

Some really REALLY high points... and then the reality of travel sets in

Long time since my last update, and a **LOT** has gone on!

The train from Lourdes to Paris went without a hitch and the short walk to our hotel didn't overtax my broken ribs. For that matter, nothing has really been a bit issue that way. It's more an issue of certain types of motions that tell you, don't repeat that certain type of motion!

It took not too much time finding the only source on the 'net that showed how access to the Tour de France course has changed this year. Basically just six points of entry, not terribly obvious on a too-fuzzy map, and references to needing to prove your vaccination status. So off to the metro we go, figure out which stop would be closest to one of the access points (we were wrong on that!) and ask the Gendarmes where those access points actually were. They were helpful but a bit... oblique? They weren't really sure. But eventually, by walking around the perimeter of the fenced-off area, we found it.

No long lines! We were immediately hopeful that the restrictions on getting in might have turned away the crowds, but this was offset by the substantially-reduced area people were allowed to view the race. Basically, just the two sides of the Champs Elysees. Everything else was fenced off. Still, people were just one-deep against the barriers keeping you from the riders, vs 3 or 4 deep on a normal year. We actually found a sorta-decent place without too much trouble.

Two hours to wait... well, you had to go 4 or 5 hours if you wanted to actually see the race in Paris before, so not so bad. You'll have to check my Facebook page for the details; easy to update Facebook from your phone; darned near impossible to update the blog that way.

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After the finish we tried to find a decent place to see the post-race ceremony but it just wasn't possible for the public. And their huge TV screen? Turned away from the public viewing areas! There are a few things about the 'Tour that make no sense. One favorable change though- what you could hear of the podium ceremony was in both French and English.

After the race we did our ritual miles and miles of walking through Paris, first towards the Eifel Tower to get some photos for Kevin's girlfriend, then in search of food. We looked at the menus of a number of places and nothing quite hit home; eventually, heading back up the route that would take us to our hotel, we came across one that... had no menu outside. But people looked like they were enjoying themselves, the food looked good, we were tired and hungry, and it was like, let's take a chance. Besides, we've seen menus that looked favorable but the food unimpressive.

It was great! <iframe
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Then the long walk back to the hotel, up hill, with one of the great night views of the Eifel Tower anywhere. Of course, you have to stand out in the middle of a busy intersection to get the shot. Kevin and I spent maybe 20 minutes there, which is amazing because Kevin is typically really impatient about spending much time on "landscape" photos. Race photos, different story. But he did promise his girlfriend some night shots of the Eifel Tower. so that he did.

It's getting pretty late now, pushing 11pm. Needed to get up at 6:50am to catch a taxi to the airport, but first... well, besides a bit of final prep and organizing, we had to figure out the "home" Covid-19 test kits. Because you can't return to the United States without a negative Covid-19 test, taken within 72 hours of your flight. FUN! You have to use a laptop with built in camera, log onto a website and have someone guide you through the testing process, watching that you do everything right (no cheating), record the results and update an app you show prior to boarding.

The first part takes about 10 minutes, logging onto the website, waiting for someone with a heavy accent come on line, open the package, prepare the test piece by putting six drops of a liquid onto it, stick a stick up your nose, rotate it a few times, than the other nostril, then insert the stick into the test piece, close it up, and wait 15 minutes. Oh, and you have to have that piece laid flat, which means the camera can't see it, so you have to maneuver (close) your case so it does see it, while it still sees what you're doing... it's a bit convoluted.

You don't have to be there during that 15 minutes so Kevin took a shower, came back with 6 minutes to spare. When the time's up someone else comes on, verifies the results (you have to hold it up to the camera) and hopefully you're negative. He was! But yikes, that's half an hour down the drain and it's getting late.

Now for my test. Go through all that stuff and... in the end, my test wasn't negative. It was "invalid." What does that mean? It means it didn't work. How doesn't it work? Who knows. They tell you to call a phone number to "escalate" your case. And I'm like, do I get to fly home tomorrow (which is now today because it's past midnight)? And after being in a hold queue for 18 minutes, you're thinking the answer is no.

Finally someone comes on, and all she seems to be worried about is the fact that I had a test kit that didn't work. All I care about is trying to get out of the country. Eventually she gets the idea that I'm not so concerned about them sending me a new test kit, because it will be too late for me to get home.. my concern is, what do I do now? How do I fly home tomorrow? How dense can the person at the other end of the line be?

So, I finally ask the obvious. I brought extra test kits, just in case. Do I just run the test again? Yes. Well, why didn't she tell me that right off? Why did the guy who analyzed the "invalid" test make it seem like such a huge deal? **WHAT IS WRONG WITH THESE PEOPLE?**

I logged back on, took another test, everything went as planned and I'm negative. Yay! But it's now 1:15am. By the time I got to sleep it was probably close to 2am. But. I can go home.

That should be the end of the drama, right? Not when there are airlines involved.

Luggage. My United app clearly shows I get two pieces of checked baggage per person, free, because, well, first because I'm Star Gold (elite status on United), which covers me, not Kevin. But second, because we're flying in Business class (paid upgrades). Everything would have been fine except the first leg, from Paris to Frankfurt, on on Lufthansa, not United. Remember Lufthansa, the people who misplace one piece of my luggage for 5 days? Well now they wanted to charge for Kevin's.

It was not easy remaining calm. It was not easy trying to keep negative thoughts about Lufthansa at bay. She makes phone calls but nobody's there. It must have taken 10 minutes, probably more, before a supervisor finally comes through the area and clears it for us.

But the Lufthansa story isn't over yet. The flight is late. How can it not be late? Their current boarding procedure it ridiculously slow

so it should start earlier. But they don't do that; they begin the boarding procedures far too late to allow a plane to depart on time. We've now seen it in action three times. We were supposed to have a 1hr 15min connection in Frankfurt, which is just barely enough. By the time we got there, it was less than an hour. Well, ok. Well, not ok. You have to clear passport control in Germany, even if you're not staying in Germany. And the lines... yikes. Not sure how much time we spent there but it was enough to be thinking, again, are we getting home today?

But many, many others on our flight stuck in that line, so I figure they'll probably hold the plane for a bit. Which they did. But of course it's not just a matter of getting to the gate; you then have to figure out the new strange procedure for "things." Like the guy who, when he sees your boarding pass, says you don't have your "sticker." What sticker. The sticker your government's people give you. And I'm thinking, oh no, I did see a United counter about 4 minutes back, and maybe we were supposed to do something there? So I ask this guy, who seems to enjoy acting annoyed at people (he doesn't work for United), what "government" people? Where? And he points to a different line at a counter a short distance away. Why didn't he just say that in the first place?

So... while the world is opening up for travel again, there remain more than a few bugs in the system. Lufthansa hasn't figured things out yet; there's a feeling that they've had a really tough time scaling things back up as travel becomes a thing again, and they resist doing the obvious (allowing extra time to board).

But right now I'm at 34,000 feet somewhere a couple hours away from SFO and I'll be back home with my wife and daughter and the bike shop and Donut King. I'll miss many, many things about France though, and while Donut King is great, there's nothing like French pastries.