

# Germany Vacation Diary 2008 – Part 4

**Thursday, May 1 – Stuttgart**

As usual, I wake up early and head down to the hotel restaurant for a continental breakfast. Since there are no menus and they are serving a spectacular buffet, I'm not sure how this will work. However, Oliver the hotel supervisor assures me that I need only to ask for a "small breakfast". Karen soon joins me and we make a hasty meal.

The first stop on today's itinerary is the [Staatsgalerie Museum](#) near the Hauptbahnhof, which features a visiting Pop Art exhibit in addition to classics by Rembrandt, Bellini and other Renaissance masters. It also houses an extensive nineteenth- and twentieth-century collection, with works by Expressionists Ernst Kirchner, Ernst Barlach, and Max Beckmann, Paul Klee, Modigliani, Picasso, and Monet. The building is large and impressive from the outside. There is a statue of a 19<sup>th</sup> century king who was a patron of the arts, mounted majestically on his steed near the entrance. We enter and pay 20 € for a combo ticket. We also rent audio guides for 4 €, which turn out to be well worth it. There are many paintings from the 50's through the 70's and beyond, featuring pioneers like Andy Warhol, Eduardo Paolozzi, Roy Lichtenstein, and Richard Hamilton. Warhol's most famous creations - including the photo montage of Marilyn Monroe in wild neon colors, and Elvis Presley as a gunslinger - are on display. Sometimes the audio guide includes commentary by the artists themselves, which provides direct insight into different – and often very odd – ways of thinking.



*Karen enjoys a sunny moment near the entrance to Stuttgart's Staatsgalerie Museum*

Listening to some of them, you wonder if they say certain things not because they believe them, but in order to get a reaction (much like their paintings).

The classics are housed in another wing. There is a special photo booth in the lobby that will take a series of four pictures and create an Andy Warhol pictorial similar to the Marilyn Monroe series. There is a short wait, but we decide to move on to the classics. Upstairs we begin in a large room featuring paintings on wood from the 1300's on up. A brochure informs us that the Staatsgalerie is undergoing renovation through 2008. As a result, paintings have been moved around and are not in chronological order. We are more likely to find paintings that look similar in form, content and composition but that were painted by artists from different centuries. We find one room that has small prints from engravings by a Dutch (Flemish?) artist. In the next room are impressionist works from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We circle back to the first room and find that what we thought was a limited collection spans many more rooms. We find works by Pablo Picasso in several rooms, along with electronic art that uses alternating neon lights. We also find depressing works by our old friend Max Beckmann, who we first encountered on Museum Night in Vienna in October 2006.

We return home for lunch. I visit Bad Leuze in the afternoon, and Karen reads, watches TV, and naps. [Bad Leuze](#) is across the Neckar River from the Canstatt Spring Festival grounds, the [Cannstatter Wasen](#). The swimming and sauna complex is a short walk from the Mercedesstrasse U-Bahn stop. It is a very reasonable 9.60 € for three hours. The complex has three levels, with four indoor pools and four outdoor pools. People come and go from the sauna area, which also includes a cold pool, steam rooms, ice machines (for rubbing down afterwards), and chaise lounges on sundecks. There is a huge outdoor cabin between the two sauna complexes featuring the hottest Finnish sauna I have ever experienced – over 100° C before the [Aufguss](#)! The guidebook was right – you can wave to the people crossing the bridge, and they can see you!



*The Finnish sauna house at Mineralbad Das Leuze is visible from the bridge over the Neckar River*

While waiting for the train at the Mercedesstrasse stop, a guy wearing a baseball hat sits down on the bench nearby and begins talking to himself. He is examining some sort of device with an antenna (game controller?) and begins making animal-like noises while becoming more and more fixated. He seems unaware of those around him, who begin moving away and shaking their heads.

