

## Georgie's 'Christmas Markets' Famil with Trafalgar Tours & Creative Holidays BKK on the way home – Nov / Dec 13



I was fortunate to win a place on the travel Corp “Snow, Sun & fun” Mega Famil to Europe and Bangkok. I have travelled all through Europe but never in the winter time. I lived in London over winter but never went to the Continent, so I was excited to go in the cold. I was expecting cold 8 degrees..ish but a Europe had a cold snap and minus 6 (yes -6!!!!) was a bit cooler than I expected!

As everyone was coming from all over Australia, only 6 of us flew from BNE and then we met the rest of the group in BKK before boarding our flight to Zurich. Bangkok airport is HUGE so make sure you leave plenty of time for connecting flights as it takes 45 mins at a brisk walk to get from one end to the other. We had 4 hours in transit, but unless you want to shop for designer label stuff (at full price), then there is not too much to do. You can pre-purchase a lounge pass (approx. \$70 for 3 hours through Travelcube) for the business class lounge which is really worthwhile as you get all your food and drinks included too. There is supposedly free Wi-Fi in BKK airport, but none of us were able to connect even with the passwords etc. I have been able to connect previously in the Airport lounge though.

The flight ex Australia to Europe is a nightmare as it is so long (recommend for families or older people to have a 2 night stop on the way), but you get there eventually. It was very exciting flying into Zurich as you couldn't see through the cloud until the last minute and then the ground was covered in snow! All white and so pretty!! Sydney airport closes at a hint of fog, and Zurich is still all go in thick snow with snow ploughs grating the runway between landing aircraft. We have a lot to learn. First time I've landed when it's snowing and it was very exciting!

On arrival in Zurich (awesome airport by the way!), you get off your flight and then you have to catch a train to get over to the baggage carousel and customs which is in another building. Another first for an airport for me – to catch a train to get your bags. Very cool!

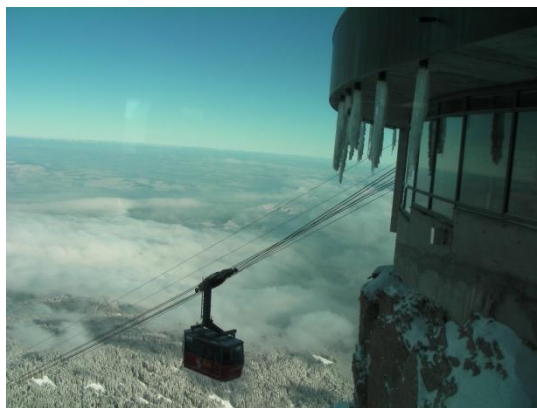
On arrival our Trafalgar Tour Director – Peter (an Aussie who lives in the UK who has been a guide in Europe for 31 years – 25 of those with Trafalgar – who just won the award for European tour Guide of the year for ALL European tour companies), met us in the Airport and took us out to the Coach. It was a trek through the snow (with some of the girls still in sandals), and upstairs to get to the Coach, but it was exciting as it was snowing!!! We were advised that usually pax are walked through the terminal to get out to the coach but as we

were young and predominately female that it was have taken too long with shop stops on the way to go that way, so he took us the short cut.

Our first stop on our trip was Lucerne, Switzerland. It look approx 40 mins to drive between Zurich Airport to Lucerne and that was in the snow. It is so beautiful even driving on the autobahn. Our Hotel in Lucerne was 10 mins walk from the centre of the city making our morning tour nice and easy. Our Tour Director was our guide for Lucerne and he was very knowledgeable about all the sights and history.



Lucerne is a beautiful town set on the lake. Two days here is enough to spend to see the sights. One day for spending in the city itself (make sure to include a visit to the Transport Museum – Amazing place!), and another day to go up to the Swiss Alp's to see the Matterhorn. It's very easy to get to the Cable Car by public transport as there is NO car parking here. You then purchase your ticket for the trip up the mountain. The first Cable car takes 4 people and that trip lasts approx 15 mins.



Leaving we were in the fog and it was a barmy minus 4 degrees, but as we went up we broke through the cloud and into bright sunshine. It was completely dazzling with the snow on the fresh white snow and all the pine trees surrounding you. Amazing! You get off the cable car half way up and change to a really big cable car for the last short bit of the trip which is really, really steep. Incredible views! Once you get to the top there is an inside viewing centre, restaurant, 2 Hotels believe it or not (Contiki used to stay up here), and the most amazing views from the top of the world. There was a James Bond movie filmed up here too. There are tunnels through the mountain side which has little Japanese people

running through them yelling at the top of their voices – as they do I thought. Well I thought I'd go through the tunnel as well for a walk. It was minus 7 up here and it was ok for the first 2 minutes but as it takes 5 mins to get through the tunnel to the other side, then 5 mins back heading into the wind, I can now understand why the Japanese people were yelling and running back, because it was so friggin cold if you didn't run, you would be frozen on the spot and a stature for all future visitors to see!!! ARRRRRR!!!!!! So what do you do at the top of the world when you feel like an icy pole?, you have a Swiss Hot Chocolate of course! Yummo!! No better place in the world!!



