of this people kept moving through our carriage to get to the buffet car which obviously closed late. The seating was OK, as it was similar to Jason recliners. Mum and I got some sleep but Dad couldn't get his eyelids to stay shut. He informed us later that the train remained motionless at a southern France station for more than an hour. Our arrival time at Barcelona was then much delayed.

We were not sure what to expect from Barcelona but the last 50 kilometres into the city did not look too promising. To be blunt the area looked quite desolate. Central station at Barcelona is reached by way of an underground tunnel several kilometres in length. So from little village sized places we went to the underground platforms of Barcelona Sants (the central station).

After exiting the station into daylight the city didn't at first look too promising either because there did not seem to be much life around us. In this case, it wasn't love at first sight but it wasn't long before Barcelona surprised us with its beauty and energy.

We were staying in a fifth floor apartment on Calle Valencia, which is a major street of the city. It begins in the centre of town and runs for several kilometres. The apartment was about four kilometres from the city along this street which is full of shops and businesses of all sorts sitting, for the most part, underneath six storey apartment blocks. These blocks were all the same height, as if six floors is the maximum allowed under the city's building code.

Calle Valencia and most of the streets nearby had a Melbourne look about them, but we found later that the Harbour area was definitely Sydney. Most of the apartments had little balconies attached. These were balconies that allowed a view but were not for standing upon. They, at least, gave very good views of the scene below as they are placed behind ceiling high windows.

Shortly after arriving we undertook some reconnaissance of the area and found a wonderful food market only 200 metres up the road. The market was very helpful to us during our stay and was the source of most of our meals. The market had butchers, delicatessens, fruit and vegetable stalls and other speciality shops. Mum even had her hair cut there. Below the market, there was a well stocked supermarket. We also found restaurants, bakeries, ATMs and an internet café in the surrounding area.

Our first sightseeing visit was to the Sagrada Familia, the cathedral built by the famous architect of Barcelona, Gaudi. It is a bizarre but wonderful sight and is certainly a great tourist attraction. On our short walk from the apartment to the Sagrada Familia we walked up a very wide avenue which was filled mostly with a park running the length of the road. The park was as wide as eight traffic lanes and was filled with seats which were occupied by parents watching their children play and seniors just taking in the lovely Sunday morning sun. These people lived mostly in the apartment buildings lining the avenue. They had a wonderful front yard with fountains and playgrounds included in the park.

We didn't spend a lot of time at the Sagrada Familia because, as usual, our major task on the first day in this new city was to board the hop-on, hop-off tour bus. There was a bus stop near the church. These tour buses are very well patronised in Barcelona, no doubt because they are very good value for money and go to many far-ranging attractions. Also, there are three interlinking runs that tourists may take. These buses run every eight minutes and while there are usually sizeable crowds waiting to board them, there generally isn't a long wait to get on board.

Apart from the width of so many of its streets, the biggest impression made by Barcelona is that even more than Paris it is a city of apartment buildings. There are countless long streets lined with these six storey buildings. Fortunately, for the residents, the streets are so wide that a lot of sunshine reaches their footpaths.

While Barcelona is not so much a city of monuments in the style of London or Paris there is much that catches your eye and it is certainly a city with a lot of style. It is wonderfully laid out and is actually divided by a 12 lane road called Avenida Diagonal. Some of the sights we saw that impressed us on our tour were the Placa de Catalunya, the city's central plaza and focal point of city life; La Pedrera another Gaudi designed structure and Tibidabo, the high peak overlooking the city. At the top of the peak is a beautiful basilica with a fun park next to it. The two may not seem compatible but they seemed to blend at the top of Tibidabo which is reached, first, by tram and then by funicular. On our return trip on the bus that day, we went up to Tibidabo and visited the basilica, but not the fun park with its rides swinging out over a big drop. The view was breathtaking and we were reminded of it when we were at Victoria Peak in Hong Kong, a few months later,

The next day was the day of my first dialysis in Spain and I must admit to being a bit nervous. For some reason, Barcelona just seemed to me to be the place where dialysis

was going to be different to what I was used to. I was dialysing at a Gambro dialysis unit which was located about seven kilometres from the centre of town. As the taxi that took us there drove on, there were fewer shops to be seen and it seemed to us that the area we were heading to was a little remote.