I return to the hotel feeling refreshed and relaxed about 7:30 and pick up Karen. We hop on the U-Bahn for the short ride back to the Mercedesstrasse stop. We head down a flight of stairs, turn right, and flow toward the entrance to the Cannstatt Spring Festival. We hear people screaming nearby as they are flung through the air on one of the twirly-whirl rides, as it kicks into overdrive. We pass through a gauntlet of tents selling trinkets and fast food, and arrive in front of an impressive ride with a four-story façade. A giant, 14-ft tall forest dweller sporting a beard and wearing a brown robe greets visitors. As we wander down the midway, we marvel at the elaborate rides that appear worthy of Disneyland in their size and complexity. Karen is fairly certain that one of the walk-through rides, a chateau labeled “Lach-Freu-Haus” adorned with miles of neon lights, can be seen from space.



*The Cannstatter Wasen is part beer festival and part amusement park – it succeeds at both*

At this point, food not rides is our primary motivation. Suddenly we hear polka music, and we know salvation is at hand. We come to a kitschy tableau featuring a deer surrounded by foliage, enclosed by a fence. Behind it is a wood framed hut; a mast attached to the hut rises to the sky. Camouflage netting fans out from the top of the mast to the ground. A pioneer figure is scaling the thin rope anchored near the base of the mast. A wagon on the roof completes the scene. However, its most intriguing aspect is a signpost pointing towards restrooms and “Tyrolian Specialties”; more signs with German phrases seem to describe restaurants.

We find the polka band around the corner. There are restaurants galore, with large seating areas filled with people happily consuming pork dishes and giant mugs of beer. At one booth, we see

chicken roasting on spits, and decide on the spot. We buy beer and Reisling at another booth. Beyond, in an enclosed area with painted Tyrolian murals on the walls, is Oktoberfest-style seating. A one-man band is entertaining guests with a combination of accordion, keyboard, singing and recorded music. Judging by the enthusiastic response of the crowd, he is playing old German folk standards. People who aren't dancing are singing along.

We take a seat at a large table and are soon joined by a man and his wife. Their two girls, who have been off exploring, climb over the barrier and join them. The parents sing along, and are having way too much fun, embarrassing the kids. The father is engaging, and says a few words in German in reference to the kids. We don't comprehend all of his words, but we understand them in context. In response, we smile and raise our glasses to them.



*Germans love to party!*

After a short break, the bandmeister returns and starts playing old rock 'n roll standards that everyone knows, like Satisfaction by the Rolling Stones. He sings the lyrics in English, and exhorts the crowd to sing along. Karen and I are front and center on the dance floor, and we must be quite a sight. We're the only ones wearing baseball caps, and as I move, the camera bag flies through the air. I see a table of Germans who are highly amused at the spectacle.

While we're up dancing, a waitress clears away our glasses for which we'd paid a 4 € deposit. We plead our case at the bar, and they are understanding and return our deposit. We decide to invest it in a couple of glasses of schnapps, and then head out into the cool night air.

The midway is an endlessly entertaining kaleidoscope of neon and noise. We eventually come to the giant Ferris Wheel, which had appeared so small from the entrance. We enter a pod and have it all to ourselves. Viewed from a height of over 200 feet, we can fully appreciate the immense size of

the fairgrounds. After several revolutions, the 4 € ticket price seems worth it. We notice it's getting close to 11:00pm, so begin the long walk back to the entrance. Figuring that Mercedesstrasse will be a logjam, we bypass it and head for Wilhelmsplatz where we board the U-Bahn for the short ride home.

Before bed, we watch a concert featuring a guy named Falco who appears to be a cross between [Peter Gabriel](#) of Genesis and David Byrne of [Talking Heads](#). He is performing a song called [Jeanny Coming Home](#) with a full orchestra in front of a huge crowd in a park. We like his music, but we're amused by Falco's faux cool mannerisms and his affectation of smoking a cigarette while performing. Later, we find out that the concert took place in 1994 and that this Austrian pop icon died tragically in a car accident four years later.

