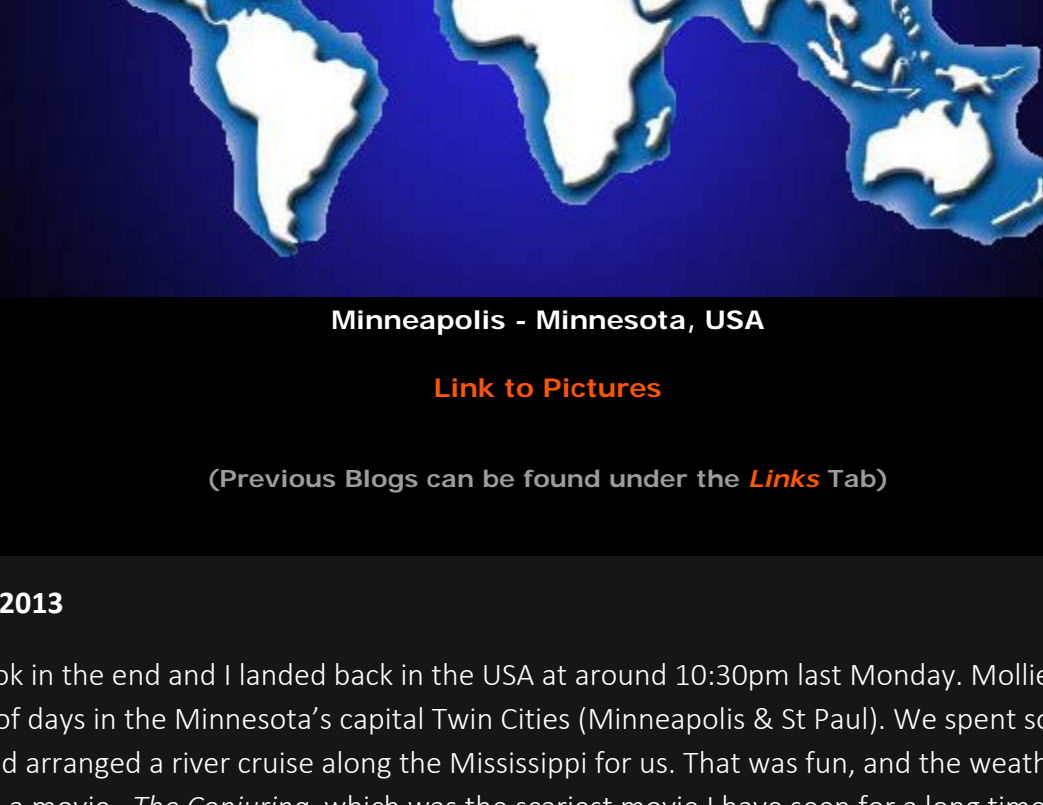


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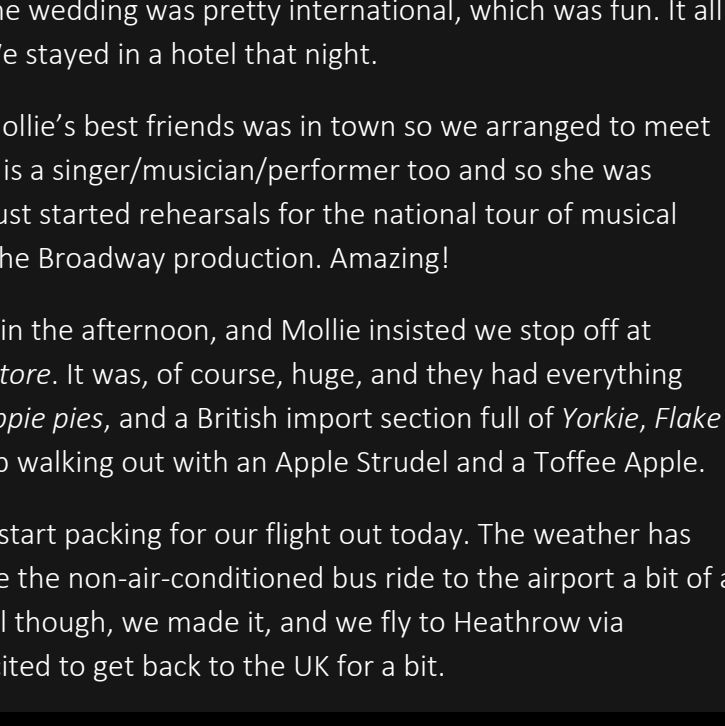
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Monday 26th August 2013

