**The Amazing Adventures of Karin, Claire, Robbie, Fred and Shelley - Melbourne to Berlin- *by Fred***

**Day 1**

The long haul to Europe seems to just get longer! Excited peoples stuck in a tin can with somewhat limited room. But you have movies, food and a.. well that's about it. Singapore came and we were transported around by porters who put stickers on Karin and Claire as ‘special deliveries’. None of the rest of us got them - bit miffed really!! Singapore to Paris was the sleep leg. Robbie sat bolt upright and managed to sleep most of the way. The rest of us snoozed and fidgeted for the trip.

Paris arrived and we were last off and then just seemed to avoid all passport controls and went straight to the baggage collection. The wheelchairs survived the flight and unwrapping the 10km of tape we used to secure them was the biggest challenge of the day. That was it - out we walked into Paris!

First task - work out the train system to get to central Paris! Took us ages to try and get through the barriers to get on the station. A cleaner showed up and opened a gate and just let us through around the barriers. Onto the platform. We can see a ramp in a cabinet but ... Now Paris is pretty accessible and people with disabilities get priority access for lots of stuff. However finding the person with the right key to get out the ramp took about 4 trains. Finally our friendly cleaner stepped in and went and found the ramp key person for us. It's universal the one with keys rules the world!

Thankfully the station people rang ahead and the ramp was ready when we arrived at Saint Michael. Off the train and up the lift. I was expecting some sort of station area type thingy but you just get out of the lift and you’re in this laneway in the city - very Harry Potterish! Walked up to the Main Street and there was Notre Dame Cathedral - right there over the Seine - always surprises me when these incredible things just appear!!

We set off to find our hotel - somewhat surprisingly it was easy. As it was about noon we decided to hit the road and find out where we would end up. So, Luxemburg palace and gardens, up to the Musee d'Orsay, along the Seine - late lunch / early dinner at a cafe - cross the river and wander around the Louvre, through the gardens to Concorde ( where King Louis lost his head) back across the river to the Assemblee Nationale ( foundation of Western democracy) and into a cafe for crepes and drinks. Siamo Stanchi!!!

Fueled up we headed to our beds. Just a few observations

1. Red man - green man how can you have so much fun crossing the road.

2. Batteries on electric wheelchairs can run out of power

3. Rob can seemingly sleep and walk

4. It's a truly beautiful city

5. They drive on the wrong side of the road - don't cross the road when tired!!

6. We keep speaking to people in broken Italian - instead of our non existent French! Doesn't work!

Au Revoir

**Day 2**

Bonjour! It took 2 years, 2 months and 5 days to build and it was only meant to be temporary. The Eiffel Tower was our target for today.

Most woke at strange times but all had a good sleep. Rob’s talking watch may end up in the toilet though! Croissants for breakfast and time to battle with red man green man. This is Rob’s Paris personal demon - there were times when the red man appeared Rob froze in the middle of the road, other times he ran backwards when the red man appeared. Never has the green man had such adulation. Once we reckon Rob actually crossed the road three times but still ended up where he started from.

Karin announced she felt like a donut and coffee so apart from the obligatory – ‘you don't look like a donut’ , we sat in a cafe and chilled, people watching. There we met a lady Pat from Thornbury who arrived the day before and was on her way to Croatia for some training - good job training that one!

Onto the Eiffel and the hordes of tourists and queues. We, however, as ‘special people’ - something to do with Shelley's hair - got to skip all that and were whisked through and up to level 2 and the views of Paris. Unfortunately the barrier was a little high and so took lots of standing to look over the city. It's really just a grown up Meccano set but still pretty impressive.

Next was a cruise on the Seine from the Eiffel Tower to Notre Dame. Undoubtedly the best thing was watching the different nationalities and their approach to getting the best seats. It was accessible but there was nowhere for the wheelchairs to be except in the aisles - strange. The cruise was actually pretty good and Claire and Karin were just laughing through the commentary.

Starving, we crossed the river looking for food. Right into the shopping district with all the big fashion houses. Doesn't bode well for our budget. Cheapest dish on the menu was about 40 euro! So onwards we go - universally hunger does things to people - from hysteria, uncontrolled giggling through to major grumpiness. We had all three until we found a place with our budget and satisfied the beasts within.

So the Arc d'Triomph loomed large and looked sensational at night. Off down the Champs de élysées. What a street!! Now the Le Tour ends with 8 laps of the Champs and I had no idea how bloody steep the road was. Those guys are jets. I now know how steep it is because Claire was down to 2 flashing lights of power. So we freewheeled down the Champs across the river to our late night aperitif cafe. Had some fun with our green and red men - poor Rob!! and finally hit our beds for sleep.

Bonne nuit

**Day 3**

Croissants, corn flakes, thinking of plan B and C (tell you later!) and looking at the Seine, Notre Dame and d'Orsey to visit. Europcar first, (part of the telling you later) good coffee then the Seine gardens.

