

## Christmas 2007

This has been another adventure filled year from the north pole to south of the equator. It all began with travel to Saudi Arabia in March. Prior to this time, visas for tourists had not been issued by the Saudi government, but a Canadian company got us in as visitors. The people were friendly and the country combined the ultra modern with the ancient. Madain Salah is a 2000 year old city carved out of solid rock. From Saudi Arabia we drove to the island of Bahrain on the King Fahd Causeway. Like Saudi, Bahrain has the modern and ancient. Then on to Qatar where the desert meets the sea. Oil rich Kuwait has mostly recovered from the Iraqi invasion.

In May it was off to eastern and northern Europe. First stop Belarus. Its capital Minsk is the headquarters of the Commonwealth of Independent States. On to Ukraine. The Livadia Palace was the setting for the Yalta Conference in 1945 where Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin met to decide the fate of Europe after World War II. Next stop tiny Moldova. Monks still live in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Cave Monastery of Orhei Vechi. To the far north is Norway, a great place for whale watching and home of the northern most point in Europe. Sweden is the largest of the Nordic countries and a wonderful place to sit in a hot sauna and then jump into a cold lake. Finland is the land of countless lakes and the vast forests of Lapland.

The North Pole was reached with the Russian nuclear icebreaker 'Yamal', which broke the way for another icebreaker carrying a small submarine. The submarine was used to plant the Russian flag on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean at the exact North Pole, claiming the Pole and the land between it and Russia for Mother Russia. Possible beginnings for WW III, stay tuned. Some polar bears were quite curious about our ship. Reached by the ship's helicopter, remote and isolated Franz Joseph Land had perfectly round boulders the size of a small house.

Indonesia straddles the equator. On the island of Sumatra is the active volcano Mount Kerinci. The climb to its 12,567' summit is very steep, taking about two days through dense jungle and then over open rock. Dense white smoke comes hissing and roaring out of the bottom of the several thousand foot deep crater. Off the coast of Java Krakatau Volcano is erupting again. From only a thousand feet away the eruptions about every five minutes are very impressive. Kalimantan on the island of Borneo is one of the only two homes of the orangutan, Sumatra being the other. Once these animals get habituated to humans they are quite curious about us and get very close. East Timor is the newest country in the world, becoming independent from Indonesia in 2002. Beautiful and pristine Jaco Island is an idyllic place for swimming, snorkeling and exploring. Due to oil, tiny Brunei is one of the per capita wealthiest countries in the world. When the sultan's brother was minister of finance a lot of money disappeared. The brother built an opulent palace which is now an ultra luxurious hotel. The judge says the brother has to give the money back. Walking through the tops of the 170 foot tall trees on the canopy walk was outstanding, especially when the sun rose and the mists cleared.

Santa sends his best wishes from the North Pole. Have a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

Steve