

## December 2004

Miles flown	19,722	Miles driven	1,600
Countries visited	Italy, England, Iran, France, Holland, Belgium, Germany		
States visited	None		

Well, December was defiantly my “being on a plane” month for the year – I certainly topped my monthly miles flown for the year . . . and hit Platinum Medallion status – free upgrades and complimentary Crown Room membership.

It all started with my dad’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday – Mum wanted the family to go on a holiday somewhere we had been before together like we did when we were kids – just the 4 of us. I lobbied for anyplace where I didn’t have to make a connection or have to travel too far to be honest since I don’t get vast numbers of holiday days .. (Paris, Barbados, New York, Mexico . . .) – they chose Venice which wasn’t my ideal choice but whatever. So, flew out from Atlanta Thursday night and it didn’t start well – flight left 2 hours late and my connection was only 1 hour in the very lovely Charles De Gaulle. I was flying Air France and anybody who has followed my travels knows that Air France were the people who totally screwed over my two friends who were supposed to meet me in Cuba 4 years ago. Anyway – we landed a mere hour late and my connection was miraculously an hour late so I just managed to scrape onto it. One bus, one boat and I was in Venice . . . all I had to do was get the Vaporetto to the hotel, well this would have been fine if the lady would have sold me a ticket – she told me it was a 10 minute walk and basically refused to sell me a ticket – except my directions included “get on the vaporetto” section .... Thankfully I had an extremely old guidebook (which is why I love European Cities fundamentally the layout doesn’t change much) and vaguely managed to get to the right place – a couple of false turns and asking the locals and I was at the hotel ..... family were out so I got to the room and fell over.

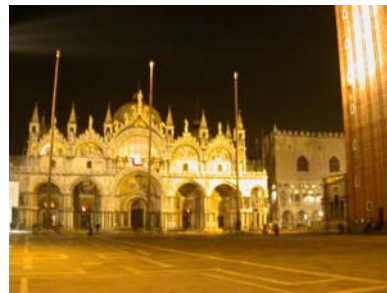
They arrived all too soon and we staggered out to the Guggenheim museum, grabbed lunch and then wandered around the museum. I love the Guggenheim; it has some interesting art and has a fabulous location right on the main river looking onto the Academia Bridge and just a total delight! We meandered back to the hotel and then I crashed for an hour before we went out for dinner to a place we went to when I was a kid – great food.



**Dad, Mum and me - St Marks**

The second day we meandered about again, took in St Marks cathedral including going up the outside and viewing the square below us – then awe went to the Goldoni museum, an original merchants house which was stuffed full of art – interesting building and great art too,

The evening we had tickets for a concert – thankfully we showed up early since there was a huge queue and we got 3<sup>rd</sup> row seats instead of standing at the back – the concert was good and walking back through St Mark’s Square in the dark and rain was beautiful.



**St. Mark’s by night**

Sunday we went to I Friari, my favorite place in Venice, a huge monster of a church with multiple monuments to famous artists – I love it because it has probably my most favorite painting in it – a small picture of the Virgin and child with a few saints close by, It's by Giovanni Bellini and I love it because it's so three-dimensional it really takes my breath away. It's small – probably 24 inches by 18 but seems so much bigger simply because of its reality. It's odd since I am not a huge fan of religious paintings but Bellini really gets to me – I think it's because he painted in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and yet was way ahead of his time in his vision and ability to make things really stand out on the canvas. Anyway, I'd had my fix so we went on to a scuola, a place where artists hung out and painted basically. Ian left that evening and we went to a really cool place which has live music and great food – more bohemian than the places we had been to before but really fun.



Monday morning I had to get off as I had my marathon return journey – mum and dad walked me to the vaopretto to take me to the airport bus and waved me off .

The rest of the week was rather a let down. Friday I went to salsa where there was a poor show-out – the teacher was not on form and it was slow going. Saturday was catching up and movies in the evening, which ended up in wine at a patisserie and chatting and drinking tea at my house until 3am. Slept late Sunday and caught up. The next week was getting ready for leaving. I finally found out about the West coast job, about 3 days after they told the other guy that he had got it . . .badly handled for sure. They clearly went for the short-term option. My boss was totally relieved he was just about beginning to panic I was going to get it – for some reason he keeps telling me that I do 50% of the department's work even when there are 5 of us now. He seems to think I'm indispensable (I am much more sanguine about it – of course he can replace me) but when he is giving me great pay rises and bonuses I'm happy. He is convinced that I didn't get the job because I'm too expensive (he pays me too much) but whatever..... I had really psyched myself into going but at the end of the day I love what I do, have a great boss on the whole and frankly it does not suck to be me!

