

Thursday 19th July 2007

Hello to all Gondie fans far and wide!

This tour has been unique in that we've had to face several travel-related challenges along the way. As well, due to a fairly full-on schedule with busy days and very late nights, we've had ample opportunities to fine-tune our "porsepart" skills which cause perfectly sane people, like the adults on this tour, to intend saying one thing but due to lack of sleep, come out with total gobbledygook; this then causes all around similarly afflicted to fall about laughing, even when it's not really that funny. The most recent example is from last night when, following our Farnham concert, a small group of us gathered at a local pub, the Queen's Head, for a drink; a supervisor, who shall remain nameless, asked for a "glass of flat white, please". And no, coffees have been few and far between, I can assure you. Which is maybe part of the problem. Another example would be that even the savviest of adults on this tour can, at some point, find themselves in some random French village rest room, holding their hands in a basin located against the wall, waiting for the automatic flow of water to wash their hands only to realise with a start that it is, in fact, a men's urinal ... J

Given that it's all becoming a bit of a blur as the days flow quickly on towards next Monday night when we board our flight back home, here are some memories of the past couple of weeks.

Our Canadian leg of the tour was wonderful if very demanding, because of very full days and very long nights. We were able to attend some Festival 500 concerts to watch other choirs perform and one or two in particular stood out, the first one being Tower New Zealand, a NZ youth choir, aged 18 to 25 years; they had a terrific repertoire and engaging performance style. The second was a small Canadian Inuit choir of about 10 people from Nunavut who performed throat singing, much to our fascination. In pairs, they stood face to face, holding each other by the arms and created rhythms using their breath and vocal chords. It's a competitive game usually aimed at getting your opponent to laugh first. Apparently, when missionaries arrived in the early 1900's, it was discouraged and sometimes banned; some communities managed to hold on to their traditions, others were unable. Now, many young Inuit communities around the Arctic are reclaiming this ancient art as a way to connect with their past and their culture.

Apart from conducting GV, Lyn was also the Artistic Director for the Festival 500's massed youth choir's performance for the final gala concert where all the children's and youth choirs came together to perform three pieces, including Chris Gordon's spine tingling "Peace on Earth", with the Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra. It was a great night but veeeeeeery long (4 hours) so yet another veeeeeeery late night.

Earlier in our St John's stay, the whale-watching tour and picnic was another highlight and we were lucky to have fine, sunny weather since it was often showery and cool most other days. The day's events were organised by families and staff from our hosts, the St Bonaventure school choir community. We piled onto two buses and drove down the Avalon Peninsula, very picturesque, with the Atlantic on the left hand side. Our goals were to see whales, puffins and an iceberg and we knew we were getting close when we passed a sign promoting "Puffin Day" on July 28. Before setting off on our boat tour, we enjoyed a bar-b-q lunch set up on a small, pebble beach, then onto the boat we piled, both Gondwana and the Bonaventure kids hanging over each side as we headed out to sea.

Not long into our trip there was a huge scream from a group of children at one end of the boat and the skipper confirmed a sighting of a humpback whale, whereupon everyone rushed over to that side to try to get a glimpse, cameras at the ready. It was explained that we should look for a turquoise patch of colour just beneath the surface of the water, which is the white on the whale showing up as blue because of the water; we watched, fascinated, as the turquoise blue streaked ahead of the boat but close enough for us to follow for a couple of minutes. There was at least one wonderful moment when the whale dived and its tail showed completely before disappearing under the surface; there were also quite a few exhalations of air (I'm sure there's some technical term for this but speed not accuracy is what I'm aiming for here as well as my being somewhat affected in the "porsepart" sense previously referred to). It was hard to know how many whales we saw in total, there were maybe just two or three but it was enough to satisfy all of us who had longed to see these beautiful creatures of the deep close up in the Atlantic Ocean. We were so lucky as it's just the start of the whale season.