After our adventurous morning on top of the world, it was back to town and free time in the city. Some people chose to go shopping, some to sleep back at the hotel, some to the pub, and me I wandered around in the cold, looking for a lake cruise to go on (but nothing operating in winter), and found an outdoor Ice Skating ring with a big Christmas tree next to it. Oh so pretty! Then it was time to find somewhere warm so down to the main train station (which is in the middle of town and easy to walk to any hotel even with snow everywhere as they greet the sidewalks with bobcats). The Christmas Markets were set at the Station, we got to experience our first Christmas market. They had lots of different things in the market (like most markets) with the addition of Hot Gluhwein (warm red wine with cinnamon and spices added along with a shot of alcohol). Delicious and helps keep you warm on the inside when it's so cold outside. Lots of Swiss chocolate and watches to buy in Lucerne.

Dinner this evening was a Dine with the Locals – so we walked into town (10 mins) and went to an Italian Restaurant on the water. The food was great, and they were generous with their wine as well! After dinner you could make your own way back to the Hotel, go out clubbing, whatever you wanted to do. I went with a few girls walking through town with all its beautiful Christmas lights glowing, and soaked up the atmosphere of the town. Once it got cold it was back to enjoy a warm bed and try to get over the jetlag (getting old!). The Hotel we stayed in which is one of the 3 in town Trafalgar use, is on a main road which is very noisy all through the night (due to the wet road out front), and also has 2 nightclubs on the premises so noisy on a weekend with everyone arriving and departing the club. The bathroom also had a shower above the bath and it was a big step to get into the bath, which could be a problem for the usual Trafalgar older clientele. The breakfast was great. A full hot

cooked breakfast buffet, with espresso machine (arrhh!). Gone are the days of European hotels serving 3 day old bread rolls with a scraping of jam for breakfast. All Hotels had great hot brekkies. Yippee!

Next stop was Innsbruck. It took us about 5 hours driving to get there with a stop for lunch on the way. As it hadn't snowed for 2 days all the snow was melted in a lot of places but then some towns don't get any sun due to the shadows of the mountains in winter so they had a lot of snow around. One thing to advise your clients of if they want to do a self-drive in Europe is the road tolls are extraordinary. On this 5 hour journey we had 18 road tolls!! Yes 18!!! All are e-tolls and have to be pre-paid in hire cars, but even at a couple of euros each toll that all adds up if you're spending a few week travelling. Ouch!

Innsbruck was the home of a winter Olympics one year – you can see the ski jump for the aerial skiing on the side of the mountain from in town. We didn't get to go up here but you can spend a day at the facilities including Bobsled rides. Cool! We arrived in the afternoon and went straight out again on our walking tour of the Old Town. Innsbruck is set on 2 sides of the river – the old town and the new town. Make sure your clients stay in the Old Town as that is where everything is. Once again our Tour Director Peter, took us on our walking tour of the Old Town through the narrow cobbles streets with all the Christmas Markets, lights and decorations everywhere. We then were given free time for a few hours to explore by ourselves. It was beautiful and magical but also go really, really cold and when it gets to minus 4 degrees and you've been out wondering around for a few hours it gets really, really, really cold.



The Hotel Grauer Bear was in a fantastic location, rooms were all different sizes but reasonable, and the food (dinner & breakfast was great). A hotel I would definitely recommend.

Next morning it was off to Salzburg and the home of the Sound of Music. Needless to say we had the soundtrack playing on the way for a bit of 'Coach Karaoke'. It was straight into the City where a Local guide met us to do our Walking tour around Salzburg which mainly consists of the Sound of Music stuff in the new part of town, but then you walk over the bridge to the old part of town, and it's a whole new city. The streets were packed full of people and even though still cobbled streets much wider. Salzburg has a castle on top of the

hill overlooking the city. Once our walking tour was finished, it was free time for 4 hours, so there was time to go up to the castle via the funicular and see the amazing views from up there along with the history of the castle, then back down to the biggest of the Christmas markets. A lot of the stalls sold Christmas decorations or food. You can go past a delicious hot Bratwurst and Gluhwein whilst wondering the markets. The Gluhwein is served in mugs specific for each market. You can take them back and get a refund of 2 Euros or keep them to bring home (I collected 6 of them and brought them home!).



This evening we had one of Trafalgar's new 'Be my Guest' experience. As neither the driver nor guide had been to the local restaurant we were going to it ended up being a bit of an adventure. The Restaurant was out in the countryside around Salzburg & the GPS lead us astray – in a Coach we ended up going down a windy track through the woods in the dark of night (not snowing luckily!) and ended up at a farmhouse – not where we were supposed to be. Hmmm.... only way out was the way we came in and as there was no room to turn around in a Coach, it was a test of our Driver's skill reversing out! And very skilled he was.. a winding dirt track through the woods at night – amazing skill!