The building was certainly not recognisable as the site of a dialysis unit. In fact, what seemed like a plumber's supply shop was on the ground floor. What's more the area seemed to be a light industrial area. The unit itself reminded me of an accident and emergency ward. Dialysis took place in two long wards. We received a warm enough, but reserved, welcome from the two doctors in charge. Barcelona is in the Catalan area of Spain. We found out from the doctors that we were, in fact, in the middle of a Catalan district and that all the staff of the unit, including the doctors, was Catalan. Maybe it is because of their repressive history but the Catalan people are somewhat renowned for their reserved manner. One of the doctor spoke good English, but no one else did.

The dialysis unit operates on four shifts daily, Monday to Saturday with about 60 -70 patients each shift. Most of the patients were elderly and poor, reflective of the area in which the unit is situated. The unit was clinical and precise. It probably would have been chaos otherwise. Probably given the shift situation, there were no warm and fuzzy feelings evident, but I was safe there. The staff approached my dialysis in a very conservative way and wanted me to use quite a low blood pump, for a start. Having read my history they were probably as uncertain about me as I was about them. Everybody was more relaxed by the time of my third and last dialysis. I certainly had no doubts about the professionalism of the nursing staff. They certainly looked the part in their crisp white uniforms.

My dialysis in Barcelona was by far the cheapest in all Europe. It was 180 Euros per session compared to 359 Euros in Paris. The most difficult thing for me was the distant attitude of some of the other patients, especially the older men. Admittedly, I did make their routine a bit difficult by dialysing for four and a half hours when everybody else did four hours. It meant that the local patient who was to next use the machine I was using had to wait another half hour for me to finish. If it was a man he would come to the door and stare/glare at me. One day the next person to use my machine was a woman and she was considerably more philosophical about the wait. Anyway, by the end of my stay I was being more gracefully accepted by the other patients and even offered a sweet or a biscuit as these were being passed around. Visitors were not allowed into the unit and my parents ended up wandering off to see if they could find something to do while I was on.

This turned out to be quite interesting for them. During my first dialysis, they walked down the road a bit and came to a bridge over one of the city's big avenues. This was a surprise to them because the area seemed to be quite isolated. They walked along this avenue and gradually came across increasing numbers of shops, restaurants and businesses. After a few kilometres they came to the most interesting roundabout they had seen since we were at the Arc de Triomphe. On one side was a disused bull ring (under restoration) with very tall outside walls that made it resemble the Coliseum of Rome.

On the other side was a convention centre called the Exhibition of 1929 (as the name suggests, built for a very large international exhibition in that year), and further behind it and high on a hill was a large palace, the Palau Nacional. In front of it was the beautiful Montjuic Fountain. It is locally described as a magical fountain for its water and lighting displays at night. Just to see this area made the long walk worthwhile for Mum and Dad.

On my next dialysis day, my parents continued across the bridge previously mentioned in the direction of a shopping mall, called Gran Via 2, one of the doctors had mentioned. This recently constructed huge concrete barn did not look all that promising – until they went inside. They said that they had never seen a mall like it. It was decked out in marble with many chandeliers, obelisks and other ornate pieces. They said the place was exceptionally beautiful and the best mall they had ever been in. One of the shop assistants described the style of the mall to them as rococo. The stores inside were of the highest quality and the window displays were up to Myer's standards. On top of this, they were able to make some quality purchases at Gran Via 2.

We had an interesting experience at a café at which we ate one night. The demeanour of the staff and the owner was quite cool. After eating we went to the bar to pay. There were a number of different bottles of beer on the counter. We saw that one bottle was a Fosters bottle. We picked it up and told the owner that the beer came from where we come from, Australia. When we said that, his attitude towards us changed instantly and he wished us a happy stay in Barcelona. He didn't say where he thought we were from, but we could have had a good guess.