### Friday, May 2 – Stuttgart

Our last full day in Germany! We opt for the buffet breakfast this morning, which is by far the most extensive of any we've had. The 15 € price per person would be reasonable if the dollar wasn't so weak.

We leave the hotel around 10:00am for a tour of the Mercedes-Benz Museum. We find the bus stop for bus #51 around the corner from Wilhelmsplatz, and the bus arrives just as we get to the stop. After traveling a couple hundred yards, the driver suddenly stops the bus due to an accident ahead of us. Two cars are blocking the intersection, so the driver gets out to talk to observers.



*Visitors to the Mercedes-Benz Museum are treated to one of many classic car collections*

The driver returns and informs passengers that they will have to make other arrangements. When he realizes we don't speak German, he apologizes in English saying something like "what are you

going to do, they're German!" He points us towards two other couples that are also heading for the museum, so we take off on foot. After about 10 minutes, Karen needs a restroom.

We break away at a gas station, but the Turkish attendants are unable to locate the key to the restroom. The nearby U-Bahn stop bordering the fairgrounds is closed down, so we have no alternative but to backtrack. Thankfully, within a minute we come to a hardware store which has free public restrooms.

Relieved, we realize that the distance to the museum is further than we care to walk, so decide to give the bus one more chance. Two minutes later, our driver pulls up. When he recognizes us, he grins broadly. We joke with him and say we are thankful that the bus is moving again. We soon arrive at the [Mercedes-Benz Museum](#), an imposing modern structure of concrete and glass. Once inside, we get our tickets and collect our audio guides, and then proceed to the ultra-modern elevators. We are whisked silently to the seven floor where we begin our tour. The audio guide memory is loaded wirelessly by pointing the device at a black dot at each tour stop. As we move through the exhibits that chronicle the dawn of the automobile age, the audio guide senses our location and delivers the appropriate commentary.



*Concept cars on display at the Mercedes-Benz Museum*

Without knowing about each other, Gottlieb Daimler and Karl Benz developed different versions of the first gas-powered automobiles in 1886. Working in Stuttgart, Benz filed a patent application for his three-wheeled motor car, while 60 miles away, Daimler patented his internal combustion engine installed in a carriage. Over the years, Daimler pursued his vision of motorization on land, on water, and in the air. He invented the first motorcycle as well as the motorboat. In contrast, Benz developed the first modern automobile in which engine, power train, and chassis formed an independent entity.

As we proceeded through each level, pictorials along the walls described world events in parallel with the evolution of technology. After WWI, the Daimler and Benz companies merged in order to survive the bleak post-war years. The company was co-opted by the Nazis in WWII, and became a major producer of war materiel until it was nearly bombed out of existence. As we arrive at each floor, we find interactive exhibits that describe how automobile components work. One particularly fascinating exhibit described how the modern radiator evolved, and became the key to making faster cars that could also travel further using far less water before they started to overheat. Pristine models of each type of car are lovingly presented in showrooms on each level.

We bid a fond farewell to the museum, and take the bus back to Wilhelmplatz without incident. We even have the same bus driver – again. We return to the hotel. I decide to head over to Bad Leuze for the afternoon, instead of making the long trek to SchwabenQuellen; Karen relaxes at the hotel, and visits a store around the corner. She has a long chat with the counter person, who seems to be grateful for her company.

I see someone at the spa who could be a twin of Teidi Tucker, a friend back home. It is said that everyone has a “doppelganger” somewhere in the world. I experience not one or two, but three Aufguss sessions – some kind of a record for me. Each is hotter than the next. It is considered very bad form to leave during one of these sessions, which can be akin to a religious experience. Before an Aufguss begins, a sign is hung outside the sauna door warning outsiders not to enter. The last one is conducted by a spa employee who introduces himself as “Stefan”. He very slowly and deliberately pours the aromatic water onto the heated rocks, carefully circumnavigating the container in the center of the room. Each ladle of water generates almost unbearable amounts of steam when it hits the rocks. Then, when Stefan whips his towel through the air, it gets even hotter. After awhile, it becomes very difficult to tell if the people around me are groaning, or moaning in ecstasy (maybe both). Stefan completes the third circuit and dumps the remaining water from the bucket onto the rocks, creating a final, apocalyptic cloud of steam. Then it is over. Everyone claps in appreciation – and undisguised relief. Even the hard-core sauna dogs are ready to bolt for the door when it is finally opened. Oddly enough, I feel invigorated and thoroughly relaxed as I collapse into the chaise lounge to dry out after a cool shower.

