

**May 2010**

## **Canal Cruise – Holland and Belgium**

Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport is a veritable city. You can find anything there. You can buy a car there! Anzie and I had just arrived in the early A.M., and were wandering around looking for the track where we were to board our train to Brussels. We noticed hundreds of people lined up in front of international ticket offices. "Is this normal?", we asked ourselves. We asked an official-looking gentleman in a blue uniform, "What's going on?" "Haven't you heard?", he responded. "The smoke from a volcano in Iceland has closed air traffic to most countries in Europe!"

This meant that our plane from JFK was one of the last flights into Amsterdam. We were probably flying just south of Iceland when the eruption occurred. The people in the long lines were seeking alternate transportation to their cancelled flights.

The chaos continued. We arrived in Brussels to find tourist groups wandering the streets, wheeling their luggage, looking for places to stay. After a wonderfully nostalgic stay in the Belgian capital and a visit to Bruges, an absolute jewel ( I had lived and worked in Belgium for two years in the mid -'70's), we returned to Amsterdam to board our cruise ship, the AMA Dolce. The ship's capacity is 140 passengers. Only 30 made it. Needless to say, we had no qualms about ordering seconds for dessert.

The primary reason for taking this cruise was to celebrate my 70<sup>th</sup>, Anzie's 60<sup>th</sup> and our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The reason we picked this particular cruise was that it was sponsored by "Says You", a brilliant, funny radio program that is Boston-based. If you're not familiar with it, it's structured around a word game that is played by two opposing teams that consist of Boston literati. More on how the game is played later. 17 people had signed up for the "Says You" cruise. When we disembarked, only four people had made it.

The following day Tony Kahn, one of the "Says You" panelists for many years arrived with his lovely wife, Harriet Reissen. Harriet is a writer. Most recently she authored "Louisa May Alcott – The Woman Behind the Little Women". The book was recently turned into an American Masters special on PBS.

Tony has worked in radio for most of his career, much of it with public radio. He helped create "The World", a daily international news program. Most recently he completed a series entitled "Morning Stories", which consists of interviews with people of some, or little, note. He reminds me of Studs Terkel. When you break bread with Tony, as we often did, he will get into his interviewing mode. He is fabulous at it. He comes up with such thought-provoking questions. When he discovered that we ran a B&B, he asked: "Who was your worst guest?" At the

time we couldn't think of one. Now, after our fifth season, we definitely can. But, that's another story.

Tony also authored a radio series entitled "Blacklisted", in which he narrates a dark piece of our country's, and his family's, history. Tony's father, Gordon Kahn, was a well-known screenwriter in Hollywood back in the 50's. He was also head of the Screen Actor's Guild. In the Red Scare Days that were generated by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the '50's, somehow his union activities made him suspect. Word came to him that he was shortly to be called before the House Un-American Activities Committee. He left in the middle of the night, and escaped to Mexico City. Tony remembers as a five-year-old boy that he was awakened with a tearful good bye from his father. Shortly thereafter Tony along with his mother and brother joined his father in Mexico, where they lived for five years. Eventually Tony went to Harvard, where he graduated magna cum laude.

What I will always remember about him is his wonderful sense of humor. I recall that we were waiting alongside the ship while everyone was preparing for a bike tour. Tony looked at his bike; then he looked at me. "Remember", he said ominously, "Do not show any fear. They (the bikes) can sense it."

A little about the ship, AMA Dolce: It is a "cruise ship", yes. However it's designed for river/canal cruising. It's wide enough to contain two passenger cabins with a middle aisle. It's four decks high and includes a rather large lounge area, a middling-size dining room, a small exercise room and a reading room. The top deck is open, covered with Astroturf and contains shuffle boards, a giant chess game and the bridge.

We quickly realized one significant advantage of a cruise such as ours over an ocean cruise. On an ocean cruise what you often see is water, water, everywhere. Whereas, we always had sights to view along the shoreline: farms, windmills, industry, communities, wildlife, fishermen, and the fantastic variety of boats that ply the river ways.

We can't say enough positive things about the food, the service, the on-board entertainment. Most of the tours were included. We didn't feel as though we were being nickel-and-dimed as on many cruises.

On our first night we dined with the only other "Says You" couple that had arrived. Martha and Brad live on Otisco Lake, in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. Our upstate NY connection gave us an immediate bond. Like us, they had arrived three days early. They spent the three days in Amsterdam, so they knew the town fairly well.

Brad added that our dock was only a short walk from Amsterdam's entertainment sector. "Entertainment sector?" I queried. "Yes. This is where you'll find the bars, the clubs, the coffee houses."

“Coffee houses?”

“That’s right. Only they don’t serve coffee. They serve a wide variety of marijuana.”