We had a very nice time in Barcelona and it was a considerably more sophisticated than we were expecting. We went on another of the hop-on, hop-off tour routes. This one took us past the Barcelona Football Club stadium which is a clone of the Melbourne Cricket Ground – so it impressed us. We had read that the Olympics coming to Barcelona in 1992 was the making of the city. It was evident that a big effort had been made to present the city at its best. The Olympic Stadium was most impressive. The outer grounds displayed a mix of the ancient and the new and this looked so much better than just a new stadium. The Games had come and gone 12 years previously, but the Stadium and its surrounds looked as if they could have just been made ready for the Games.

Our tour bus then moved on to Barcelona Harbour which has been considerably modernised and is most scenic. Apart from its new infrastructure, one of the features here is a very high maritime control tower which has cable cars running to its highest level. The ride looked more than a bit scary. We next drove past a Catalan university. Each faculty of the university was housed in a very large building and, overall, the university covered a big area. It made some of our universities look a bit small. The bus tours are quite long, but are reasonably priced and go to many tourist sights. I would say that the tours are the equal of the London and Paris bus tours. We had become connoisseurs of such tours by now.

Every visitor to Barcelona gets to know Los Ramblas. It is the famous pedestrian thoroughfare from the centre of the city running down to the harbour. It is a wide walkway in the centre of a street and has a reputation for being a bit crazy with many stalls of all kinds and fun things to see. The two times we walked up and down Los Ramblas were during the afternoon when it was, no doubt, quieter than in the evening. So we did not find Los Ramblas as exotic as its publicity led us to believe. The stalls were mostly clumped together according to what they were selling, so there were bird stalls, domestic animal stalls, flower stalls and jewelry stalls all sitting together. This made comparisons easy, at least.

Strangely enough, coffee was generally available only from the footpath cafes at the sides of the street and not generally along the walk itself. The most colourful sights were the performance artists. There were a good number of these and they mostly drew good crowds, but didn't seem to be making a lot of money except for the Charlie Chaplin guy. The Michael Jackson impersonator didn't draw many people.

The modern harbour area contrasted sharply with the old area to which it was adjacent. This area may have been old with narrow and winding lanes but it had been well looked after. While the bus tours we went on were wonderful, Barcelona, like Paris, is best seen on foot.

We were able to go on a tour of the harbour on a catamaran. This was very interesting and, after we passed the breakwater, we covered a lot of the coastline. It certainly gave us another beautiful view of the city. Just prior to the Olympics in 1992 people were scathing of Barcelona Harbour and talking of dead animals and refrigerators etc floating in the water. If this was ever the case, it isn't anymore. The water was lovely.

A downside to our harbour cruise, which lasted one and a half hours, was that the smell of the catamaran's diesel fuel didn't do much good for the stomachs of a number of passengers who were sitting downwind of the engine on the trip back to the boat's berth.

Begging is rife in the city, especially around the city centre, and is well organised. Groups of women, apparently of gypsy origin, some with children, were gathered on many street corners. Some were almost arrogant as they would approach you with hands open and you could see they were already holding gold coins. Others would hold out both their hands and their baby. Tourists are advised to follow the practice of the locals – walk past without a glance.

One last thing about Barcelona is that if you order a satay meal in a Chinese restaurant, be prepared to receive a meal with an orange sauce instead of a peanut sauce. When we queried where the real satay sauce was the staff had no idea of what we were talking about.

Barcelona was a wonderful place to visit and was a very pleasant surprise for us. We were meant to be staying longer in Spain and moving on to Madrid and Seville, the latter city with its colourful Islamic influenced architecture. Unfortunately, despite many

weeks warning, my dialysis arrangers did not, or could not, make bookings for me until after we reached the point of no return in our travel arrangements. Instead, my dad suggested we go to Amsterdam instead, especially as we had to fly out of that city for our stay in Japan. He was able to arrange bookings for me within a couple of days following an internet search and some use of phone, fax and email. It turned out that this city was an inspired choice as the dialysis unit I used in Amsterdam was the best set up I had ever seen.

