



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Recently, I was offline for almost two weeks. Though happily disconnected, I was strangely disconcerted, upon my return, to find the virtual world completely intact. On Facebook, Twitter, and beyond, life goes on – with or without you. A person can disappear, then reappear, with no fanfare whatsoever. You just drop off the face of the digital earth . . . then drop back in.

And when you do, you find that nothing has changed. Your absence has made no difference. It's like you were never gone. Or maybe more like you were never there.

I started thinking about this, and a question (of the postmodern, existential variety) occurred to me: If a person takes a trip and doesn't post about it online . . . did it really happen? Ten rather remarkable days of my life just went completely unrecorded in real time, and I must now try to remedy that situation the old-fashioned way. By writing about it *after-the-fact*. Daunting.

But here goes, anyway. I've just had a marvelous vacation with my mom! We flew to Amsterdam, then boarded the Holland-America cruise ship Eurodam and traveled across the North Sea, then up the coast of Norway, stopping at towns and cities along the famed fjords.

We arrived at the Okura Hotel in Amsterdam around 8:30 on a Wednesday morning, having flown all night. Mom had slept a bit on the plane; I hadn't. We were achy and exhausted and determined to see the city. So, we took a boat tour of Old Amsterdam, during which I nodded off at least three times, then rode around town for almost two hours – completely lost – after boarding the wrong tram. It took us 45 minutes to realize what we'd done, and almost an hour to undo the damage. But, we certainly saw Amsterdam. My impression? It's a hazy blur. With

canals. And lots of Dutch people on bikes.

On the bus that took us to the ship the next morning, Mom and I met the first of our favorite travel companions. We were the last to board, thus ending up on one of those sofa-thingies that spans the entire back of a bus; I was in the middle, between my mom and a strange man. It was stuffy, and I began to get queasy – a theme that would re-emerge on the boat – and seeing no vent over my head, I warned my seatmates that I might be scooting over to snuggle with one of them under theirs. "Preferably you," I told the strange man, trotting out my sassy "southern charm." He laughed and we struck up a fun conversation. He was from Fresno, but said he was particularly fond of the South, that he traveled there often. "Are you a traveling salesman?" I asked. "Actually, I'm a Catholic priest," he replied. "Sorry about the snuggle comment," I cringed. "Don't worry about it!" he laughed. "I should have told you sooner. I never know quite how to break the news." I told him I was a Methodist-turned-Presbyterian who'd secretly longed to be Catholic ever since reading "Brideshead Revisited." He said that could be arranged, but not in the span of one Norwegian cruise, so I bagged the idea. But Father Scott became our new best friend.

The next day, my mother and I were delighted when a fellow cruiser introduced us to a charming Englishman named "Tony" who turned out to be Anthony Daniels – pen name "Theodore Dalrymple" – whose books and essays we've both been reading for years. Daniels/Dalrymple is a psychiatrist/writer who's spent much of his medical career working with inmates in the UK prison system . . . and much of his writing career authoring books on culture, society, literature, and the arts. Based on his writings – witty and insightful, but decidedly pessimistic – I'd always pictured "Dr. Dalrymple" as a cranky old curmudgeon. What a pleasant shock to find him warm and twinkly-eyed, instead. And not even very old! "Tony" was traveling alone, and we had the pleasure of lunching with him on several occasions. Every now and then, Mom would utter out of the blue, "Can you *believe* we've been hanging out with THEODORE DALRYMPLE?" (What can I say? Some women like actors and rock stars. Mom and I go gaga for semi-esoteric cultural critics.)

One day, while we were lunching on the ship with Father Scott and "Tony," an elegant older woman approached our table. "Anthony Daniels!" she effused. "We met on this cruise a few years ago! We talked about whether or not I should let people know I'm an atheist." Daniels, who has written about his own atheism, looked sheepishly at his plate. "Maybe you should ask Father Scott, here, about that," I said to the woman, who suddenly seemed flustered as the rest of us erupted into giggles. Father Scott just smiled and offered his hand. He really should wear his collar more often.

Traveling Mercies

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 13 August 2013 12:12 - Last Updated Monday, 19 August 2013 17:32

We met many fascinating people on this trip. Father Scott was traveling with a group of pals who called themselves the California Mafia – for reasons I never quite gleaned – that included a prize-winning vintner, an insurance tycoon, and someone known around the ship as "the almond king." We also spent time with the brilliant European parliamentarian Daniel Hannan, his lovely wife Sarah, and their precious young daughters. We dined with the octogenarian historian Paul Johnson, who was one of Margaret Thatcher's closest confidants, and guerilla video-journalist James O'Keefe, who, incidentally, ordered a second entrée instead of dessert.

Oh, and we saw Norway. The weather gods were determined that we shouldn't, but we persevered! Our first port was the major Norwegian city of Bergen, where it literally rained all day. Not just drizzle, either. Hard driving rain, complete with thunder and lightning. (Thanks, Thor.) As it was our first stop, and we knew there WERE plenty more, Mom and I decided to luxuriate in our floating hotel, taking in the sights through the windows of the wonderful library on the top deck. The view of the city was spectacular, and we weren't crammed into some hot, queasy-making tour bus, like many of our fellow cruisers. We fancied ourselves the smartest, luckiest travelers around!

The next day was the tiny, enchanting town of Flam. We awoke in the morning to find ourselves cruising toward port beneath magnificent green mountains, dotted with little houses and sliced by cascading waterfalls. I took pictures from our cabin deck in my pj's, weeping. (Unabashed beauty makes me emotional.) The weather cooperated for a few hours, and Mom and I – again, eschewing any formal "tour" – explored the town and even hiked into the mountains. It was here, in the gift shop, that I purchased souvenirs for my family. Some amber earrings for Amelia (amber is "the original Viking jewelry," according to the sign), and a Viking Troll statuette for Jeff. (Trolls are all the rage in Norway.)

The cruise made an unexpected detour the next day. We were supposed to visit Eidfjord, but a new bridge had just been completed there, and it was too short for our ship to pass under. (These port towns depend on tourism, and I'm pretty sure some heads are rolling over that one!) We ended up in the reportedly unexceptional city of Haugesund, where again, it rained all day. Mom and I were happy as clams to stay on the ship – which, as I've said, was just a luxury hotel on water.

The last port was Stavanger, where it drizzled a bit. Determined to see the place anyway, we took our umbrellas and strolled the cobblestone streets, beside the quaint shops and wooden houses, with their magical gardens and overflowing window boxes. Then, we entered Stavanger Cathedral, for which there is only one word. Awesome. A classically ornate Gothic structure – built in 1125! – full of sacred art collected throughout the centuries, the once Catholic cathedral

Traveling Mercies

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 13 August 2013 12:12 - Last Updated Monday, 19 August 2013 17:32

still operates as a Lutheran church, with services every Sunday and regular choral performances.

According to National Geographic's Genographic project – yes, I swabbed my cheek and mailed off my DNA – my "people" hail from Scandinavia. As I stood in Stavanger Cathedral, almost 1000 years old, beneath the 'flying buttresses' I learned about in art history class, before the splendid stained glass windows (added in the 1920s) and the baroque baptismal carvings (circa 1630) – amidst symbols of an ancient religion that is also my religion – I had this overwhelming sense of time. Time passing and time standing still. Ashes to ashes and life everlasting. And I knew I was part of it all.

And then, I went back to the floating hotel with my mother, wondering who would be at our dinner table that night.

[Read more Rants & Raves](#)