Likewise with the iceberg since it was the end of that season – there's a 2-week window to see both at the same time and we were just lucky to be in St John's at that time. The boat travelled around the iceberg, which was about 30 feet high (the minimum height to be classified as an iceberg) and had anchored itself to the sea floor, where it had floated into one of the many small bays or coves. Close up, we could see rivulet of water pouring down its surface as it continued to melt in the sun, then just as we drew close, a huge piece broke off and crashed into the water, very dramatic.

Finally, we motored next to Gull Island where thousands of sea birds have their nests in seemingly impossible crevices along steep cliffs. The noise of these birds, as they wheeled in circles and swooped and dived all around, was deafening. We also saw lots of puffins, which were very cute, similar to a penguin I thought, but smaller than I'd imagined. When our boat came near, they'd scoot along the water in a comic fashion to get out of the way, their little feet seemingly running on the water,

Another concert we performed in was in Carbonear, about an hour and a half's drive north up another nearby peninsular. Whilst there, we visited a local museum which pays tribute to the aviation pioneer, Amelia Earhart who, "On May 20, 1932, became the world's first woman pilot to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. The flight, in a Lockheed Vega, originated at the aerodrome in Harbour Grace, Newfoundland", Harbour Grace being very close to Carbonear. The museum also contained an old log of various flights made, with one signature recorded as that of Charles Kingsford Smith.

It was sad to say goodbye for now to several of our younger choristers, as well as older choristers who had a conflict of commitments and were only able to participate in the Canada leg of the tour. They flew off back to Australia early on our last day in St John's whilst those remaining had a few extra hours to pack and do a bit of sightseeing. Several choristers were taken by their host families to stand on the eastern most point in North America, Cape Spears, a dramatic, windblown landscape, complete with lighthouses (old and new), and the Atlantic ocean crashing into the steep cliffs far below. We adults were also lucky to be taken there just before we went back to pick up our suitcases and head for the airport to catch our Air Canada flight to Halifax at 6pm. Or so we thought...

Just after 3pm that day, Lyn received a phone call from Air Canada at the airport to advise that we'd missed our 3pm flight. No, no, said Lyn, we're booked on the 6 o'clock flight. No, no said Air Canada, your flight was changed back in March, you should have been advised. Not only were we not advised, but we had confirmed our flights with Air Canada some 24 hours prior and not a mention was made of the time change. We got to the airport as soon as possible and soon, choristers started arriving with their host families, only to be told that not only had we missed our flight but also there were no further flights available that night. To say we were horrified, as a group of 46 expecting to connect to our London flight, then coach to Waterloo station, then Eurostar train across to Gare du Nord in Paris, before our coach up to Caen, was an understatement. There we were, happy but extremely tired, after several very late nights and very full days of rehearsals/performances, and now stuck at St John's airport, whilst the host families waited patiently to find out what was happening.

Over the next three hours, we made a new best friend of the St John's Air Canada manager, Ron, whilst we sat in his office trying to work out how quickly we could leave not only St John's but also, Canada, because we'd missed all our connecting transport that had been booked to get us to France. As one Canadian said to me in a queue for Tim Horton's coffee, "Air Canada, the airline Canadians love to hate".

There was no one flight for us all to fit on so we divvied up kids and adults so that 3 adults and 20 kids were booked on the 6 am flight (not to Halifax but to Montreal), 15 kids and 2 adults on the 10.15am flight and Lyn brought up the rear with the remaining 5 at 12.45pm. Once at Montreal, Air Canada organised for hotel rooms at the nearby Holiday Inn so that the 6am kids especially (who'd had to front up at St John's airport the next morning at 4.30am, meaning a 3.45am wake up call for them and their billets) could crash for a couple of hours. No longer were we one group of 46 but 3 separate groups all operating independently of each other, shuttling back and forth from Montreal airport to the hotel – thank goodness for our choir mobile phones, they were our salvation in terms of keeping track of where we all were at any given time. ("We've landed in Montreal." "Our flight has been delayed".)