Our train journey from Barcelona to Amsterdam was in two stages. We first caught a sleeper to Paris and followed up with an express from Paris through Belgium to Amsterdam. While we had managed to book a sleeper from Barcelona, there was no such thing as a cabin for three people. We were forced under railways policy, therefore, to split up. Mum and I had to share with two other women and dad was in with three other men. We weren't altogether comfortable in the social sense. Mum and I had a good relationship with a young Brazilian lady in our cabin but the other lady spoke no English. Dad and two of his companions, a German and an American, got on well together but the other man, a Frenchman, more or less turned his back on them. He left the train somewhere in mid-France anyway.

When we arrived in Paris, we had to leave in a hurry from our arrival station in southern Paris for one in the northern suburbs. Fortunately, we were able to quickly get a taxi. We were ripped off just twice in our time in Europe, both in small ways and both within this one hour in Paris. First, our taxi driver gave us incorrect change but that didn't matter too much because the amount was what Dad was going to tip him anyway. The other was at Gare du Nord Station (our station for departing Paris) when Dad bought some pastries and then found one was missing. He figured that he probably didn't need a second pastry anyway. I guess you could say we were lucky. The only bad moment I experienced was in Barcelona in a clothing store when two young women positioned themselves on either side of me. I then felt and heard the velcro flap of my bag open. Luckily, the zip underneath was closed. I looked at one of the women and both quickly disappeared.

The journey from Paris to Amsterdam was both comfortable and interesting. First we saw the countryside of northern France, then we stopped at a number of cities in both Belgium and Holland giving us a chance to look them over. In Belgium, we stopped at Antwerp and Brussels. Admittedly, you shouldn't judge a city by the look of the area around its main railway station, but in Brussels that area looked very dirty and dreary. It was later confirmed to us by people who have lived in Brussels that it is indeed generally dirty and dreary. Antwerp seemed to be more interesting.

As the train rolled into Holland, we were pleased to see that it seemed to be a very nice place to visit. Rotterdam and The Hague looked quite inviting. We later found that this was an accurate assessment.

The journey to Amsterdam from Paris took more than four hours. Again, the area around the station was appealing. We were met at the station by the owner of the apartment in

which we were to spend the next nine nights. The apartment was less than two kilometres from the station but we had to take a circuitous route to get there, such are the problems of car travel in a city built around canals.

Our apartment was unusually laid out with a large loft being where the sleeping and lounge areas were located but it was comfortable and was very nicely situated being close to a canal. The apartment was also pleasing because it had a washing machine and a dryer. While I had a nap, Mum and Dad explored the immediate area and reported that everything we needed was close at hand – supermarket, coffee shop, restaurants, bakeries and delicatessens. They bought plenty with which to have a good dinner that night. After that and having had a day and a half of travel, we needed a good night's sleep.

Having again moved into northern Europe, and with it now being the end of October, the mornings were darker and colder, but nothing we Canberra people couldn't handle. As always our first move on our first day was to the hop-on, hop-off tour bus. This time, however, the tour bus was a canal bus, being a glass covered barge, with the choice of three routes to take. Our first choice was the route which took us to see the best tourist sights around the inner part of the city.

This was a lovely tour and we followed our usual practice of going all the way around the loop before choosing which sites to get off at later. These canal tours are not as frequent as the tours in other cities with the canals being more difficult to navigate and the barges moving around at a sedate speed. The up side to this was that it gave us a better opportunity to look around us. The sights weren't flashing past us. Some of the highlights of this tour were the Rijksmuseum which houses many of the paintings of Rembrandt; Ann Frank's House; many ancient and historic terrace houses; and the Van Gogh Museum.