So, Thursday evening I fly to London – DIRECT FLIGHT – not that I learned something from last year (much !) and landed at 7am, fought my way through commuters and rain to get to my parents and then crashed for a couple of hours. We went out to the south bank for lunch to meet with Joan, someone from my Russia trip (of all people !) it was fun and the food was great, then we took a very blowy walk on the south bank before coming back and then getting in to the car to get to the tube – somehow mum decided I needed to have a lift to another station other than West Hampstead - next time I'll just take the tube as we hit all sorts of traffic, mad drivers and diversions. At the airport I met Rachel in the usual manner – I stayed still and she found me! It is an art we perfected in Venezuela and has stood us in great stead ever since.

Iran was an interesting tour – The flight was under six hours but was the middle of the night and my second consecutive night on a plane so I arrived truly knackered. Off the plane in a headscarf and a truly horrible raincoat - we were excited to be allowed through passport control without having our scarves pulled to cover more of our faces. We changed money, with an exchange rate of 8500 to the dollar and the usual note being the 10,000 you can imagine the inches of money that we received – mine was \$100 – 85 notes ! We then found Mette, our tour leader and loaded on to a bus, checked out the others on the tour – as predicted we didn't like the look of anyone.

There were ten men and five women total and only four of us had arrived with a travel companion. Pretty silent journey to hotel, two hours sleep and then up again to go sight-seeing in Tehran. We were so tired we sat down through most of the guided museum tour and fell asleep about 10 times. On our way out of Tehran we went to Khonemi's mosque and tomb – enormous ugly building with the inside made out of corrugated iron ....and then the cemetery of the martyrs – all the people who died in the Iran-Iraq war. The strangest part of this was they have a fountain that they run with red liquid to commemorate the blood that they shed. Thankfully they don't run it except on festivals – it's a really gruesome concept in my mind.

First night group dinner was rather hellish because everyone was too tired to talk much except Rach and I who babbled to each other incessantly, when the second and third nights were similar, we began a bunking habit that we never lost and simply disappeared somewhere else, usually to the restaurant the group was visiting the next night (so we'd have an excuse not to go a second time!). I am sure the Tour Leader cottoned on pretty fast but we tried to be polite about it, at least at the beginning. We progressed to bunking the walking and eventually the bus tours too. Well, the Iranian 'local guide' was very nice but spoke too fast and never actually ended a sentence. Basically everyone else was on an Explore trip; we did Nabney Tours. With a guide book which usually includes maps I can find my way around anywhere, and even when I can't Rach dutifully follows me until I find a recognizable landmark and aim for it, even places with no street signs. My favorite was the instructions "go 100 yds and turn right " so I counted 100 paces and turned right – it was the correct alleyway. Generally as soon as we hit a town we bailed out and moved off swiftly then reappeared for the bus ride to the next place and then bunked off again. By the end of the trip there were still people who didn't know which of us was which, which is pretty amazing for anybody who knows us! Not surprisingly we didn't bond with the rest of the group it and became clearer and clearer that some of them were actively avoiding us by the end – we weren't avoiding them per se – just had things we wanted to do and simply bunking and being friendly when we did meet people.



### **Fin Gardens**

Next we went to Kashan to the Fin Gardens, with streams of thermal waters running through it and then on to an

almost deserted village - Abayneh which is in the middle of nowhere and basically built of mud ( a recurring theme as you will see !). It was a strange eerie sort of place with all of about 100 residents left. Not surprising since it was a mud village built on a steep hill. Not designed for modern-day living for sure. On the way out we went through our first mountain range and saw all the snow. Yes – it was totally freezing there and although the dress code for women is pretty restrictive I was glad of all the clothes that I was forced to wear – it'd be a totally different thing if it were summer though.



Next was Yazd which had a fantastic mosque, it is basically a mud town. We indulged in a ton of yomping of the streets including seeing some old merchant houses with beautiful courtyards. We got a free rooftop view from a hotel and had tea while keeping warm and away from the chill. Yomped all day and rested in the evening watching the interesting evening entertainment (as far as evening entertainment goes in a country where there is no alcohol and holding hands in public is illegal) this was in the form of a male exercise group doing a kind of pilates in a pit surrounded by people watching. The locals went too - mainly men - to watch blokes who were either skinny and weedy or with huge pot bellies doing a weird kind of press-up followed by waving around wooden batons that looked like elongated pears and the grand finale - spinning on the spot. In the background was a live group banging away mostly on drums and shouting verses from the Koran.