When we finally ended up where we were supposed to be (after a few more wrong turns), the welcome we got on arrival was fantastic! The owner, along with his daughter and son, run the restaurant and brewery, which was amazing! The food was amazing and their beer was delicious along with a great atmosphere. When it was time to leave the owner was very upset to let us go (especially as he hadn't managed to get his son engaged to any of the Aussie girls on the trip 😊).

Next day it was on the Coach again and off to Munich. It was a short drive with us arriving in Munich before lunch, and straight into town for our walking tour. Once again Peter our Tour Director, an expert in the Germanic Countries, took us on our walking tour, which was great and required skill to keep everyone together as the Christmas Markets were on and there were crowds of people everywhere. Trafalgar supply transmitters and headsets for everyone, so you can walk at your own pace and still listen to the commentary (but if you're too far away it does drop out). With the walking tour ending at Hofbrauhaus just before lunch, many decided to spend their day enjoying the local beer and festivities, but for me (not a huge beer drinker), the Christmas markets were calling. I'm not a shopper either but the Christmas Markets were spectacular in Marienplatz with the famous Glockenspiel watching over everything. More Gluhwein and bratwurst to help keep us warm, even though it had been a sunny day, and to help keep the energy levels up for exploring the Markets and the shops. The shopping is very cheap in Germany, Munich in particular one of the cheapest in all of Europe for brand shops.



The following morning we were given the option to take a Day tour to Dakau provided by Trafalgar, but as I had already been previously, I had a day at leisure to explore the City. Along with a few other we caught a taxi into town (only 10 mins drive and EUR10), we enjoyed a morning coffee whilst watching the passing parade, then we jumped on the Hop On Hop Off bus and did a circuit around the City. As the traffic is very bad in Munich, it was a very loooooong loop around the City and once was enough for us. The afternoon was spent

wondering the streets and discovering new markets and spending the last of our money on souvenirs. We walked back to the Hotel the "Hilton Munich City" which is a huge Hotel just 10 mins walk from town for a Hosted 'Farewell dinner'.

It was a very early morning start 4.30am, so the Hotel kindly arranged Breakfast boxes for us to have on the Coach for the last leg of our journey. Our flight was leaving from Frankfurt and Munich is a 5 hour drive away and it had been expected to have a huge snow storm arrive during the night, so extra leeway was required. It did snow on the drive but the storm didn't reach us, thankfully!

One major thing about travelling through Europe in the winter months is the temperature difference between indoors and outdoors. With outside temps 5 degrees and below, you rug up with layers, scarves, beanies & gloves to keep you warm. The problem is that inside any building they have the temperature set as 25 degrees! All the Hotels are so hot you only need summer clothes on inside, and in most cases they are too hot, with you having to open windows and leave them open all night to keep from being cooked! This was one thing that everyone found difficult to adjust to. You also have to be prepared to take your layers off every time you walk inside a shop, and then put them all back on when you go back outside. It was exhausting but I love going to places that are so opposite to what they are at home temperature wise, so it was worth it!

Our flight with Thai was on their A380 aircraft. There was more leg room than on the 777, but that was the only difference. I would place Thai as a 3 ½ star Airline, certainly not in the same category as Emirates & Singapore Airlines.

Once we arrived in Bangkok, Creative Holidays took over. Ditramp Travel, Creative's ground operators, took over and did a fantastic job of getting us where we were going. At Bangkok we stayed at Siam@Siam, which is a very modern hotel. Built to have an Industrial look, with brown, burnt oranges and polished concrete everywhere, it is a great hotel for younger people. The pool and reception area are up on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor, but believe it or not the pool was cold, which is what you don't expect in Bangkok. As our rooms weren't ready yet, you could either walk down the street to one of the 3 huge shopping centres, or have a nap by the pool as we had been travelling for approx 24 hours at this stage.



The rooms are large and the beds very comfy and the cocktail bar by the pool having a great range, as well as the bar on ground level which has live music every night. The Hotel is in a good location if you want to shop at indoor shopping centres.

We were met by Ditram Travel and taken by the Skytrain to our Hotel inspection for the evening which was on the other side of town - The Alfot. I'm my opinion it is the best Hotel in Bangkok. The rooms are bright and airy, the pool is large and tropical looking, the hotel Gym is fully equipped and new, the bar and 24 hour mini mart are a great feature, and the streets surrounding the hotel are full of markets on the sidewalks. This is where all the real bargains are. For the young party goers, 2 of the top Bar's in Bangkok are located at the Aloft and across the road from it.

I had 4 days in Bangkok, which was 3 days too long for me personally, but a great city if you love shopping as there is not that much else to offer.

All in all, it was a fantastic Guided Holiday with Trafalgar, with some amazing sights seen along the way. I would have no hesitating in giving Trafalgar my highest recommendations for my clients.

Georgie.