On this trip Mum spotted a likely spot for lunch, a pancake restaurant. This restaurant turned out to be one of the most popular eating places in all Amsterdam, given that pancakes are a national dish of Holland. We had a 20 minute wait before we could be seated but it was worthwhile as the international pancake dishes the restaurant served were wonderful. For the record, I had a Chilean pancake, Mum had Norwegian and Dad had Indonesian (it was satay flavoured and Dad loves satay).

After lunch we went back into the centre of the city which, essentially, is the area around the main railway station so as to catch another route on the canal bus. This time the route was around the outside canals of the city. The highlights we saw on this trip included the historic Amsterdam Harbour; the Maritime Museum; the zoo which is called the Artis Zoo; the Opera/Music Theatre called the Concertgebouw; and City Hall. We agreed that we enjoyed this route even more than the one we traveled that morning.

We had decided that the next morning we would head for Ann Frank's House as I was very keen to see it. It is situated a few canals across from our apartment. What we didn't realise was how popular an attraction the House is. There is still a deep affection for Ann Frank in Europe even though it is 60 years since her death. The House, however, is also

a focus for world peace and meetings and conferences are held in Amsterdam which sustains that focus and enhances the symbolism of the House. The crowd was so large that we decided to come back at an earlier time on another morning in the hope that we would beat the crowds. [When we did go back to the House we were able to get in very quickly. The house has been kept in exactly the state it was in when Ann and her family lived there. It was noticeable how hushed people were in moving about. It was like being inside a church. A highlight of the visit was being able to see three of the diaries kept by Ann. One was opened and we could see her own handwriting. It was written in Dutch, of course, but it was a form of old Dutch that is apparently difficult for younger Dutch people to be able to read today.]

We decided instead to go to the Rijksmuseum. This Gallery closely resembled a construction site as it was undergoing an upgrade. Nevertheless, we were able to see many Rembrandt paintings and those of other artists of the period, in addition to works of furniture and other curios including very old dolls houses. The highlight of our visit was Rembrandt's huge painting, 'The Nightwatch'. This was hung high in the Gallery and allowed a large crowd to gather and marvel at the magnificence of the work.

With a half day of sightseeing having been accomplished, it was time to head off for my first dialysis in this city. For some reason, I was feeling more confident about this dialysis. Probably the main reason for this was that, in this city, English is spoken everywhere and with great clarity, confidence and accuracy. We learnt that it is a compulsory subject in schools. Young people were particularly confident in their use of English.

The dialysis unit is about ten kilometres out in a quiet, mainly residential area in the southern part of Amsterdam. We could have traveled to near the unit by light rail or by tram but decided that the length of the journeys by these means did not make it a truly viable option. There would have been some lengthy walking required before and after either means of transport. We gave into comfort instead and went by taxi. As my dialysis was timed for late afternoon it was necessary to get a taxi home, in any case.

The building we were searching for was a little hard to find at first. It looked like many of the medium sized office buildings around it. Once inside the unit it looked at first like a well organised office. We were met by a receptionist who explained how the system worked at the unit. We were then passed on to the business manager who dealt with the payments situation. After that my nurse for the day came to meet me and took me to my dialysis station. Everybody was very pleasant and efficient, the staff were dressed for the office rather than for the medical work they undertake and they, of course, all spoke excellent English.

The unit was set up in an identical manner to a government department office. That is the dialysis stations were in blocks of four and separated from each other by partitions. The design was such that I could not see another patient and this gave privacy to everyone. A desk ran along the side of one partition. It had a television, phone, electrical cables for

plugging into a laptop computer and direct lighting instead of only ceiling lighting. The patient occupies a king-size recliner. On the other side is the latest model Fresenius.

Plate glass windows surrounded the large room and provided views of a park with a canal running alongside it. My parents were allowed to sit with me if they chose and they were also provided with some of the excellent food and drink that I was given. There are two members of staff on hand to prepare and serve these refreshments. The atmosphere was very calm, peaceful and relaxed. I felt very comfortable as the medical staff was also very professional and experienced. The unit is a public facility but is very well resourced. We understood that most of the patients are on relatively low incomes. We spoke with one man who lost his kidney function 25 years ago as a young teenager having migrated from Holland to Sydney. He told us that his parents decided to return to Amsterdam so that he could receive top class public dialysis treatment. As a private patient, my dialysis cost me 369 Euros per session which, apart from London, was the most costly in Europe.