### Jameh Mosque

Leaving Yazd we also took a side trip to the tomb of Cyrus – a big stone edifice in the middle of a snow field. The very battered remains of his palace were there also but hardly distinguishable from any other rubble we'd seen.



### Tomb of Cyrus

On our trip to Shiraz we went to a Zoroastrian “Tower of Silence” where they put their dead to be eaten by the birds – it was quite a strange feeling being atop a 40' diameter tower where people had been pecked apart. Shiraz is much more of a city than the towns we had previously visited with a proper tourist trade going on. Interestingly as we got further south more and more women were wearing the full chador (large tent-like black sheet) and not just the requisite knee-length sack-like coat and headscarf. We hit the souk in search of fridge magnets. None to be found. Lots of scarves though. In the end we had someone write down 'fridge magnet' in Farsi and we touted it round the shops to no avail. Everybody we super –friendly and tried hard but all we could find were plastic cherry fridgies. We did find a paper fold-out X-mas tree to hang in the bus though and we considered buying tiaras to wear over our headscarves but they were beyond our budgets. Shiraz was the place where we definitely had the best food – we checked out a couple of great restaurants from our book and meandered to them. Shiraz was also the place where Rach discovered cream buns. These were choux pastry stuffed with fake sweet cream - yueuchh. She had **five** that first night. Dinner was almost always kebab - very 'imaginatively' cooked kebab (some of it was marinated) but kebab none the less - and after dinner always consisted of the

cream bun hunt. When we couldn't find the buns (as in Esfahan) she became very grumpy and made me walk for miles in search of even the faint hint of a cream bun.

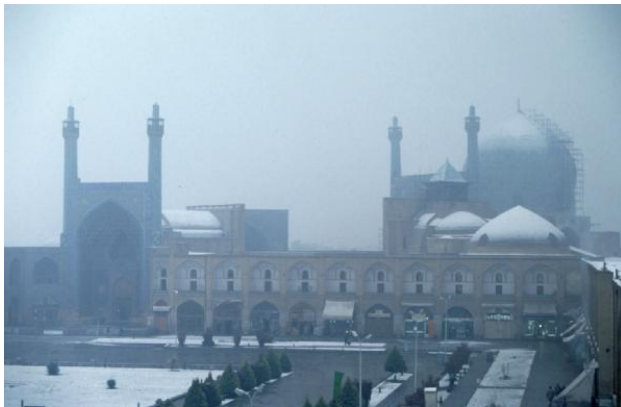
The following morning we got to see a whole bunch more tombs – dug out of the side of a hillside with carvings below them – 3 of them intact, of the guy who built Persepolis and his two sons. We had them described to us in the greatest of detail it was freezing cold and blowing a gale – I was so cold I could barely move after ½ hour.

Then we finally got to Persepolis (or as we saw on a sign Percy polis) which was the most interesting rubble in Iran and the main reason why our fellow travelers wanted to go to Iran. I'd never heard of it before the trip – shows what a pleb I am. We even had another "local guide" for this one who was supposed to be very knowledgeable (for us 'knowledgeable' = boring so we bunked in spectacular form). It was really exquisite and had some of the nicest carving I have seen – the Apadnana steps had little men 'walking' up them carrying tributes to Darius – amazing !

**Perseopolis**



Leaving Shiraz we had a special treat – we got to see some more tombs ! Oh yes – our tour was mud towns, headscarves and tombs. We went to the tombs of Sa'aid and Hafiz. Two very famous Persian poets from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Very interesting – well very funny, since it's a great place for a date apparently. Yes – that's right – you take your sweetie to some old dead guys' tomb and drink tea. The Tour Leader regaled us with stories of her one date with an Iranian (complete with the local guide as interpreter) where her date spent some of the time intoning poems from the great ones. I don't date, but I wish it had been me....



**Imam Mosque in the snow**

Esfahan was meant to be one of the highlights of the trip and that first evening we went yomping out - Nabney Tours style - to get a look at the famous square and mosques that we were going to see properly the following day.... The buildings were beautiful and looked as if they would afford great photos so we woke up earlyish and ready to rock on X-mas day to be greeted with serious snow - everything was a white-out, no decent photos possible. We we

allowed ourselves to be picked up by a carpet shop owner who was all of 4'6" tall who let us use the internet for free and gave us tea and didn't try to sell us anything. Then we found a little old man who painted miniatures and we sat with him for a bit while he drew us each a pen and ink picture of the famous poets whose tombs we had visited. Then we spent lots of money on a proper miniature and waded through more snow, had a tea break in a teahouse that made more tchochkis than any place I've ever seen and a huge pair of cows horns over the door to signify the correct place. At this point we decided that we were wet and miserable, Rach had a screaming cold and I was exhausted for some reason so we gave up and went back to the hotel for a well-deserved kip.