My flights turned out ok in the end and I landed back in the USA at around 10:30pm last Monday. Mollie picked me up and we spent the first couple of days in the Minnesota's capital Twin Cities (Minneapolis & St Paul). We spent some time at the Mall of America and Mollie had arranged a river cruise along the Mississippi for us. That was fun, and the weather was perfect! We also went out for sushi and a movie...The Conjuring, which was the scariest movie I have seen for a long time.

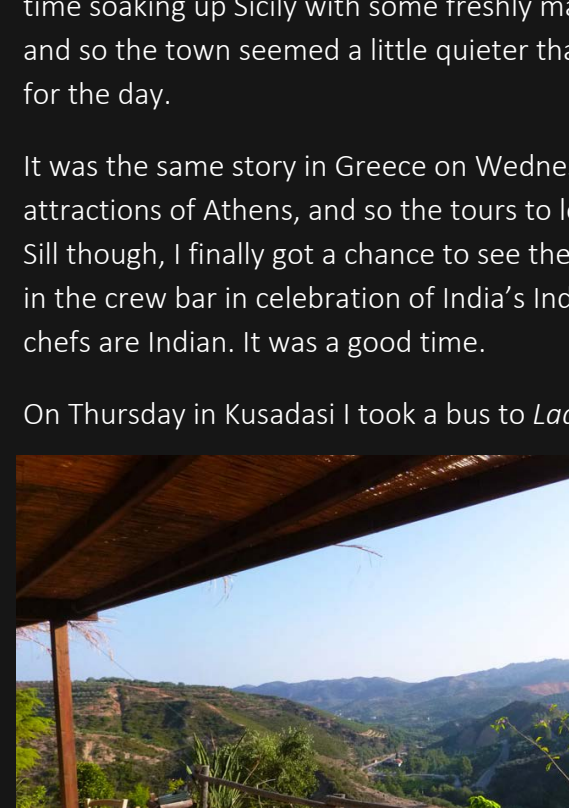
On Wednesday we had a picnic at the Sculpture garden in Minneapolis where they had some fun mini-golf setup. Each hole had been designed by an artist and so they looked like a good time, we couldn't be bothered to wait for a round though...too many kids, ha! We also had a look around inside the famous Guthrie Theatre in town, which was cool as well.



We were back at Mollie's home by Thursday, and so I have been hanging out with the family again. They are a lot of fun, and I have been cooking as well as eating out, making wine, helping out around the house a little bit and just enjoying life on land again.

Some family friends came over for dinner on Friday night and so grilling was the order of the day. I also tried for the first time Cannibal Meat. This is some type of minced beef mixed with onion and spices that you eat raw, with crackers or whatever. It was strange at first, but it actually grew on me. We spent the evening playing games and drinking wine.

On Saturday I went up to the cities again with the whole family for a wedding. I had met the bride and groom a couple of times at the cabins during July 4th events, and so I knew quite a lot of other people there too. The groom was Italian, so the wedding was pretty international, which was fun. It all looked expensive as well. We stayed in a hotel that night.



The next morning, one of Mollie's best friends was in town so we arranged to meet up with her for brunch. She is a singer/musician/performer too and so she was interesting to me. She has just started rehearsals for the national tour of musical Once following her stint in the Broadway production. Amazing!

I drove back from the cities in the afternoon, and Mollie insisted we stop off at Minnesota's largest candy store. It was, of course, huge, and they had everything from stroop waffles to whoopie pies, and a British import section full of Yorkie, Flake and Aero bars. We ended up walking out with an Apple Strudel and a Toffee Apple.

We made it back in time to start packing for our flight out today. The weather has been super hot, which made the non-air-conditioned bus ride to the airport a bit of a nightmare this morning. Still though, we made it, and we fly to Heathrow via Reykjavik (Iceland). I am excited to get back to the UK for a bit.