It was fortunate that the next day was dialysis free for me as it was my 35th birthday. Much of the day was spent in the area around a fabulous pedestrian only shopping street in the centre of town called Nieuwendijk. For a start, the mall contained dozens of trendy, but not too expensive, clothes shops. There were also many souvenir shops.. The street ended near the famous Amsterdam red light district and as this area is promoted as a tourist attraction, we went to have a look. We certainly saw many of the ladies of the district in our short stay in the area, many of them sitting behind their plate glass windows. Dad visited Amsterdam in 1967 and said that the area had now become more seedy than it was then simply because of the many sex shops that had opened for business in the district. He felt that it was a little more dignified when only the girls were there. Well we had been there, done that.

For my birthday dinner that night, we chose an Indian restaurant. Although it looked nondescript, the restaurant served us a beautiful meal and it was nice to have had such a good meal on a special night. Dad normally drinks a couple of light beers when we go out. In Barcelona, and again in Amsterdam, he found non-alcoholic beers on the menu and he found that they were very tasty and satisfying, so much so that he looked for some when we got back home. After a bit of a search he found a supplier here in Canberra of a nice German non-alcoholic lager. The best thing about it as far as he is concerned is that he is yet to find somebody who is also willing to try one with him. This keeps the cost of his beer down.

In all the ten weeks we were away, Amsterdam was the only city in which we went on organised tours. We went on two of these. The first was a half-day tour which took us north to a village on the North Sea coast. On the way we stopped at a clog making factory and saw that while clogs were once made entirely by hand, nowadays machines follow the lines of a finished clog and exactly reproduce it. In the factory's museum we saw the many kinds of clogs that are made such as wedding clogs, church clogs, inside clogs etc. We learned that clogs originated because they protected the feet of farmers in the always damp earth.

Our next stop was a cheese making factory at Edam (where that style of cheese originated). After listening to a talk about how it's all done we sampled various cheeses in the factory shop and were able to purchase some cheeses. The funniest part was when Dad kept sampling the same kind of cheese and raved about it so much that he purchased a package of it. Afterwards he found it was sheep's cheese – too late then!!! He would have been much happier with plain Edam. Our tour guide was commentating in five languages but the young woman who informed us of the cheese making process was even more fluent – she was amazing!

The tour continued on to our main destination, the fishing village of Valderdam. Being seated high up in the bus we were able to look down into houses as we passed them. To be honest, the Dutch put us to shame in how neat, tidy and decorated their houses are. This is one thing that still sticks in my mind. Valderdam is quite big for a village but it is a lovely place. Even though it's focus is on fishing, it has a strong emphasis on tourism. So there was plenty of food to be bought as well as tourist items. The fish sure tasted wonderful.

On the way back to Amsterdam we saw many polders. A polder is an area of land reclaimed from a former lake. This was difficult task for the Dutch as these lakes were all below sea level but this is where windmills with their capacity for pumping were helpful. Windmills were also used for grinding grain. We learned that the population of windmills in Holland is now very small compared to earlier years – it is now less than a couple of hundred. It was good to have seen about twenty of these. It was also explained that the Dutch no longer feared the damage the sea might inflict on their country because the system of dykes now in use is so successful at keeping the sea at bay.

We went on a major tour one Sunday. Essentially this was a tour around Holland. We started off for Rotterdam which is the biggest port in Europe. This conjures up thoughts of a rather grimy and run down place. Rotterdam, in fact, was quite the opposite and was a surprisingly attractive modern city. The reason why it is the most modern city in Holland is that it was heavily bombed by the Germans during the Second World War before Holland surrendered. Amsterdam was saved from bombing by the surrender.