OK Notre Dame ... tick. Now how hard do you reckon it is to book a train ticket from Paris to Munich? Ring, book, done - right. The French tell us the French part is ok but the German part??? The Germans suggest the French are incompetent and don't know what they are having difficulty with. This we discovered in Australia when we could easily book tickets but juggling the wheelchair hoists was the issue. The advice was to go to Paris and organise it there so they can see what they need to do.

Lesson 1 - don't do it. Buy your tickets and tell them about the wheelchairs later!!

So plan B - Munich by car!! No vehicles big enough. 2 vehicles? How to get the wheelchairs into the vehicles ... What's Bunnings in France???

Possible...

Plan C - try different ticket offices. Off to Gare de Lyon. Looks good, promising even, yes it's ... no good - France OK ... Germany????

So when all else fails find a German. Rang Sandra (Karin’s mum)....help!! Chenoah, Karin’s brother Tristan's partner to the rescue. Wheelchair reservations and 3 further reservations made from Paris to Munich- a nice German contact to help us - looking good. All we have to do is buy the tickets. To buy the tickets we need a reservation. You cannot buy tickets without reserving seats - you cannot just pay for the tickets - this is fun!!

Rang Karin’s dad - what do you mean you are having problems - it's all booked surely. Ah!! Well no because ... story again.

So - reservation OK - tickets no. Plan D - final plan. Try to buy tickets in morning if OK - yay. If not then a taxi to the airport, hire a car / cars and drive to Munich.

So it still was a good day. Notre Dame is this great gothic construction with amazing windows. Food was great and we spend most of our time laughing - we will see what tomorrow brings.

Stand by for more adventures ...

**Day 4**

Somehow in some way we go to Munich today. Ticket office Saint Michael ... “But I need a reservation code for you to buy the tickets - 6 letter code - do you have it??” “ah no.” “Non possibile!” Ring Germany “yes we can see the reservation” “what's the code???” (Heavy German accent) “vas code - I know nothing... “ “OK - You guys ring this Paris dude and sort it out”. Didn't happen - apparently there is some history between the French and Germans.

Message to Jurgen (Karin's dad) - hopefully be there at 9.30pm. Please let the Paravan (vehicle hire) man know we will be late – too bad if he is inconvenienced as we are paying a huge amount for the vehicle..

Ladies have gone shopping. Retail therapy - still here ... ladies are back, waiting outside - Claire reckons she should put a cup out!!!! Raise some funds.

Germans haven't rung back - decide to turn up at the station. “Non-possibile!” But we finally found a brain or 5 and we are now off to Munich. Albeit a little late - get in at 11.30pm. Much dancing in the station – Rob is embarrassed by us.

Late lunch at a cafe as we watch the people in the streets of Paris. It is a truly beautiful city and the space in the centre of the city is sensational. It feels airy and open with its parks and plazzas. Loved it. The guys loved it too - Eiffel Tower was a favourite of Claire, Rob liked the dogs of Paris and the lights of the Champs Elysées but not the red man green man (road crossings), Karin didn't like the poles at the crossings and tried to take one out! Also not so keen on the homeless people in the streets as she tried to run over several. Karin loved the Champs de élysées and the Arc de Triomph. All are eating heaps - especially Karin!!!

Right now we are cruising at 315km/h on the TGV to Munich. The train banks on the corners it's amazing. Clare, Karin and I are in 1st class - with wine and dinner. Shelley and Rob are in 2nd class with BO and no food - suppose I will have to swap at some stage... But then maybe not.

Til tomorrow in Munich

**Day 5**

Munich - home to the German bogan! We arrived to be greeted by soccer chants at the station and the game doesn't begin for 24 hours! We found Jurgen at the station and Karin and he had a joyous reunion. Karin is in heaven - finally in Germany with her dad - brought a tear to your eye. Everything is better here - the food, the language, the accent - one happy camper!!

Hit the town for the day - wandered down the main pedestrian drag to Marionplatz with its gothic architecture, puppet show and glockenspiel, a couple of markets and finally settled ourselves in this food and beer hall. Hot dogs (proper ones) and beer for lunch! Yum!

After lunch ... shopping - my personal non favourite activity, so I people watched and observed:

1. There are so many people in wheelchairs

2. There are so many drunk people

3. Even a drunk person in a wheelchair

4. Bayern Munich supporters are like Collingwood supporters

5. Lots and lots of beer!!

Soccer game was sold out so we headed back to the hotel for an early night ... maybe a trip to the bar - whoops there goes the early night. Rob got lost in the hotel (again). Found him on level 3 with a worried look on his face. Claire drank Piña Coladas, Karin was emailing her dad. Rob headed off to the room to watch TV. Yep lost again - found him in the basement level this time.

Off to Neuschwanstein castle tomorrow!

**Day 6**

Neuschwanstein castle was the objective today. Medium start and the weather was a little chilly and wet. Undaunted we set the GPS. All was well until I noticed a flashing light behind us and a sign saying ‘Stop’. We pulled over and were visited by a couple of Munich's politze. Apparently there was an incident about 200 metres behind us. ???? Shit did I hit somebody, was my first thought. No apparently I drove through a cobbled area. Yep, just following the GPS. And it is VERBOTTEN to drive through a cobbled area in Germany. Whoops - Sorry!