Sunday 18th August 2013: Day 36 (Sign Off)

Well I made it off the ship today as anticipated, and I have to say that this time it feels pretty good. I feel as though five weeks was a perfect timeframe for me to get a taste of a different cruise line and their 7-day Mediterranean itinerary. I have had a lot of experience musically and played with a load more musicians, singers and guest entertainers. I have had so much fun seeing all of these cool new places and learning about the history and cultures of my own continent, and I have even managed to save a little cash. Having said all that, I am ready for a proper break now and some more time with the girl.

The week was a pretty good mix of adventure and down-time for me. In Messina I didn't sign up for a tour. Instead I spent my time soaking up Sicily with some freshy made pasta and a Gelato dessert. I think this week has been a big Italian national holiday and so the town seemed a little quieter than normal. It was nice. I strolled around some more shops and just enjoyed the sunshine for the day.

It was the same story in Greece on Wednesday as my tour was cancelled. I guess most of the passengers want to see the main attractions of Athens, and so the tours to lesser known places maybe aren't so popular, which is why they are cancelled so much. Still though, I finally got a chance to see the ice show on board in the evening, which actually was really fun. Then there was a party in the crew bar in celebration of India's Independence Day. The food especially was excellent, and authentic too as most of the chefs are Indian. It was a good time.

On Thursday in Kusadasi I took a bus to Ladies Beach with some of the production cast. I wanted to have one last swim in the sea before I hit land again as I don't know when I'll next get the chance. I loved it, and I stocked up on Turkish Delight too for souvenirs/gifts. We played the shows that night with Celine Dion tribute act Tracey Shield, who apparently won Stars in their eyes once upon a time. She did all the classics, and her show was fun to play. People seemed to love it too. Afterwards I went with some of the band to eat at the Johnny Rockets (American Diner Chain) on board, and after that we went for some ice-skating as the rink was open for crew in the night. Yeah that was a fun day.

I took full advantage of my final stop in Crete on Friday as I was not invited in boat drill or training. I escorted another passenger tour, this time to the Askardalos botanical gardens. This place was very Mediterranean, and of course full of trees...all different kinds of fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices. My favourite was the Swiss Cheese plant! I also tasted some of the local Cretan alcohol and watched how to make proper Tzatziki. After this we had some time to explore the city of Chania, which really was just a big tourist stall. It was pretty though, and full of history.

In addition to Tracey Shield's shows we have played again with classical singer Ugo Palitto, as well as the standard Welcome Aboard Show, the Farewell Show, the jazz cabaret, Big Band Set and the production show. I have enjoyed the work on board, and the consistent 7-day schedule definitely had its advantages, although I was starting to get a little bored of it already. The MD seems to have thought highly of my work though as he gave me a great final evaluation. That was really nice.

So tonight am in a Hilton hotel close to Rome airport as I fly out early tomorrow. I arrived here this afternoon and so I jumped on a bus into the city for a few hours to see what it was all about. I found a city tour bus and so hopped on there, and I spent a little extra time at the Coliseum and the Vatican. These were what I really wanted to see. Rome is nice...super old, of course, but pretty much what I expected. I'm so glad I finally had a chance to go and explore. What a great way to end this contract. Tomorrow however I will be travelling for around 22 hours before I hit Minnesota again. Ugh!



Sunday 11th August 2013: Day 29

In Messina again on Monday, the tour that I had signed up for was cancelled due to lack of uptake. I headed out on my own and ended up hopping on board one of the sightseeing buses which toured me around the city and dropped me off in the shopping district. By then it was early afternoon and so a lot of things were closed because of the whole siesta culture there. I did manage to get hold of a cannoli though, which is like a traditional Italian ice-cream/wafer treat, and I feel like I know the city a little better now.

On Wednesday I made it once more into Athens. This time Mike and I borrowed a couple of bikes from the ship and set off on our own little adventure. We ended up throwing the Frisbee around at the National Gardens, having fun with the presidential guards and climbing the huge Lycabettus Hill up to the church of St George, and some great views over the whole city.

