

# From Beijing to Berlin

On August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008, a group of 28 members of 41 Club New Zealand flew out of Auckland for a 13 hour flight to Beijing, China at the start of what proved to be a memorable trip.

Beijing was our first stop, and visits here included The Forbidden City, The Temple of Heaven, a bike ride through the streets of old Beijing, and a walk up the Great Wall of China.

There was no sign of pollution while we were there, and while some of the things we saw were not quite to our liking, those few days in this great city were very enjoyable.



From Beijing, it was on to Xi'an and the home of the Terracotta Warriors – these were only discovered in the 1970s by some Chinese farmers digging a well for water. That well site is still able to be seen in the No 3 shed. Each warrior has a different face, and like the horses, they were all made hollow. Following on from the pits being dug, and the warriors made and placed in the pits, wooden beams were placed over the pits, and the workers who had done all the work, were buried alive with their work. Earth was then placed on top

of the beams and the sites were sealed. However looters got in and ransacked the pits, and fires destroyed the supporting beams, hence the damage as found in the '70s.

Our last stop in China was a night in the great city of Shanghai. We travelled the 30kms from Shanghai city to the airport in 7 minutes !!!! There is a Maglev train and our only disappointment was that at night it only gets up to 301km per hour, while during the day it reaches 430 kms per hour.

A 12 hour overnight flight from Shanghai to Munich and a 5.30am arrival saw us greet the last two members of our group ( we were now the full sized group of 30 people) and our Swedish bus driver, Tord Bergman, who had driven about 2300 kms to meet us with our bus.



A quick look around the old part of Munich and it was away to Kirchdorf in Austria for a quiet night in a small town and a lovely hotel.

Our next stop was Graz, and here we experienced our first lot of home hosting. Graz is the home of Lydia and Dieter Straka who visited New Zealand in 2007. A mayoral welcome and a walk through the city were part of the entertainment arranged for us.

Back on the bus and we travelled north to Vienna, where our accommodation was in a Monastery, complete with its own chapel and resident priests and nuns !!. The very central city location was excellent, and it was only a short walk home after a night at the Vienna Opera House. Another highlight here were the house parties when we were taken to have a meal with members of Vienna 41 Club in their homes.

Leaving Vienna (and Austria) we crossed into Hungary, and travelled over 600kms to the East, skirting around the city of Budapest, before another border crossing took us into Romania, and a hotel for our first night in this country.

Yet another long day (500kms) saw us cross further East into Romania and late that afternoon we met our first Romanian hosts in Brasov. One of the things that sticks in our minds is the sight of horse and carts being used for all sorts of transport – people, animals, firewood And many other uses. The rural houses we saw looked small and rather minimal, but we all commented on the number of satellite dishes we saw on the same houses!! . Another incongruous sight was a Romanian man standing by his horse with a cart load of wood, and he was talking on a cell phone!! . We all struggled to make sense of this.



Brasov is in the part of Romania known as Transylvania – and the most well known character there is Dracula. A visit to Bran Castle, supposed home to Dracula (???), and a local guide who dispelled all the myths about this story, showed us how a story in a book can be turned into a money maker if you do it right.

A hilarious night in the Wolf's Lair ( a local hotel in Sacele) with members of Brasov 41 Clubs left all of us able to howl like a wolf, and with a taste for the local food and drink.

Our travels took us south through the centre of Romania to the city of Drobeta Turnu-Severin which is on the banks of the River Danube. Just across the other side is Serbia. A very warm and traditional welcome with bread and salt by the local 41'ers started our stay here off in a great way.



Rain marred our full day in Droberta Turnu-Severin, but it did not dampen the kindness shown by our hosts. A couple of hours in the local museum, which was opened just for us, left us all realizing just how lucky we are to live in New Zealand. Have a look at a map and you will see how many neighbours Romania has, and over the centuries, Romania has been occupied by most of them.

A visit to the Irongate Dam and Hydro electric power plant was followed by an excellent lunch of locally produced food. In the evening a night a singing, dancing and (some???) drinking was shared by the group and our host 41 Clubs' members. One thing that remains as a memory from here was that the red wine we had at the evening function was just beautiful, and it turned out to be made by a 41'er. When it was time to depart the following morning, Doru presented the bus with 20 litres of his wine to take with us.

The generosity of the Romanians was just wonderful, but their spirit of optimism was unbelievable, especially when you realise that they have only been free of Soviet Union control for something like the last 18 years. They know they have a long way to go, but they are determined to get there, and if a short visit from a group of Kiwis can help, then the news is all good.

