

January 2014 Travel Column for "Experience" by Valerie Graczyk of Someday Travel

FREE TIME - A BONUS WHEN TRAVELING

Creating memorable moments gives me joy and renews my passion for traveling the world. I truly get very excited when on our "Someday" trip itinerary states, "your evenings are free to explore on your own and to enjoy". After leading many trips to Europe, Wayne and I know our travelers need space and time to be on their own when traveling with a group. We strive to be done with our formal touring by 5:00 p.m. each day which in turn means returning to the hotel with a full evening to do whatever individuals like. We also include free afternoons for our traveler's convenience and enjoyment.



Of course, on our trips Wayne and I don't want anyone to feel left out or left sitting in the hotel alone because they "don't feel comfortable exploring on their own". Each day we announce what our plans are and invite others to join us. We also check with others to see what they have planned for the evening. They are usually open to others joining them. Often times a smaller group of travelers will gather in the lobby at a prearranged time and will all walk over to a neighborhood restaurant for a dinner together.

We all enjoy the conversation, the sharing of the day's travel adventures and the laughter. For Wayne and I this time is very special and relaxing as well.

On our free evenings, if the two of us are taking in a play, a concert or another special activity, we will work with those interested so they can order their tickets and attend with us. One of my favorite memories was when some of our London travelers joined us for a play. We were a group of five women and after the play we returned to the hotel ready to go to bed. Two women in group, both in their 80's, invited us all to go to the hotel lounge for a snack & a drink. The three of us younger women looked at them and said we were exhausted and had to get our sleep. The next day our two adventurers shared that not only did they enjoy themselves, but a man from Scotland insisted on paying for a drink. We all had a great laugh and they were very pleased with themselves.

I had never been to a modern dance presentation until I attended one in Siena, Italy. Wayne went in another direction with others in our group but 8 of us climbed into taxis and off we went. I was astounded at how flexible the human body could be, literally. The young dancers contorted themselves into impossible positions. It was not a favorite type of entertainment for me but I don't regret going. My world was expanded and I still remember it to this day.

On a trip to Scotland we stayed for a few nights in Edinburgh and enjoyed a wonderful evening at their concert hall enjoying the National Orchestra of Scotland. I happened to be sitting next to a woman who was a retired school teacher who attended all their concerts. She was very interested in hearing about our travel group so I had double the fun. I enjoyed the concert and also my conversation with her.

A “forever memory” was made in Prague. Earlier in the day we saw a poster announcing a concert for that evening at St. Nicholas church located on their infamous square. We reserved our tickets and returned later that evening. We were seated under a huge crystal chandelier in this magnificent setting listening to the most beautiful brass horn concert. I was moved to tears with the beauty of the setting and music.

On our Tuscany tour with Kevin Miller, Executive Director of the Thelma Center for the Arts, we stayed in Lucca, Italy. Lucca is the birthplace of Puccini and we not only toured his home, but that evening a group of us attended a concert in the church where Puccini actually attended and played the organ as a young man. We sat and listened to three opera singers singing pieces written by Puccini. One of the songs that touched me deeply was from his opera “Madame Butterfly”. In fact, this experience led me to lead a one-day trip to Madame Butterfly in Chicago this past October. After the concert we walked out of the church onto a town square and watched couples dancing the tango to live music under the stars. The whole evening was a surreal experience!

In Madrid, Spain, a group of our travelers booked a dinner show to watch Flamingo dancing, a dance with its roots in the Gypsy culture. It was spellbinding. We could not take our eyes off the dancers who were so fiercely disciplined in their steps and routines. The music was raw, a lamenting of the soul and full of pain, yet thoroughly breathtaking as well. I had never experienced anything like it and when we return with a group in September of 2015, I hope to attend again.

This past spring we led a group to England and had an overnight in Stratford Upon Avon, Shakespeare’s birthplace. After touring the house he was born in, we toured Anne Hathaway’s Cottage, Shakespeare’s wife’s home which was surrounded by beautiful gardens. As so often happens with free evenings, a group of us decided to attend a Shakespeare play. Unfortunately, the play turned out to be very violent. In fact, a number of us left at intermission but many stayed and shared that they were happy they did. While it was not my type of entertainment, I again felt I stretched myself a bit and that isn’t always a bad thing when you travel into another country with their different cultures.

I have many other “free evening experiences”, too numerous to include in this article. But my intent is to illustrate that the free time we include in all of our trips can definitely be an opportunity to enhance your knowledge of the culture of another country. This is done by you personally experiencing it through their restaurants, music, dance and song. So, when planning to take a trip, be sure the itinerary includes time for you to personally experience the country you’re in and that you are “free” to explore and enjoy on your own.

We are already looking forward to what “free time” adventures we will plan when we are in Greece in April, 2014 and Prague and Budapest and Vienna in September, 2014 or Alaska in August, 2014. To see more details go to www.somedaytravel.com

Valerie and Wayne Graczyk

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