We were in Turkey again on Thursday and I signed up to escort another passenger tour. This one had a few stops. Firstly, we visited the House of the Virgin Mary where I was able to fill my souvenir clay pot with Holy Water. Then we headed over to Ephesus, which is an Ancient City originally founded around 6,000 BC! I think. As you can imagine, it is mainly ruins, although quite a lot of it has been excavated which means you can get a pretty good impression of how it used to function back in its day. There was a little Gladiator fight and Mark Anthony was there with Cleopatra and a bunch of belly dancers. After this we stopped at a nice hotel resort and had lunch. It was a buffet and so I tried to keep it authentic and ate mainly kebab meat with olives and salad, then a bunch of traditional Baklava for dessert. Our final stop was to a jewelry/carpet store, and a presentation/sales pitch about Turkish rugs. It was very interesting, and I was able to get a little more Raki out of the deal, which I've developed quite a liking for now. In the end though I had to dash back to the ship to make it in time for rehearsal with Ugo Palitto...

This guy is another Italian guest entertainer. He is a classical singer, and he did the standards like O Sole Mio and Grenada. He was a nice guy and a great singer, but his show was a bit boring and so didn't hit any home runs this time around. He's here next week as well though.

I had to skip out on a few trainings this week in order to get plenty of adventure into my final couple of cruises. However it seems to me that offering 'New Crew Orientation' training 4 weeks into a contract is a bit of a joke anyway...I just hope that it doesn't come back to bite me. We'll see.

I also managed to get my second (and final) load of laundry done this week. It has proved relatively painless this time around, which is a relief as laundry duty used to be the stuff of nightmares for me.

Today we are in Civitavecchia, and my plans to make it into Rome flopped because it was all a bit last minute. Maybe I will get a chance to see some of it before I fly out next week. Oh, my safety duties were changed last night too which means I will have to work the passenger boat drill today...grrr. Oh well, at least it will only be this one time.

Saturday 3rd August 2013: Day 21

With two weeks left of my short contract out here I am still really enjoying my time on board, although I have started to make plans for our trip back to the UK in a few weeks. Mollie and I will spend our first couple of nights in London with my Auntie and Uncle. It will be nice to see them again, and I am excited to show Mollie some more of our amazing capital city.

For now however I have been soaking up the Mediterranean culture (and sunshine!) on offer here... I signed up to escort a passenger tour on Monday. The tour was called 'Lovely Taormina', and after I had herded a bunch of internationals onto a bus, we set off from Messina, along the Sicilian coast to, well, Taormina...which is indeed lovely. It is a small, quaint town set on the mountainside, and so we had some great views of Mt. Etna - Europe's largest active volcano. Among the highlights of the city was a huge Greek theatre built in the 3rd Century BC. It was impressive, and had been renovated in the 50s so it was still in use today. In fact, they were setting up for some famous Italian Pop Star who was playing there that night. Check out Mt. Etna smoking away in the background of this pic. I also sampled the local drink, Granite. It tasted to me like a lemon-meringue pie flavoured slushy. I liked it a lot.

There was another crew tour on Thursday as well which I went along to. It was a boat ride in Kusadasi (Turkey), where the sun was blazing, and so swimming in the sea was a great way to spend the day. My buddy Mike (guitar player) and I split a bottle of traditional Turkish Raki to take along. I had never heard of it, but I guess it is like Sambuca (aniseed flavour)...it went down well, and we made it back just in time for rehearsal with Motown group Soul Satisfaction.

Those guys went great, and people really loved it. Violinist Vincenzo Gentile also went down well when we played his shows again on Monday night. Yeah work is still good, and the cabin situation is bearable too, even though it was difficult to go back to sharing a cabin. My roommate is an older Italian guy named Galileo. He is half of another music duo on board, and apart from the smell of feet and the occasional snoring, he is pretty quiet and tidy, so I can't complain too much.

It was payday on Tuesday, and that felt good. The plan is that I will have saved enough cash over the past year to support myself for the next few months on land while I put some time into writing a book for me and Mollie. The idea is that we put together an act to perform on ships as guest entertainers. That is a really great gig...good money, short contracts, passenger status, and most of all it's a means for us to be together without worrying about visas and immigration stuff.