The police were very nice and let us off the fine and then told me next time to get an International driving licence - even though I don't actually need one. Now, if you were ever to be arrested you would be happy to be arrested by these police - great looking ... even the guy. We asked if we could get a photo of being arrested but had to settle for a photo of the car.

Finally got to Fussen and then the Alps made the GPS go weird. At one stage I was apparently doing 346km / hour. So we winged it. Now we had heard that we could drive the bus up the top with the guys. Alas, no go - so we walked all the way pushing a chair (story for later) - it is a steep 30 minutes in the rain but we finally made it and reached the castle. A couple of the more game went further to the bridge for a view of the castle. Pretty sensational!!!

On the way down we stopped off for hot drinks to thaw out and the shopkeeper - a Romanian - told us we should have driven up because we are allowed to with people with physical disabilities ... being a little weary I felt like strangling the ticket sellers down the bottom. But it was a great castle in a great forest , so all was well.

On they walk down the hill Karin announced she was so f\_\_\_\_\_g cold she couldn't feel her toes. Yep it was cold! Back into the bus and on the road to find dinner. Few access problems as we wondered down the romantic road checking out restaurants. At about 7 there was this place up on the right which looked good. We pulled over - a ramp, yes we can get in. It was sensational!!! Best meal we have had with this amazing view, good food and stuffed animals everywhere. It was a great end to a fun day. Stuttgart tomorrow and lunch with Karin's family.

Cheers

**Day 7**

Stuttgart today and we meet Karin's family. Driving in Germany is easy so long as you drive on the same side as everyone else!

We drove to the address of Karin's step sister and there met Diana (step sister), Josephine (niece - 10 years old) Bennidict (nephew - 8 years old) Hiedi-Rose (step mother) and Jurgen. Karin was very excited and so was I, because Bennidict is a soccer lover. So while the adults had a chat - the kids played soccer on the street ... heaven!!

Off we went via a stop to see Jurgen’s house and then into the Zentrum of Stuttgart. (centre of town) for lunch. We all had this traditional Stuttgart regional meal which was delicious. After lunch we took a walk around central Stuttgart and ended up in a cafe for coffee.

The rest of the time was spent back at Diana’s and Michael’s house just chatting and chilling. Apparently they were very nervous meeting us but it turned out to be a great day. It's people that make the experience - one thing I have learned about traveling is it will always be the people you meet not the places that are the most important.

It was time to depart which was a very sad affair but also lovely as it was so great to see how important this trip was for Jurgen and Karin in particular but also for the rest of Karin's German family. It was quite an effort to get here but so worth the challenges.

The drive back to Munich was late but largely uneventful. There was this one incident when a Poilize car flew past with lights and some German word flashing at us, cut in front of us and slowed with their hazard lights on. What did we do??? So we followed the Poilize off the Autobahn down a slip road where they stopped, hopped out of the car and walked ... away from us to collect this hare (giant rabbit) which had been hit and threw it in the grass. So it is not us - we are not arrested? Heart rate begins to descend. We then follow them around these slip roads back on the autobahn - now we were worried they would pull us over for stalking them!

Back to the hotel and we were hopeful that Claire's wheelchair was all fixed and returned. - oops forgot to tell you that one. Seems like we blew a motor on Claire's chair and we have been trying to get it fixed. We remain hopeful!!!!

So a great day and the day that the trip was all about - it went so well!! Thanks to Jurgen, Hiedi-Rose, Diana, Josephine, Bennidict and Michael (Diana’s husband).

Cheers

**Day 8**

Hump day. A day of rest and not rushing around. Rob slept until 12! Champions league semi final - Real Madrid vs Bayern Munich at the Allianz arena tonight which is about 15 minutes away. Let's rock up and see if we can fluke tickets. So off to Allianz - yes you can get tickets they would be 1000 euro each!!!

OK - we go now ....Went to the BMW museum which was Robs favourite then went to a shopping centre. Now, as you know shopping is a favourite activity of mine. So I thought I would get them organized man style to shop. I reckon if you can't buy everything you need in 1 shop then it's not worth going into. For women apparently shopping is more like grazing, sheep like, across a paddock looking for the best bits. Grass is grass, so fill up and let's get to the bar to watch the game!

Made it back in time and found our position in the bar just as the kick off occurred. Lots of noisy Deutschlanders and us. Gee it went quiet quickly. Real Madrid won the game 4 zip to march into the champions league final and send the Munchkins into oblivion.

Early night and tomorrow we head for Berlin.

Oh yes - spoke to the guy about Claire's wheelchair - his English is not great and my German is useless. What I did get was “Kaput!!” and “too old to fix”. So I got the hotel to ring him. Yes definitely stuffed - can't be fixed and he will bring it back at 3pm. Now there is nothing more useless than a Kaput electric wheelchair as you are traveling around. So I rang him back and said save yourself a trip and keep the thing for parts. OK done. Luckily we have Karin's manual as a backup and Claire can hire a wheelchair in Berlin.

So to the autobahn and Berlin

Farewell Munich!

***More posts coming soon …***