We crossed over the Danube by way of the top of the Irongate Dam, and straight away entered Serbia. Words do not come easy when trying to describe this country, but one thing that we will all remember are the bombed out buildings and shops and houses with bullet holes everywhere. Road signs are virtually non existent, and Tord really had his work cut out to get us through to Belgrade where we spent the night in a hotel.

Tord was advised not to follow our planned route to Dubrovnik on the Adriatic Coast, because of Police and army intrusions along the border areas, so we headed towards Sarejavo. Today's journey was 600kms, but with everything we encountered it took us some 14 hours to make it to a 10.30pm arrival in Dubrovnik – and a very welcome bed. Today we crossed from Serbia into Bosnia, then into Croatia, back into Bosnia and finally into Croatia – border crossings became a little ho-hum to us !!



The chance to visit another World heritage site (The Great Wall of China was the other one) in the form of the old walled city of Dubrovnik was taken by everyone, and we all spent a very interesting day taking in all the history of such a place. Some even took a ride on a boat to get a chance to see the old city from the water.

From Dubrovnik, we headed inland (and back into Bosnia again!!), and the town of Medjugorje, a town where a reported vision of the Virgin Mary has made it a mecca for those of the Catholic faith. We left some of our group there, and the rest of us travelled a short distance on to Mostar. This is such a sad place as during the recent wars, the Serbs bombed out a medieval bridge, while attacking a Turkish enclave just across the river.

The historic bridge has been rebuilt (with help from the Turkish government), but when you walk along the old cobbled streets of the Turkish market, and then across the bridge, you must ask yourself about man's inhumanity to man. But the resolve of the people when you talk to them about things, makes you feel quite humble.



The next day saw us back into Croatia, and in the small coastal town to Podgora – a town with an interesting story. Two of the group stopped at a local bar named Ahipara, the name of a town in Northland. On asking about the use of this name, we were told the owner lives in Ahipara in New Zealand. We were also told that there are more people from Podgora living in New Zealand, than actually live there. The reason given was the poverty of many years ago, and New Zealand saw many from Dalmatia (as it was then known) head to our shores to live. Think about some of the well known names in fishing and wine making, as well as many other industries and you will see the link.

Travelling up the Adriatic Coast saw us spend the next two nights in Split, playing tourists, and doing our own thing.

North again, leaving Croatia, crossing through part of Slovenia, and we were in Italy – and we used the wrong border crossing !!! After a long sit (some 50 minutes!!) on the side of the road, and some phone calls, our Trieste hosts eventually found us and took us to our lodgings for the next 2 nights. We stayed in a Scout camp on the outskirts of Trieste, and we were catered for at the camp.



During our day in Trieste, we were impressed with the high regard in which the locals still hold New Zealanders after the Second World War. This was really bought home when we were welcomed to the city by the Mayor, and after his welcome, he presented Peter Butchart with the City Crest to mark our visit.

That night we shared the evening with members of Trieste 41 Club who were holding their regular monthly 41 Club meeting. This gave us a chance to mix and mingle with the locals.

From Trieste it was westwards across the top of Italy, and after dropping off Helen and David Lewis on the outskirts of Venice to do their own thing in Italy, we headed into the South Tyrol and onto the mountain town of Meran. What a beautiful spot to stay – so peaceful and quiet, and with a lovely atmosphere about the place. A night with the locals in a pizza restaurant will not be forgotten for a long time.

Another highlight of Meran is that it was in the mountains above the town that “The Iceman” from some 5000 years ago was discovered, and after all sorts of wrangling, he now “resides” in Bolzano, about 30 kms away from Meran.

A beautiful drive up the Reschen Pass – described by one of the group as “a moving picture postcard” – around every corner the view was magic. There were lovely homes, grapes being harvested down lower, then apple orchards higher up, the mountains with some glaciers, but always a lovely view everywhere. A stop by a lake at the top, and all that was visible of a town flooded when the hydro dam was built, was the church steeple !!! Must say it looked rather peculiar sticking out of the lake.



From there it was over the St. Anton Pass and down into Austria, and then into Bavaria in Germany where we stayed in a small country hotel near Oberstaufen. This hotel was just what we needed – only about 4 or 5 houses nearby, and when you woke in the morning, the first sound was of cow bells ringing in the fields.