Friday 26th July 2013: Day 13

I am settling into life on board a little more now. I made it through my first week/cruise without any issues, which means that I have covered all of the music that I will need to play (besides the interchanging guest entertainer shows). This is a relief as being able to do my job competently is the most important aspect of my time here.

Apart from training, I have had a bit more free time this week so I've finally managed to get into the gym again. There are two crew gyms and the passenger gym, which is consistently pretty busy. There is however a big steam room and sauna up there, and so I make it up there sometimes.

Saturday is the last day of each cruise, and for me that means working the farewell show. This is an easy day, although the rest of the band also take part in 'The Parade' after the shows. I guess that there was a musician previously who didn't want to be involved, which means that I get out of this ridiculousness...but basically, the whole entertainment team don crazy costumes and march up and down the 'royal promenade' in the middle of the ship in a big circus themed parade led by mascot elephant 'Navigator Nelly'. It is very silly but kind of fun, and definitely a memorable way to end a cruise.

Other work has been good as well. We played the shows with Gary Williams again, and with another guest act, a Violin Player named Vincenzo Gentile. This guy played a lot of classical stuff and so it was a tough show to play with such a short rehearsal. We played Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the overture from Barber of Seville, The Marriage of Figaro and a few other international favourites. He went down pretty well with the audience, and it was good practice for my classical playing.

On Sunday I made it into Civitavecchia (Italy) for a wander around and got myself a genuine Italian espresso. It was good, and the weather was extremely hot, although I had to be back relatively early for more training.

I had my first taste of Messina (also in Italy) on Monday, and this seems like a fairly big town. Again I wandered around for a bit before finding a cafe where I could sit with Mollie.

We ported in Piraeus again on Wednesday, and I made it onto a crew tour into Athens. The coach drove around to various sights including the Panathenaic Stadium which was cool, and then arrived onto the Acropolis to climb the steps up to the Parthenon. I had a lot of fun, and learned some stuff too.

I missed out on a tour in Turkey yesterday because of a boat drill, plus a bunch of meetings and whatnot. This stuff seems like just as much of a drag as I remember it being. I got out for a bit though and treated myself to a proper Turkish kebab and some genuine fake trainers.

Today we are in Souda (Crete), and one of my trainings got postponed until next week. This gave me some time to see the port, and I dragged a lot of the band out to play Frisbee with me. We had fun, and then ate Gyros (like mini doner kebabs) and drank beer. It has been our day off too, so I have been super relaxed.

Thursday 18th July 2013: Day 5

Well, the end of last week was a nightmare for sorting out last minute medical stuff in time to fly out to Rome for my ship contract. Most of Thursday and Friday were spent running around trying to get stuff finalised. We did catch the opening night of Spamalat at MSU on Thursday, which actually was really good, and then Mollie and I ended up spending Saturday night at the Mall of Minneapolis so that I could get an instant drug screening and still make it to the airport on Sunday. We had dinner at a nice Italian place called Tucci Benucch in the Mall of America.

I made it to the ship on Sunday afternoon, and after a bearable 12-hour trip I was thrust straight into rehearsals. The first gig was the Welcome aboard show, which features a big piano solo with the production cast. It went well, and I slept well that night.

The Navigator of the Seas is quite a bit bigger than the Norwegian Sun, although they are about the same age. It has some impressive features...the theatre is classy, and they have a cast of ten ice-dancers that do a show on the ice rink. I will have to check that out when I get a chance.

This week has been super busy for me with training, practicing and gigs. I have been in trainings every day, and a lot of it is basic common sense safety stuff, although we get a little tour up to the bridge, and it's always fun to see the dials and controls that are used drive the ship.

As for work, well besides the welcome aboard show, the production show, a big band set for 'captain's cocktails' and a jazz cabaret with the production singers, we have played with two guest acts...motown singers Soul Satisfaction and Rat Pack style crooner Gary Williams, who apparently played Sinatra in the West End. These shows were a lot of fun, and the 9-piece band creates a really big sound. The musicians are all great too, and nice guys. I have been managing to keep up with all the stuff that I'm supposed to play, and so far the production show has been my biggest challenge.