The next day all traces of snow had vanished so we had a manic Nabney-tours special around town doing photos and checking out all the places we hadn't been able to see before, whilst trying to negotiate the traffic. Of course there was the inevitable stop in a tea-shop. This time we chose the one with the great view of the square and the mosque. There were so many mosques and minarets to see as well as trying to get back to the beautiful Jameh Mosque that we were really going for it. We went down to the river to check out the famous bridges and then back up to the main square. In the afternoon we decided to take a (hilarious) bus ride out to the wobbly minarets which were famous for being ... well .... wobbly. Every couple of hours some guy climbed up into the top of them and made them wobble. They have apparently been doing this for centuries with no sign of them falling down. Although now, they limit the wobbling to one man instead of a free-for-all. I had to go and encourage (shout at) the little man to get him to wobble them as we'd already been there  $\frac{3}{4}$  an hour freezing and drinking the ubiquitous tea, and he wanted us to wait two hours until he was ready ... and we had a bus to catch. When he actually wobbled the towers we fell about hysterically – it really wasn't much to write home about at all – oh what the Iranians have to do to entertain themselves. The bus ride was more interesting than the wobbling. It was truly segregation all over again, we had to get on at the middle door and go to the back of the bus and stand amongst a huge number of black 'penguins' holding onto their chadors with their teeth. How Iranian men distinguish 'their' penguin from any other we just couldn't work out; they were even the same height. I guess they must have done it by dental recognition. I nearly got into trouble as I nearly stripped one chador-less by standing on her tent as she got off the bus –she kicked me hard to let me know I was nearly in trouble. It's all very strange we had to get **off** the bus at the middle door and then had to walk to the front door on the outside to give the driver our tickets. Next to us was a young couple who got off with us and walked ahead of us into the park. They were stopped by a lone policeman who was being encouraged by a couple of bystanders.. We didn't think anything of it until the girl came pelting past us. The guy was arrested but we couldn't work out why until we realised they had been holding hands which is illegal.

Caught a night flight back to Tehran and then spent a very scary day trying to cross roads. Frankly there isn't much else to do there – the main palace was pretty dull and the bazaar was full of kitch that the locals would like – we tried to find a mosque alarm-clock that played the call to prayer but failed and Rach couldn't find anything to spend the rest of her hard-changed money on. Tehran is one of the most traffic-ridden cities I have ever been in. The traffic is insane because it **will not** stop and it's not bicycles; it is cars and maniacal motorcyclists. Now I soon discovered Rach had semi-perfected the street-crossing challenge by hiding behind me – I started to hide behind the penguins and finally the icing on the cake was crossing beside a penguin **with children**. At least 5 of us in a row waiting to cross – it was hilarious. We even tried the subway which was again totally segregated so we stood in one of the 3 designated carriages for women (packed) vs. 5 for 'everybody' (read 'men') - I've never been started at by quite so many penguins. I also took a surreptitious picture of one of the "Down with the USA" paintings on one of the walls of the "Nest of Spies" (former US Embassy).

We went for the final group dinner – a special treat for our fellow interesting travelers – as Rach puts it : 'they were just as socially challenged as they had been on the first night'. Especially when one of them read the address list that the Tour Leader put together and found out where I lived (when she vaguely asked if I lived in London I vaguely replied "south of London") – the squawk from the other end of the table was deafening.

Taking our scarves off on the plane was amusing and got a few "oh so THAT'S what you look like" s from the boys. We had lots of wine on the flight home. Rach had been in near panic half-way through the trip that wouldn't serve it because it was an early-ish flight and to be truthful the flight attendant did say "With the breakfast that we are serving ?" (with a sneer) but he brought us some anyway.