A day around Oberstaufen included visits to a 150 year old cheese factory, a brewery, and lastly to the picturesque Prince Ludwig’s Castle. A night of hilarity, with music by Columbo, a local accordion player, followed, and he was still playing when the last of us called it quits at about 1.30am !!

It was an early start from Oberstaufen as we headed north to pass around the outskirts of Munich, and on to Landshut for a lunch stop with some German 41 Club members, including Einhart Melzer who is the father of 41 Club in Germany. A walk around Landshut, saw us leaving for Dresden in the middle of the afternoon, and it was about 7.30pm before we arrived in Dresden.

A quick unpacking of cases, and onto the local trams to go into town for a meal, then home to a very welcome bed.

Dresden is the city the Allies blitzed in one night during the Second World War, apparently in retaliation for the German bombings on Coventry in England. To visit Dresden today, you would never know how bad the damage was, because it has been rebuilt, using plans and photos that existed before the bombings. We had a guided tour of the city and when things are pointed out to you, it makes you wonder how they did what they have done. We also enjoyed a ride on a paddleboat on the River Elbe, and that evening some of the group were taken to a house party, while the rest went to a local restaurant with members of Dresden 41 Club.

Our last long drive in our bus (we actually did over 6000kms in the bus – and Tord did another 4300 kms getting down to meet us and returning to the north of Sweden!! – a total of some 10,300kms) – took us to Berlin, and a new group of home hosts for most of the group.

What a fascinating city it is – so full of history. We were taken on a walking tour of the city – and it rained all day, but we did have umbrellas!! We walked under the Brandenburg Gate, up the Unter der Linten through what had been East Berlin, went to a service in the Berlin Cathedral, had lunch up in the revolving restaurant on the Berlin TV Tower – built in the 1960's by the East Germans. After lunch we were taken to the Reichstag – the German Parliament – for a guided visit. Then it was back on the bus for a short drive around the city, during which time we saw remnants of the infamous Berlin Wall, until we finally arrived at the site of the 1936 Olympic Games when Jack Lovelock won Gold for New Zealand. Sadly we were not allowed in the Stadium, but had a look from an adjoining tower.

The evening was spent with local 41'ers in a restaurant, and during the course of the evening, a surprise visit to our group was made by Drew and Moira Cochran from Edinburgh. Drew is the current National President of 41 Club in the U.K. and Ireland, and he had come to Berlin to present Peter Butchart with the G.B. & I. Association medal for services to 41 Club worldwide. Only 3 of these medals are presented in any one year, the other 2 this year going to members in the U.K.



On our last day in Berlin we were taken out to Potsdam – this is where the treaty that divided up Berlin was signed by Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. By coincidence it was also German Reunification Day, when they celebrate the bringing together again of Germany, so it was quite fitting that we were in Potsdam on that day.

Our final function in Berlin was an evening with members of Berlin No. 1, and it was a wonderful night, although tinged with some sadness, as the group were saying goodbye to each other. The following day, Saturday, October 4<sup>th</sup>, saw members of the group depart to all points of the compass, some heading for home while others were undertaking additional tours or visits to other countries.



After a trip such as this one, it is only natural to reflect on all that took place, and I believe that the most important thing is the contact we made with people from another part of the world. By sharing this contact with them, we were able to tell them a little about New Zealand, while we had the opportunity to learn a lot about their country. Contacts such as these are important, and if they can lead to a greater understanding of others, then we should be satisfied that our Club has played a part in this process.

To try and sum up the tour, one word would say it all – maybe two words – very successful.

I have often said to people that as tour leader, my happiest moment is at the end of such a tour, when you know all the planning and such like has worked – we have turned up in the right place, on the right day, and at the right time. Believe me it is always a great relief when this happens !!.

As this was my last tour as your National Tour Leader, I must first of all say “Thank you” again to 41 Club New Zealand for entrusting me with this position, secondly I must say “Thank you” to everyone in the group for their cooperation and support while we were travelling. Next I must say a very big “Thank you” to all our hosts overseas and to the 41 Club members who helped me with the planning of the tour. An last, but by no means least, I must say a very big “Thank you” to my wife Margaret for all her support over the past 20 years, and with all the trips I have planned and led overseas. Without that support, I could not have done it all.

To my successor, Derek Johns, I wish you every success Derek in your future plans and endeavours, and you know that my support and help will always be available for you.

Yours in 41

*Peter Butchart*

**41 Club New Zealand**

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