So, backtrack to St John's where the billet families stayed at the airport to find out what was happening with our flight plans and offered to take our kids back home for an extra night, albeit very short for some. They were just wonderful in their lack of

fuss at the obvious inconvenience of having to take the kids home again, provide an unplanned meal, then get up very early the next morning for the return trip to the airport by 4.30am for the first 20 choristers. Words cannot adequately describe just how wonderful the St Bonaventure community was in its support of Gondwana Voices; one family even delayed their own family holiday departure because they insisted on taking their choristers back home with them to stay that extra night. Newfoundlanders are renowned for their hospitality and I can well understand why. Our host families were so in tune with our schedule and what our kids' requirements were and this is well illustrated by the following. During one afternoon earlier in our stay, when Lyn had asked for everyone to have a good rest then OK'd some shopping time, I was downtown with one of our younger choristers and we were crossing the road when a car suddenly stopped in the middle of the road, holding up the traffic behind and the driver, a complete stranger to me, wound down the window and yelled out "Hey, aren't you supposed to be having a rest?!"

The only positive outcome of our late arrival in France (on the day of our very first performance) was that we were able to fly direct from Montreal to Paris (a short, overnight flight), which the kids loved ("We're flying into Paris!"). From the moment we arrived at Charles de Gaulle airport, two volunteers with the Polyfolia choral organization, Richard and his partner, Felicity, a retired but dynamic English couple who now live in Normandy, shadowed our every move and met our every want and need, just about. They were accommodated with us in Caen, in our student accommodation and did everything they could to assist us in practical terms such as hands-on laundry - 5 dirty tour t-shirts times 40 kids plus a tour fleece and one pair of jeans each adds up to an overwhelming quantity of laundry which takes hours and hours to wash and dry, just ask Monica who co-ordinated it all. They drove us around to shop for all kinds of needs and generally couldn't do enough to help. A couple of mornings Richard got up early and went out to collect our breakfast items so that we could give the kids a slightly later breakfast in our accommodation; every extra half hour of sleep became critical as several of them started to get sick and run the risk of missing out on either sightseeing or performances or both.

Our first performance, in Dives-sur-Mer, was in a very old (circa 12th century) barn of a building that used to be a market place where goods were sold - just incredible. In spite of their exhaustion from the overnight flight and preceding waiting at airports, the Gondies gave of their best like the troopers they are.

One highlight of our Normandy stay was a quick visit to Bayeux, a medieval town whose cathedral was dedicated in 1077 by William the Conqueror, where we were very fortunate to see the famous tapestry depicting William's epic journey to England and the battle of Hastings. On our designated free day, the choir visited Mont Saint Michel where the church, the first building established, was built before the year one thousand! Over the centuries, more construction took place (it was used as a prison during the French Revolution) and has been opened to the public since 1874. I believe Mel has written more about this day.

Other performance venues in Normandie included the church in the tiny village of Surtainville where we were well fed and watered by the local women, a formidable team indeed! Then there was Hambye, an abbey founded in the 12th Century by an order of Benedictine monks in the most glorious rural setting surrounded by hills and leafy woodlands. Now in ruins, it provided a spectacular setting for the more sacred pieces from our repertoire, including Lyn's Festival Alleluia performed around 11pm with flickering candles lighting the way for the audience towards the ruins, at the conclusion of the main performance (Gondies first half, the Song Company second half). Magic. Our final performance was at yet another abbey, Juaye-Monday, but "only" dating back to the early 19th century. It was one of our best performances and the acoustics were just amazing. I should add that by now, several of our Gondie families and friends had been making appearances at our concerts and two in particular, Jo and Leora, gave up a huge chunk of their personal time, even missing most of one of the concerts because they took massive amounts of laundry away to wash for us. And Leora earned a big hug from Lyn after she produced as if by magic, a cup of tea, with milk, just half an hour after we'd arrived in "Dives-sur-Mer"! Lyn also remarked at one of our concert venues, that she had never seen so many people from Toowoomba gathered together apart from when she was last in Toowoomba!

On our last day we drive to a nearby village, Arromanches, at the site of some of the D-Day landings and Richard provided a fascinating, historical commentary.