“Now, that’s interesting!”

“Do you want to go? It’s only a 20-minute walk”

“Let’s do it!”

So, off we went: through the port, across the highway, through the train station, down the Damrak to Dam Square. Our destination lay adjacent to the Red Light District. I had no idea of directions at the time. I just followed Brad.

We entered what looks like a bar. It’s dimly lit; a few tables and chairs; a few hanging plants. The warm, familiar aroma of grass hit us immediately. Conversation is much more subdued than in a saloon. We approached the stand-up bar. “What’ll it be?”, queries the bartender. “What’ve ya got?” responds Brad. The bartender directed our attention to a blackboard behind the bar. Listed on the board were three or four brand names. “Purple Haze” was the most expensive. Prices were listed according to the quantity. A gram went for around \$18. A joint went for \$5. We asked what was so great about Purple Haze. Bartender proceeded to expound upon its qualities. I bought a gram. Brad bought a joint.

We sat at a table and lit up the joint. My second toke produced a coughing fit. We then sat and talked for a bit. By the time we rose and headed for the door I realized that this grass was aptly named. I was seeing everything through a purple haze. I recalled that our journey from the ship took about 20 minutes. Our return trip seemed endless! Brad was leading the way; I had no idea where we were. I remember saying, “Don’t leave me now, Brad.” Four hours later we arrived on board. I wanted to get down on my hands and knees and kiss the deck.

It really didn’t take four hours. Purple Haze screwed up my sense of time. I think that, when I become terminally ill, I’ll smoke Purple Haze again. With Purple Haze every hour seems like a lifetime. Hmm, that would make a fine ad slogan.

Both of us agreed that Purple Haze was definitely a one-toke ganja. Two tokes were excessive. We finished every night with a smoke outside on the top deck regardless of the temperature.

### **Back to Says You**

One of Tony Kahn’s duties was to organize a shipboard version of Says You. He organized two versions. The venue for both was the Reading Room. The first night posed Anzie and me against Brad and Martha. Drinks were involved, and I can’t recall the outcome. The second show posed Anne, Brad and Martha against Michael and Annette, both late arrivals from northern California, and me.

A principal segment of the show concerns a version of the old game “Library”, in which one group is given an obscure word. One of the three panelists gives the correct definition. The other members must give false definitions. The other panel must discern the correct definition. In our case Anzie’s team was given the word “occlupalid”. Anzie can be so-o-o convincing. She had my teammates fooled. Fortunately I had lived with her for 18 years. I recognized when she was trying too hard to be persuasive. And I was right. It’s probably not a good idea to place marrieds on opposing teams. However, we were shorthanded.

What’s an “occlupalid”? It’s that little piece of plastic that holds the twisted plastic wrap around your loaf of bread. You know. It has that expiration date of the product printed on it.

### **We experienced many highlights:**

**Bruges** is a jewel of a town in Belgium. Canals criss-cross the town. One finds a subject suitable for a photo or a painting around every corner. We walked through a walled convent property. Included was a manicured forest where the ground is dotted with daffodils in the spring.

Canal cruise through Amsterdam: a great way to see the city

**Indonesian cuisine:** We found Indonesian restaurants throughout Amsterdam. “Rijsttafel” is more than a rice dish. It’s a banquet. Comprised of many dishes spooned onto rice, it is eaten either with utensils or by hand. “Nasi Goreng” and “sambal” are dishes that may be included.

**Willemstad:** A quintessentially cute Dutch town which is surrounded by fortress walls that are shaped like a multi-pointed star.

**Keukenhoff:** A national park that’s open only a few weeks a year in April and May. Originally it was the venue for the commercial tulip vendors to display their wares. A few years ago it was open to the public. We woke up early so that we could arrive at the park by 8 PM. It was already crowded. The displays of tulips over many acres absolutely boggled the mind! The colors, the arrangements were fabulous. Other flower types, especially orchids, were displayed in large galleries. We departed at around 1 PM, at which time the crowd was so thick you could scarcely move.

On the way to and from Keukenhoff we passed through farmland that consisted of bands of multi-colored tulips that extended from our highway to the horizon. The lines of cars coming to Keukenhoff in the afternoon extended the same way. We were so glad to have arrived so early.

I don’t want to extend this journal with detailed descriptions of all the highlights:

Amsterdam:

The Red Light District

Flower Market

Restaurants

Ghent

Antwerp

Brussels

The next time we see each other I'll be happy to bore you to death.

The subject of our next journal will be Dubai. We're going there October 31 for ten days to visit brother Tim and his lovely wife, Connie. We're joining our good friends Axel and Sylvia there.

Hasta la proxima,

Chuck and Anze