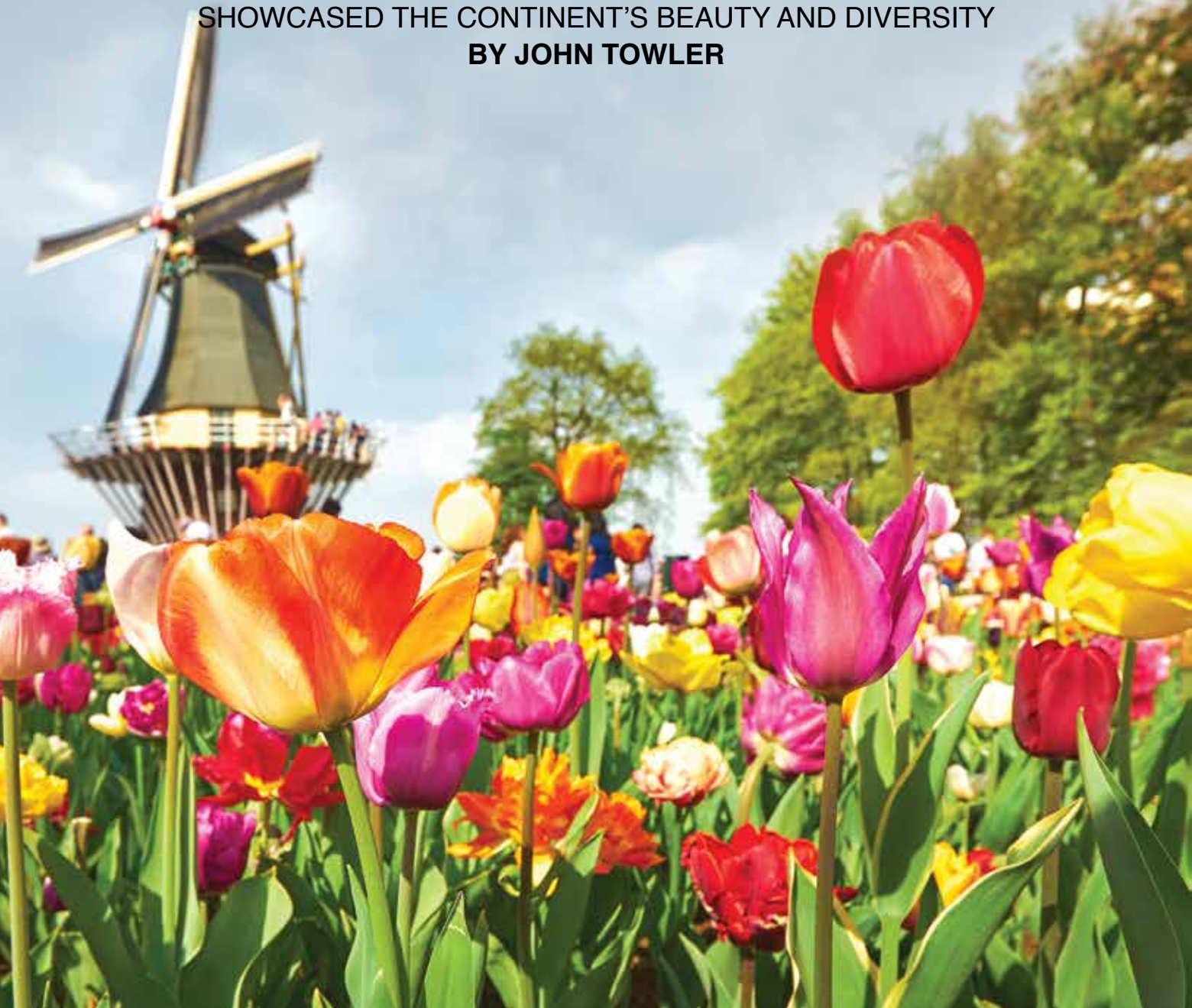


TRAVEL

TRANSPPOSITIONING *to Europe*

STOPS IN IRELAND, FRANCE, ENGLAND, BELGIUM AND AMSTERDAM
SHOWCASED THE CONTINENT'S BEAUTY AND DIVERSITY

BY JOHN TOWLER



My wife and I took a transpositioning cruise to Europe. Six days at sea were restful if a bit boring, but stops at several European ports more than made up for it. We left from Toronto in April, overnighed in New York City, and set sail the next day on the Norwegian Pearl, a Jewell Class cruise ship with capacity for nearly 2,400 guests.

Norwegian Pearl Cruise Line offers what it calls “freestyle cruising,” which means no tipping the staff, no set meal times or table partners. Dress codes are quite relaxed. Men are asked to not wear shorts, flip flops or hats to dinner, but we noticed this was often ignored.

The cabins were adequate, as was the food, and the staff were particularly friendly and helpful. The entertainment varied from excellent to less so, but we were disappointed with the quality of the few lectures available. The ship had several specialty restaurants, which were excellent. We found the ship to be noisy, with many over-amplified music acts and very few quiet places; however, the ports of call were interesting and unusual. We made our own arrangements and were glad we did.

Our first stop was in Ireland at the port of Cobh, an island in the harbour of Cork city, near the southern coast. We had booked a free walking tour in Cork, which was a short train ride away. Cork is a lovely historic city. Neasa O’Riordan, our charming and knowledgeable guide, took us on a 90-minute walk and explained its medieval past, its success as the busiest port in the British Empire, and the changes it has experienced in modern times. It was a warm, sunny day and we enjoyed ourselves while learning a great deal.