Then Paris. Aaah! We dropped our bags at our hostel accommodation, the Mije, then caught the Bateaubus up the Seine to the Eiffel Tower where we joined the queues to wait to go up to the second level, then re-group and head back to the hostel

for dinner and bed. The next morning, Lyn guided the group through the streets of Paris, past the Louvre and other buildings of historical context, to have a quick shop at Gallerie Lafayette before it was time to go back to the Mije, this time via Metro to pick up our bags and wait for our coach to take us to the Gare du Nord where we were due to meet Alex Cameron.

Or so we thought. We waited and waited at the hostel. Then rang to find out where was the bus? No bus, they'd never heard of us despite some careful planning and booking in Sydney. After flights cancelled due to fog and flights missed due to us not knowing about them, the idea of no bus turning up felt a tad familiar if not at all comforting. OK, after a quick brainstorm we moved onto Plan B which was to tell our kids we'd had a change of plan and were now travelling from the hostel to Gare du Nord by metro. That is, 41 kids and their suitcases plus 7 adults and their cases (we'd met up with composer Brett Dean and his daughter Clara, an ex-Gondie, who was re-joining us for the rest of the tour) plus bags of passports and tickets, medical supplies, percussion bags and various extra stuff we'd accumulated along the way. Downstairs into the metro (keep to the right everyone!), bump, bump, bump went the suitcases. Upstairs to change lines (Line Number 1, get off at Bastille, then change to Line Number 5 and get off at Gare du Nord - hurry up everyone!), around corners, losing sight of the person in front of you and desperately trying to sight those turquoise blue fleeces disappearing far into the distance. Some suitcases went into meltdown and lost their handles or just refused to co-operate but there was no stopping. You would have been proud of your progeny and the way they responded to the challenge; never have so many young people moved so quickly in such a short space of time! In order to manage this logistical feat, we divided up choristers between adults so whenever we had to jump on and off a train, we'd do a group check before and after, to make sure we hadn't lost anyone! It was with great relief that we arrived at Gare du Nord, (goodbye Mel – sob!; hello Alex – joy!), went through UK immigration, then had the challenge of fitting our entire luggage on the train with minutes to spare before our trip across the Channel to England. Au revoir France with much regret, how beautiful was Normandie and what amazing experiences we'd all had there. Apart from the adults consuming way more fromage et baguettes than was recommended in the healthy dietary guidelines.

And now here we are in leafy Farnham, a more quintessentially English village you could not find. Cobbled laneways with quaint buildings of red brick and slate tiled roofs. I keep expecting the cameras to pop up to film an episode of Midsomer Murders or Inspector Morse, etc. In the old church of St Andrews, our main rehearsal (and performance venue for last night's concert, I notice such signs as "Lunch in the Rectory Garden, by kind permission of the Rector" and "The Parish Fayre needs your help to form a committee to run the fayre, which will not take place unless volunteers come forward to run the event." Somewhat different, yet somewhat familiar, eh?

We are again being wonderfully looked after, this time by the families of Farnham Youth Choir, led by David Victor-Smith, their conductor, who spent the January season with us in Brisbane. Last night's concert went really well, great acoustics, the kids looked like they were having a ball performing their concert repertoire one last time in a shared concert with FYC, including the 3 final pieces they did together. Now we are focused on our Proms performance at the Albert Hall on Sunday night and today was spent rehearsing Brett's piece as well as some afternoon shopping.

This evening, after the choristers had gone home with their host families, the adults were invited to David's home for a drink in their lovely English garden. buddleia, figs and plums in fruit, lush, green everywhere. I felt in the lap of luxury with my Pimms with fresh raspberries and plums.

Sadly, this is where I shall have to leave you, dear reader, since this laptop has to go back to Lyn and also there will be little free time to sit and type an update; if I get the chance however, I will. Tomorrow we head up to London late afternoon to rehearse with the orchestra (BBC Symphony) and chorus – very exciting.

Lyn and Sally, along with Dan's artistic support and the incredible achievements of the kids themselves, have made us feel very proud to be part of the travelling Gondies, an experience we will never forget. Rest assured, Alex has everything in hand for our return home and Mel has warned that Heathrow is a nightmare viz a viz restrictions on hand luggage, with super tight security everywhere, so we'll be leaving more than enough time to check in on Monday, following our free time and sight-seeing.

Till next time! Nuala