On landing I went back to my parents to meet Deb and pick up the car my parents were loaning us. We met back at Rach's for dinner to meet with Rachel (from Southern India trip) for dinner. We had lots of yummy curry and then went back to crash in order to set off again at seven next morning to go to the Chunnel and then drive to Berlin. I did all the driving, Deb did navigating and sleeping and Rach did passenger and sleeping. It took us nine hours including a getting lost moment around Antwerp – they took all the signs to anywhere useful away as soon as we got o the ring road. My favorite part was when Deb said “take this road for the next 263 miles” and promptly fell asleep. Thankfully we were on the Autobahn so I could go at whatever speed I liked (traffic permitting). I learnt a lot about the car in those 263 miles – like it has a bad tyre vibration at around 90 mph and the driver's window has a terrible wind noise at about 100mph. Things of course I won't be telling my parents who loaned us the car ! Actually it preformed flawlessly and although not super comfortable I was fine in it for the 575 miles it was to Berlin from the Chunnel.

Berlin was so fabulous we couldn't believe it. The drive into the city was amazing, very dark but clear and all lit up and sparkly. There were a few detours so Deb had her head in the map but Rach and I oo-hed and ah-ed as I drove in. We stayed in a women's hostel ten minutes from the Brandenburg Gate; we could see the Reichstag and its dome in the near distance.



Brandenberg Tor



We spent the next two days yomping like crazy. We stumbled across The Wall; went to the beautiful Liebskind building which the Jewish Museum is housed in. It's amazing as a building, all angles and weird windows, and the exhibitions were also fascinating. Then we yomped more all over the Kreuzberg district and then the main East/West divide and the main street - Unter Den Linden. Rach was suffering from cream bun withdrawal so had to make do with apfel strudel and she finally got proper coffee. Me ? I had real beer at last and we avoided the national dish of Germany: kebab by eating a lot of salad (and Deb ate soup almost exclusively)

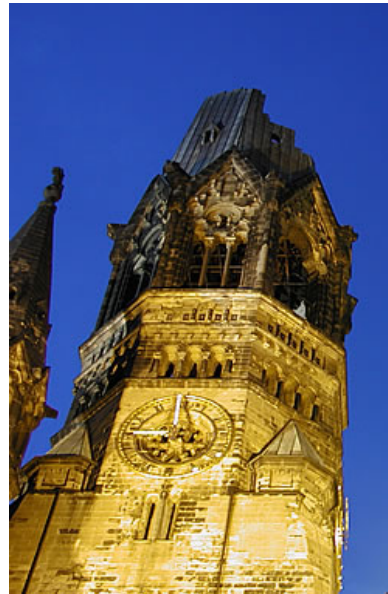
Inside the Jewish Museum



That night we went to the Reichstag to climb to the top of the walnut-whip-shaped dome on the top and look at the city view. How beautiful it was. Sadly it wasn't as clear as the previous evening but we still had great views of the Brandenburg Tor and the rest of the city. We ended up being out for so long that we walked ourselves into a stupor, getting home at eleven o'clock, barely able to stand and hardly speaking.

New Year's Eve was fairly low key because we knew the crowds would be scary so we decided to check out the celebration zone early. We walked through the main park to the Zoo station and then negotiated the bus system well by taking a ride all the way to the other end of town – walked back, cake and coffee on the way (ok beer for me) and then more bus riding and sightseeing – cathedrals, museums and more and more. My favorite place was the Gedachnichtetes Kirche which was partially bombed out and had a modern church built next to it with tons of stained glass. In concept it really reminded me of Coventry cathedral.

### **Gedachnichtetes Kirche**



Having yomped madly all day, we collapsed back at the hotel for an hour, then went out again to walk from the Brandenburg Tor westwards through all the stalls selling wurst, gluhwein and tacky souvenirs. I made Deb and Rach try both wurst and gluhwein – it was hilarious watching them trying to split a wurst and it certainly was one of the cheapest New Year's Eve dinners I've ever had. Deb hated the gluhwein so much that I ended up drinking nearly two – shame. Despite being searched on the way into the park some people were still managing to bring fireworks and bangers in and we started getting uncomfortable at it all so once it got really crowded and bangy and dunken-louty we decided to go home. On the way back we walked past the "Monument to the victims of the Terror" (Holocaust) which was in progress but a moving sight – hundreds of coffin-shaped concrete blocks in rows and rows in this huge space that you would eventually be able to walk around and through. As a final and fitting end to the evening we came across some banger-throwing louts who we crossed the street to avoid, which I really was glad we had done when one randomly pulled a gun out of his trousers – we ran for the door and couldn't get into our hostel fast enough. It was 11.30pm by then and I got all pj'd up to have to be woken by Deb at just before midnight to toast with a glass of red wine – and so to sleep and so ends another year !

One more thing – if anybody is going to Iran in the near future I still have that piece of paper with "fridge magnet" in Farsi on it so please make sure you take it and help fill my fridge-magnet void.