I return to the hotel around 7:30. Karen and I decide on one last visit to our Doner Kebab place. En route, we stop at an Internet Café and check email. It’s fun to see the familiar messages from friends and family. I type in the SportsUSA URL from memory, and am distressed to find that my softball team is 0-2 since we left. At the Doner Kebab, we order gyro-style sandwiches and drinks, and then head back to the hotel to turn in early.

It doesn’t take long to pack, and we are in bed by 10:30. We left instructions earlier in the day, changing our wake-up call from 4:00 to 4:15am, but still feel nervous since we have no alarm clock.

We both spend a restless night, tossing and turning. I wake up around 3am and think about getting up for good. The next thing I know, Karen is saying “Wake up, John. They didn’t call. It’s 4:20!”

### **Saturday, May 3 – London**

We hurriedly shower and dress. Karen calls the front desk and tries to explain to the attendant that we never received our wake-up call. After Karen repeats herself, the attendant begins to understand and is dismayed when he realizes someone screwed up and scratched the call instead of changing the time.

Our taxi arrives promptly, just before 5:00am. The streets are dark and quiet as we make our way toward the airport. At a traffic light, another taxi pulls alongside and gives a friendly wave to our driver. We notice that the U-Bahn is running, even at this early hour. We could have taken the train,

but with stops it would have taken at least 30 minutes longer. We gladly trade the extra euros paid in cab fare for more sleep.

We arrive at Stuttgart airport and scan the ticket counters for British Airways. We find a helpful employee who assists us with the automated check-in procedure. At the baggage check-in, we verify with the friendly counterman that he has checked our bags only as far as London, and not to San Diego. Good thing, since he seems as much in need of coffee as we do.

Once through security, we stop for pastries and coffee. Soon, it's time to proceed through passport control to the boarding area. As the gate attendant takes our tickets, we are pleasantly surprised that we are not hassled about our carry-ons. Our flight to London is short and uneventful, with the pilot promising good weather upon arrival.

We are among the last to deplane, and take our time passing through the long ramp to the now infamous Terminal 5. Having been briefed on board our flight, we are now familiar with the signs directing us to baggage claim. The terminal is huge, and it takes awhile to reach the long conveyer belts, where once again Providence has smiled upon us and we find our bags waiting.

En route to the shuttle area, I approach a tourist desk offering Big Bus tours of London. The helpful attendant directs me to an ATM, where I purchase £140 at the hideous exchange rate of \$2.07 per pound sterling, which includes a 4.5% TravelEx service fee. Of course, my ATM bank also wants its cut, which is a modest \$2.90. I then buy London tube passes for the day (£7 each), then return to the tourist desk to buy Big Bus tickets at £24 each, plus a good walking map of London for only £3. The attendant also directs us to the Hilton shuttle bus. I thank him for being such a big help to us, and we then proceed through the exit to find the shuttle waiting for us.



*The Hilton at London Heathrow International Airport*



Heathrow International is the largest and busiest airport in the world. So it's not surprising that it takes the shuttle bus a full 20 minutes to take us from Terminal 5 to the Hilton at fringes of Terminal 4. We tip our driver and proceed to the front desk. While the building's façade is unimpressive, the inside is modern, clean, and well-designed. We are relieved to find that our room is available for check-in right away. We proceed to the elevator, which takes us to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor where we find our room. After our Junior Suite at Hotel Mercure in Stuttgart, it seems small. However, we are glad for its comforts even though we won't be able to relax and enjoy them for several hours. Within a few minutes, we are organized and ready for our excursion to London. It's only just after 9am, and we have the entire day for touring London.