After Rotterdam we moved on to Delft. Delft is famous for its beautiful but expensive blue and white pottery. Our visit showed us that it should also be famous for the beauty of the town of 35,000 people. It was very nice to be able to have a lunch break there. We wished we had more time because it seemed like a wonderful place to explore. We had only enough time there for Mum and Dad to buy an 80 years old pair of ice skates for only 12 Euros in an antique shop. Little did we know that these would cause a security problem when we eventually arrived back in Sydney. The person operating the x-ray machine checking the incoming bags did not like the look of these sharp objects in one of Dad's bags. The customs people kept asking Dad questions without saying what the problem was. In the end, after getting nowhere for some time they asked him if he was carrying long sharp objects – that's when the penny dropped. The stupid thing in the end was that Dad was about to unwrap the skates which were in a plastic bag when they told him not to bother about it. They didn't even look at them.

From Delft we moved on to The Hague. In a way, The Hague was vaguely familiar to us. This was no doubt because being Canberra people we could identify with a city that is the seat of government and has many national institutions located within it. The Hague also has a number of international institutions, such as the court for trying alleged war criminals, located within it. The big difference between Canberra and The Hague, of course, is that The Hague has so many beautiful old and historic buildings and monuments. The Queen of the Netherlands also has a palace located in the city. It is a beautiful place but, unfortunately, we weren't able to stop and explore it. The bus kept moving and took us to a fishing village and residential area situated on the North Sea. Schevingen is its name and it is so close to The Hague we would call it a suburb.

Driving along the seaside road into Schevingen was like driving into Surfers Paradise or Bondi. Even though it was late autumn and the weather was a cool, the traffic was very slow moving as the area was packed. It gave us time to have a good look around us. The beach is an Australian style beach with yellow sand, there was a long pier with various entertainments along it and, on the other side of the road, were four or five storey luxury apartment buildings. People certainly seemed to be having a good time. We were told that in summer the area attracts vast hordes of people. We weren't sure where the fishing part of the village was - probably on the outskirts.

We weren't finished with The Hague yet, for we went another few kilometres back towards the city and came to Madurodam. Madurodam is best described as a miniature Holland. In an area the size of a football field are scale models of all the best sights of Holland. There are models of all the best parts of the major cities plus representations of some smaller rural towns. There were, for example, very large models of Schipol Airport in Amsterdam and the port of Rotterdam plus good sized scale models of all the important buildings in Holland. We were allowed a stop of one hour at Madurodam but you could happily stay there for the best part of a day.

Madurodam is actually a memorial. Construction first started in the early fifties financed by a wealthy man whose son was killed in the Second World War. The display is dedicated to his memory and is always being updated to represent modern Holland.

After leaving Madurodam we commenced our trip back to Amsterdam about 60 kilometres away. It was starting to get dark and the bus had to battle with heavy weekend traffic, but we had a six lane motorway on which to travel. In so many ways, it was like being at home. We felt really comfortable in this country. Obviously, we felt similarly about England but that was to be expected whereas Holland was more of a surprise to us.

One final highlight of our visit to Amsterdam was a visit to Rembrandt's house. As the building had been extensively restored to how it would have been in Rembrandt's time it was another very interesting experience. Rembrandt was an obsessed collector of various artifacts as well as paintings and it was this obsession which got him into great financial difficulty. He was eventually forced him to leave his prized house.

It was the box beds set into the woodwork of the walls of the house that made the greatest impression on us. Granted that the people of his day were not very tall, the beds, although looking very cosy, were extremely short. Anyone who was what we would call a reasonable height would have had to have slept in the foetal position.

Having arrived in London on 16th September, we were leaving Europe on 8th November. I had my fourth dialysis in Amsterdam on the latter date. Afterwards we headed directly for Schipol Airport, which was surprisingly quiet. Perhaps it was because it was a Monday. Anyway it was nice to be able to quietly relax for the few hours before we boarded our Japan Air Lines flight to Tokyo. We understood that Schipol is a hub airport into Europe. It is certainly very large, modern and especially security conscious. Its other claim to fame is that it is the only international airport in the world that is below sea level.