



Unexpected European Delights

by Tomasz Zakiewicz

It was thanks to the arrival of Frederico (Rico), our first grandchild, that we embarked on our trip to some interesting parts of Europe. Our son Adam and his wife Katharina (originally from Namibia) live in Hinchley Wood, a suburb south of London, where they recently bought a house. The other purpose for our travels was to accompany Adam on an adventure running marathon in France, and finally to visit our family in Poland.

After few days with our wonderful grandson in London, we flew to Geneva. It is cheaper to hire a car in France than in Switzerland, so we went to the French side of the airport and rented a big family car – a Renault.

After a two hour drive through astonishing parts of the Alps, we arrived in a small village, Notre-

Dame-Des-Millieres, which is close to the starting point of Adam's race. The L'échappée Belle is a very prestigious and tough race: 85 km through the crests of the Alps, up and down, with a height difference of 6000 m. The scenery is spectacular, but temperatures reached a high of 40°C during the day. We met Adam twice at certain control stations along the route of his run. The mountainous roads were very narrow and there was not enough space for two cars to pass. It was quite challenging to drive on the right side of the road, though 40 years ago I passed my driving exam in Poland on this side of the road. Adam did very well among 300 runners (only 150 managed to finish). It took him 26 hours to finish the race.

The following day we drove to Chamonix-Mont-Blanc where we

holidayed for a week. This popular resort welcomes 5-million visitors each year, and held the first Winter Olympic Games in 1924. From almost every spot, including our ground floor apartment, there were amazing views of the summit of Mont Blanc. The White Mountain is the highest mountain in the Alps (4808 m) and the highest in Europe west of Russia (after the Caucasus peaks). We made a few excursions to explore the beauty of the Alps. One day we hiked up a nearby mountain. At first a perfect day, it suddenly turned into a torrential downpour, completely soaking us. Fortunately, Rico was secured with a poncho which I had brought all the way from Cape Town.

Chamonix has one of the highest cable cars in the world. We visited the summit of Le Brevent at 2525 m. On the other side of the



valley there is a cable car which reaches the top of Aiguille du Midi (3842 m), situated close to Mont Blanc. Later in our trip we learnt about an incident that happened with the cable cars going to Aiguille du Midi. Due to a strong wind, the cables mixed up and some cars were stuck between the stations. Several people were trapped for a night and rescued the next day.

On Saturday we flew back to London, and the following day we landed in Warsaw, Poland. Visiting Poland was a bonus and not the motive for our journey but it was joyful to be in our homeland after 35 years. We had a reunion with my two sisters and their families, highlighted with long talks during the dinners, which were followed later with suppers.

The next day we toured Warsaw and visited the Warsaw Rising Museum, which opened in 2004. The Warsaw Uprising of 1944 was a major World War II operation by the Polish resistance Home Army to liberate Warsaw from Nazi occupation. About 200 000 civilians were killed and Warsaw was completely destroyed. There is a huge collection of documented evidence of this heroic time. The museum is very popular and is a must-see.

I met my colleagues with whom I studied at the Technical University in Warsaw, at the faculty of Geodesy and Cartography. The majority of them I last saw 45 years ago. Twenty-five of them came and we had a great time chatting and recalling those good days. They were interested in many aspects of my life in South Africa. I learnt that our faculty is extremely popular and there is big competition for admission. Exams are still conducted to select the hundred lucky candidates. Education in Poland is free, including university. Communism is gone, but some of its ideas still remain and not all of them were bad!

After an official gathering at the university, we moved to a nearby

tavern, where we dined, sang and danced into the late hours. I hope to join them when special diplomas are awarded for the 50th anniversary of the completion of studies.

Two days later we travelled by train to Poznan – my wife’s hometown. We were warmly welcomed by her sisters and their families, and we renewed our wedding vows there on 11 September, in the same church where we got married 35 years ago to the day.

Poznan and Warsaw are green and very clean. Commuting in both cities is excellent. Tramways, buses and trains are air-conditioned and very punctual. We went by train on a pilgrimage to Lichen and Czestochowa. In Lichen there is a sanctuary of the Blessed Mary, who appeared there in 1850. A huge basilica was built a few years ago. Czestochowa is a spiritual capital of Poland. The icon of Black Madonna has been adored in the Jasna Gora monastery since the 15th century and legend says the icon was painted by St. Luke on a table top of the Holy Family.

After a week, we came back to Warsaw and on the same day went to the theatre. Unbeknown to me, my sisters had a plan up their sleeve and when we intended to take a group photo under a street lamp, suddenly two men and a woman appeared and my sister invited them to pose with us in the group photo. I became very upset and walked away because I did not want to have a photo with strangers. Then, one of the men spoke and I realised that this voice could only belong to my old friend Adam. He now lives in the USA and I last saw him in 1978. I attributed this reunion to a miracle of God not knowing that my sisters had arranged it with the help of another colleague. There were different opinions as to who looked more surprised - Adam or me. The meeting ended late in the evening in a restaurant and Adam invited me to visit him in Florida.

A contingent of friends and family members joined us at the Warsaw Chopin Airport when we departed for London where we spent the next two weeks. We know London well from our previous visit, nine years ago, so we were not interested in going to the same places again, but preferred to be with Rico. One day, however, we went to Buckingham Palace to say hello to the Queen, but she was too busy to see us. So instead we watched the 45-minute spectacle of the Horse Guard parade and the Changing of the Guard. It is a centuries-old British tradition that marks the official shift change of the household regiment – the Queen’s guards who are stationed at Buckingham Palace. Later we walked to Westminster Abbey – a gothic church and site for coronations, and stood near Winston Churchill’s statue which is close to the Palace of Westminster – home of the UK Parliament and Big Ben. Then we paid a visit to Admiral Nelson, who stands on the column in Trafalgar Square, surrounded by lions and fountains, and from where he sees the South African embassy. Then we took the tube from Piccadilly Circus to the Polish Cultural Centre (POSK). Originally, it was a gathering place for 80 000 Poles who found their place in London after the end of World War II. There we had delicious Polish food for lunch.

Our other son Alec is a quantity surveyor and works for a big firm in London. One day he showed us his project sites and then invited us for drinks to the Gong Bar in the luxurious Shangri-La hotel. It is situated on the 52nd floor of the Shard of Glass, a 309,6 m

high building, which was opened in 2013. It is the tallest building in the UK and western Europe. The bar also has a magnificent view of London from its height of 180 m. A cocktail costs £18 and guests are not allowed to spend less than £30 during a 90 minute stay (that’s over R500). These requirements are made clear on arrival before being seated.

Among the friends whom I met were Jim and Ann Smith who live in Pietersfield. Jim lectured geodesy at Portsmouth University. He is a secretary of the Commission on the History of Surveying at FIG. He had previously encouraged me to write a paper for the Consas 1997 Conference in Durban. Since then we have shared an interest on the Arc of the 30th Meridian. Jim played a major role in the proclamation by UNESCO of the Struve’s Arc as a World Heritage Monument and he aims to obtain a similar status for the whole Arc, stretching from the North Cape to the Cape in South Africa.

Mr and Mrs Smith invited us for lunch to the Royal Pub, located on the outskirts of Pietersfield. Opposite the pub, there is a cricket field and a monument commemorating the birth of cricket in the UK in 1795.

Two years ago we welcomed Dora, our daughter, who returned from London after seven years. Now, it was her turn to greet us upon our arrival in Cape Town. We had a wonderful holiday and realised, once again, that our home is here in South Africa.

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