We check at the desk for directions to the tube station. We are informed that the Piccadilly Line is not running from Heathrow, so we will need to take the train from Terminal 4 into London. We proceed through a long covered walkway that connects the Hilton with Terminal 4. Along the way, we encounter signs that inform us of the remaining time to our destination: "You are only 6 – 4 – 2 minutes from Terminal 4." Once inside the terminal, we take the elevators to the lowest level and follow the signs to the trains. Along the way, we check with a rail employee for directions and schedules. Satisfied, we proceed to the platform where our train pulls in shortly.



*The Parliament Building in London is a familiar sight*

Within 20 minutes we are on our way to the city. After about 7 minutes, the train arrives at Terminal 3, reminding us once again how large Heathrow airport is. Finally, we emerge from the dark tunnel and into sunlight. A conductor approaches us and asks for our tickets. When we produce them, he stares at them for several seconds and I begin to develop a sense of foreboding. He shakes his head and says in heavily accented Jamaican English, "dees tickets ah not valid for dis tren." We then express our surprise and explain what we were told by the rail employee at the station. He laughs and says, "who told you dis RI-DIC-U-LOUS story?" He then explains that a private

company unaffiliated with London Transport ran the train from Heathrow to a suburban station, and that a supplemental fare is required. Exasperated, we throw up our hands and say, “well, no one told us that!” Suddenly noticing the Columbia logo on my jacket, he smiles and says, “Well, since I see you are Columbians from America, I will let it slide this time.” We thank him for his generosity and he moves on.

We then chat with a school teacher from Maine, who has been to London a few times and is familiar with the vagaries of public transportation. She tells us we can purchase the supplemental fare for our return trip at our destination, London Paddington Station, Platform 12. She has a son who is graduating from University soon, and was distressed to hear that he planned to skip the graduation ceremony. “It’s no big deal”, he told her. “Well, I paid for your education, so it IS a BIG DEAL to me!” she replied. She was glad that her son finally relented and agreed to go through the ceremony.



*A warm spring day brings out the people like ants to a picnic*

When we arrive at the station, we find the usual pandemonium as travelers rush for the trains, the exits, or the bathrooms. We use our day passes to exit through the Cubic-built turnstiles. Oddly, our passes are accepted at some turnstiles but not others. We then locate a ticket window, and explain our situation. The agent says he knows exactly what we need, and sells us the supplemental tickets. And since we already have our daily metro passes, he is able to sell them to us at a discount of £9 for both.

Feeling luckier by the minute, we locate an information kiosk where the agent directs us to the proper exit to catch the Big Bus. We wander up the ramp to a busy intersection, cross the street to a tobacco shop. We ask the proprietor to confirm directions to the Big Bus, and he directs us around the corner. Within a minute, a large double-deck maroon Big Bus pulls up. An agent

validates our tickets, we hop aboard, and grab some headphones. After roaring through several twists and turns, we arrive at Hyde Park where we disembark.

Large groups are milling about near several Big Bus stops. Agents dressed in maroon jackets hurriedly give directions to confused patrons. The queues begin to dissolve into small, vocal mobs. We decide to ignore the agents and jump on the next Blue bus that offers room on the top deck. We are the first to arrive on top, and plug in our headphones. After a few minutes the bus fills up and we speed off in the direction of Marble Arch. Curiously, we hear no audio but neither does anyone else. Presently we are barreling along Gloucester Road, the wind whipping our hair. Suddenly a baritone voice suitable for Masterpiece Theatre begins to narrate our journey. We come to Baker Street, home to the Sherlock Holmes and Madame Tussaud Museums. We learn that Ms. Tussaud got her start by accepting a commission to make wax casts of the heads of victims of the French Revolution. Ugh! Of course, it was all downhill from there. We entertain the idea of stopping by later for a tour, until we catch sight of the huge crowd waiting in a line that wraps around the block.