We took several free walking tours and were seldom disappointed. The guides were enthusiastic locals, and patrons simply pay what they wish at the end of the tour. (www.freewalkingtours.cork.com). The train from Cobh to Cork takes 24 minutes and costs \$6 Canadian (return).

Our next stop was at Dun Laoghaire, an elegant port town near Dublin. It was a 40-minute train ride to Dublin and we visited on a Sunday, when most shops were closed, so we decided to walk the quiet streets of the port and have breakfast at a local café.

After a day at sea we arrived in Le Havre, France. Le Havre is a major port in northern France’s Normandy

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region, where the Seine River meets the English Channel. Le Havre was heavily bombed during the Second World War and has been extensively redesigned and rebuilt by Belgian architect Auguste Perret, with a great many landmark examples of reinforced-concrete architecture. The day we arrived was Victory in Europe Day, a national holiday. Most buildings were closed, but we had a drink at an outdoor café, watched a parade and visited a shoe store and a French bakery before taking a city tour that took us around the port and the residential sections of the city.

The next day brought us to Tilbury, at the mouth of the River Thames in England. We had been told Gravesend had more to offer, so we went there by ferry. This is an ancient, interesting town dating back to the Stone Age and is mentioned in the Domesday Book, a survey of landholding commissioned by William I in 1085 that is Britain's earliest public record. Gravesend has been the home of many famous people and is the resting place of Pocahontas. In 1617, she and her husband and son were returning to America from London when she became ill and was taken ashore at Gravesend. She died shortly after and was buried underneath the chancel of the parish church of St. George. A life-sized statue of Pocahontas stands in the churchyard. It shows a finely featured young woman.

We found Gravesend to be a charming English village with steep streets, unusual shops and sidewalk musicians. We particularly enjoyed visiting the Sikh Guru Nanak Gurdwara Temple. Gravesend welcomed its first Sikhs in the 1950s, and there has been a steady increase in numbers ever since. Now, there are estimated to be about 15,000 Sikhs in the area — more than 15 per cent of the Gravesend population. This temple is one of the United Kingdom's largest and most impressive Sikh temples. It opened in 2010 at a cost of £12 million. We were greeted warmly and shown throughout this beautiful building.

We love good fish and chips and were delighted to come across the Reliance Fish Restaurant that dates back to 1920 and had a sign saying “We were serving before you were born.” It was as good as it claimed, and we shared a huge serving of delicious plaice — a variety of flatfish — and chips cooked to perfection.

Our fifth port of call was in Bruges, Belgium. A shuttle bus took us 45 minutes from the port to the outskirts of Bruges, one of the best preserved medieval towns in Europe. We were given a small map of the area and told a brief 10 minute walk through the park would take us to the city centre. The map was totally inadequate and the Minnewater Park, while beautiful, was more than four acres in size. We managed to emerge an hour later and found our way to the Markt (city market) in Bruges. The

plaza was filled with hundreds of tourists and 20 or 30 tour guides with large groups in tow. We had booked a walking tour but it had already left, so we decided to stroll along the cobblestone streets, look at the sights and shops and take a trip on one of the many canals. This was more difficult than we anticipated, as the streets were packed and the lines for the canal boats stretched for blocks.

We retreated into a café to quench our thirst and sample the famous Belgian waffles. We were amazed to learn the latter were very small, unadorned with anything and not at all what we expected. We visited a couple of the many chocolate shops, drooled over their wares and slowly wended our way back to the park and our bus.

Our final stop was in Amsterdam, where we had planned to stay for three days before returning home. We arrived early in the morning and went directly to our PH Hotel, situated on the outskirts of the major attractions. The hotel was clean and comfortable, if somewhat minimalist, but



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the location was excellent and we could walk everywhere. There were dozens of interesting shops and restaurants nearby and we visited several on our way to Rembrandt Plaza. There were no crowds and we had lunch at an outdoor café, gawked at the architecture and the myriad of bicycles and took a leisurely trip on the canals.

Later in the day we strolled back to the hotel and were amazed to see the streets were filled with hundreds of tourists, although this was only mid-May. Locals told us Amsterdam becomes packed solid in the summer.

The world-famous tulips were still at their peak, and we had booked a visit to the Keukenhof Gardens on the outskirts of the city. Keukenhof is the international and independent showcase for the Dutch floricultural sector, with a special emphasis on flower bulbs. In the space of eight weeks, Keukenhof shows what the Dutch floricultural sector has to offer. The park's focus is on seven million spring-flowering bulbs, which allow the 100 participating companies to show their living catalogues. Five hundred flower growers present an enormous variety of cut flowers and potted plants at the more than 20 flower shows. Besides the spacious 32 hectares of flowers you can enjoy spectacular flower shows, surprising inspirational gardens, unique art and wonderful events, including a fully functioning calliope.

Needless to say we thoroughly enjoyed our day there, and more so because we had booked our tickets ahead of time at a great savings and convenience. You can buy tickets at many locations in Amsterdam but they are expensive and usually involves a very early bus trip and a limited time at the park. We booked online at www.ticketbar.nl at a fraction of the price. It included admission to the gardens and complete flexibility for arrival and departure. The gardens are only open from mid-March to mid-May, but we were at the right time and it was unbelievable.

The next day we caught our flight back to Toronto, returning with great memories and many pictures. The entire holiday was a delight and we were glad we went in the spring before the majority of visitors arrived. ■

John Towler is a retired psychologist and university administrator. He blogs about his travels at towlerstravels.com.