*The London Eye is a popular tourist attraction, offering spectacular views of the city and beyond*

Nearby, the British Telecom tower rises hundreds of feet above central London. Next, we drive down Regents Street, past stately 18<sup>th</sup> century government office buildings. Statues and flags lend dignity to their facades, while breaking the monotony. Further on, we pass the world-famous Hamley's Toy Store, four stories of toys for kids of all ages. As we turn the next corner, we are greeted by the sight of electronic billboards and London's trademark red double-decker buses dashing through Picadilly Circus. We pass the Admiralty Building on our right and the National Gallery comes into view on our left. Hundreds of people spill from its steps into Trafalgar Square beyond. People cling to statues while having their pictures taken. The monument to Lord Nelson rises majestically in the center.

We continue down Whitehall towards #10 Downing Street, home of Britain's Prime Minister. A large crowd has gathered for the changing of the guard, and we catch a glimpse of festooned soldiers moving deliberately through their midst. Traffic becomes heavier as we press on towards Big Ben and the Parliament Building, and nearby Westminster Abbey where many of the U.K.'s greatest men and women throughout the ages are buried. Crossing Westminster Bridge over the Thames, we catch sight of the [London Eye](#), a colossal Ferris Wheel. Built in 1999, it is the largest observation wheel in the world. It stands at over 400 feet tall and has 32 pods each capable of carrying up to 25 passengers. It takes 30 minutes to complete one revolution and moves so slowly that people can just walk on and off. Like other popular tourist venues this day, it is besieged by a throbbing mass of humanity.

We cross the Thames again, over Waterloo Bridge. As we enter the Covent Gardens district, our narrator points out that the City of Westminster is on our left, and London proper is on our right. As we turn onto Fleet Street and pass the Royal Court of Justice, we are reminded that this is also the legal and financial hub of London, and pubs are plentiful. Soon, St. Paul's Cathedral comes into view. It has somehow managed to survive several wars intact, and is the favorite choice of Royals for their weddings. I tell Karen that I remember staying at a youth hostel nearby, and am thrilled to spot the sign near St. Paul's square pointing to the youth hostel. So it's still here after all these years! I can remember waking up to the gong of church bells each morning. Maybe one day I will again – as a retired senior.

We pass a monument, an obelisk built by Sir Christopher Wren, that is under re-construction. We then cross back over the Thames on famed London Bridge (I thought they moved it to Lake Havasu?). We pass the entrance to the London Dungeon, a tour/ride through a simulated medieval underworld that promises to raise every hair on the back of your neck. Its £32 price tag does not deter the dozens of people in line. Soon we are passing over the Tower Bridge, and then on to Tudor Castle and the Tower of London. Here is where Henry the VIII ruled and Anne Boleyn lost her head.

The bus races along Upper Thames Street and Victoria Embankment, until we arrive at the Charing Cross Pier. Dozens of tour boats, floating restaurants, and other craft are moored nearby. We decide it's time for a break and exit the bus. A monument to Cleopatra, an obelisk covered with Egyptian hieroglyphics, provides an excellent reference point. Hoping to find a pub near Parliament (politicians and ale seem to go together), we make our way up to the Westminster Bridge. The sidewalks are packed, and there are no pubs in sight. We decide to return via the Tube to Covent Gardens, where we spotted so many pubs.

Throngs of people are entering and leaving the tube station. We connect the dots on the [metro map](#), and make our way to the platform for Ealing-Broadway westbound on the District line. When the train arrives, it is jam-packed. We somehow find just enough space to cram ourselves in (if we tried to fall over, we would never hit the floor). We exit the District line at South Kensington where it connects with the Piccadilly Line, and go northeast toward Covent Garden. When we finally exit the Tube, we've traversed 10 stops to go less than half a mile as the crow flies. However, our weary bodies overrule reason and our feet are grateful.

We immediately locate a pub, and once again the streets are packed with sightseers. The pub atmosphere is friendly and noisy, and we are lucky to find a table. A sign nearby warns that purse snatchers are operating in the area. After waiting a few minutes in vain for our waiter to appear, Karen spots a sign that says patrons should order at the bar. After politely waiting my turn, the bartender says that they are backed up in the kitchen and the wait for food will be at least 30 minutes. Is that all right? "No." I say, and we press on up the street. Although we pass several inviting Italian places, I am holding out for authentic British pub fare. Wandering into the theatre district, we settle for a large, open restaurant that – while not quite a pub, at least serves fish and chips.

Our waitress is French, very friendly, and solicitous of our welfare. After running on less than 5 hours of sleep all morning, it feels good to sit down. We order beer, wine, and decide to share a

plate of fish and chips. Karen also orders a bowl of soup. Our waitress brings our drinks, which taste like nectar from the Gods. The patrons at the next table get up and leave, leaving behind an unfinished plate of fried potatoes. At that moment, Karen and I have the same thought: if our food doesn't come soon, we will feel no shame in devouring their leftovers. Fortunately, our food arrives and actually tastes quite good, despite the English reputation for over-fried, over-boiled, and tasteless fare.

The bill with tip comes to about £27, which would ordinarily be quite reasonable, were it not for the ghastly exchange rate (\$56 for less than two full meals and drinks!). Feeling revived, we check our bearings and head toward the Thames. On the way, we decide to stop into a second pub, the Coal Hole. Wood and brass are everywhere. Here, I introduce Karen to her first authentic [London pub](#) experience. I have a local ale, and Karen orders a Reising. We avail ourselves of the free Pubs of Britain and Dick Whittington Ale Trail maps.



*The crowds still gather at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park to hear the harangue of the day*

We walk down a side street around the back of the venerable [Savoy Theatre](#). A sign proclaims that in 1881, it became the first public building in the world to be lit throughout by electric lights. We make our way along the Victoria Embankment parallel to the Thames River, and catch the next Red Bus tour. We are pleased to find a live, English-speaking guide on board. He is very humorous, as advertised in the brochure. We disembark at Hyde Park and after a restroom break, catch another Red Bus for another narrated tour. The crowds have grown denser. [Hyde Park](#) is littered with lawn chairs and blankets as people celebrate the first sunny day of spring.

The bus retraces our route from this morning, while the guide keeps things lively by joking with passengers on the upper deck. As we pass through Piccadilly, the streets are even more packed than before. People swarm like ants in and out of the stores and along the sidewalks, in a never-

ending stream. The sights have become familiar, and we relax and enjoy the view, while continuing to marvel at the street scene. Despite a chill wind blowing off the Thames, the masses queue up for tickets to the Tower of London. We figure we would need at least a week to visit the major London sights.

We exit our bus at the Embankment tube station, figuring we'll need about 20 minutes to get to Paddington Station and another 10 to make our train bound for Heathrow. When we arrive at Paddington, we join the rush with other passengers and get on board at the train at 6:35 pm, with 5 minutes to spare. The trip back seems shorter. When the conductor comes by to check our tickets, we hold our breath for just a second. However, this time there's no problem.

When we arrive back at the Hilton, we find we've gotten a second breath. I go exploring and locate the swimming pool and fitness area, but they are closing within 45 minutes. Karen and I decide to eat at the casual restaurant. We order a medium pizza to share, a side order of grilled veggies, a glass of Reising and a pint of ale. The bill comes to just over £32, or about \$66! We are glad we took our time and savored the meal.

### **Sunday, May 4 – London, New York, San Diego**

The next morning, we sleep in until 5:15am and are roused dutifully by the automated wake-up call. We check out and take the train from Terminal 4 to Terminal 3, where we check in with American Airlines. We're going home.