The show is called Now & Forever and is a Broadway review similar to NCL's Encore! Production show. I had to wear my tux because the orchestra pit moves up and down throughout the performance, and so there are times where we are in view. This is fun, although it quickly gets a bit hot and sweaty.

I have been the last day of land yet because I have been busy with training. However, I did manage to get out into Piraeus (Greece) yesterday, although I used my time mainly to catch up with emails and other internet stuff as the internet on board is terrible and expensive. Then today we were in Kusadasi (Turkey) and I had a bit of chance to look around and whatnot. This town is just full of peddlers and stores selling genuine fakes of everything and anything, and the persistent call-to-prayer was an interesting touch too. I am excited to have some time to check out the tours and stuff on offer in order to make the most of my short time here.

I have met a few people so far, mainly from the entertainment department, and everybody seems to approve of my playing. That is the first step to gaining some respect, and so I'm glad it's working out. The crew bar is a pretty big area and drinks are relatively cheap, so it is a good place to relax after the gig.

Wednesday 10th July 2013

So I've been having a good time out in the sticks. On July 3rd we headed over to 'long lake' in Wisconsin. One of Mollie's dad's colleagues owns a huge cabin out there and so we ended up hanging out with around 25 other people for the evening. We played beanbags (throw the bag into the hole...it's better that it sounds), drank some beer, barbecued and set out across the lake on the boat to watch the fireworks. Apparently, super famous redneck comedian 'Larry the Cable Guy' lives on the 17-mile long lake too, and he holds fireworks every year on 4th July weekend because it is also his anniversary. In the evening we did the campfire thing which was kind of fun. They were all fun people.

We spent the next few days at another of Kevin's colleagues place about a half-hour drive away. He lives on 'Red Cedar Lake', in another beautiful cabin. These days were filled with more lake fun, swimming, boating, tubing and waterskiing. There were also more fireworks across the lake on 4th July. For dinner, we ate a 'dump dinner'. This was a new concept for me, but seemed like a great way to feed a lot of people. Basically, they cooked up a big pan of sweet corn, sausage, shrimp, potatoes and other bits and bobs and then just dumped it out onto a disposable tablecloth. Then it is like a free-for-all.

On Friday we drove back to Minnesota, up to the north of the state to a small town called Ely, where Mollie's grandparents live. This was another cabin on a lake, and so we did some more swimming, boating, and canoeing. Mollie's Grammy and I are good friends and so it was good to see her again. I got a chance to check out an old gramophone, which was very cool. I have decided that music sounds better from a vinyl, and so I will be sure to get a record player when I have my own place. We also hung out with Mollie's cousin...Amber is 15 and seemed like a nice kid. We saw some live music in town, watched some movies, made ice-cream, played more beanbags and did a little more of our few days up there.

Today I drove the 5 hours back to Minneapolis, and although we were super tired, I managed to spend some time sorting out more documents and stuff or my ship contract. This has been a super long process and Mollie has been very patient and supportive driving me around everywhere to get stuff sorted. I am excited to go on Friday, but I still have a few things to sort out before that. I also bought a new laptop as mine was starting to act up. It is a touchscreen with Windows 8, and I am still deciding what I think about it. It's working ok so far though...just taking a bit of getting used to.

Tuesday 2nd July 2013

Ok...a bit of a turn up for the books this week. I've been offered another ship contract, this time with Royal Caribbean. I have a couple of ships to choose from and although I turned down the full 7 months, after talking to Mollie I decided to take a 5-week fill-in contract on the Navigator of the Seas. I will fly out to Rome in a couple of weeks and do 7-day cruises around the Mediterranean as the showband pianist.

Anyway, aside from this I've filled my week with constructive fun with the girl and her family. Mollie and I hung out on Tuesday, took a walk and went for a swim at 'The Pit', which I guess is a local quarry that has filled with water. There's a little beach area there and it seems popular with the locals, so that was fun.

I was back at MSU on Wednesday night. Spamalat sounds like a lot of fun, and I am enjoying watching the Music Director do his thing. His name is Nick Wayne, and I talked to him about maybe getting a voice lesson too before I leave for the ship. I have also been able to play the piano a bit in one of the rehearsal rooms there, which is something that I have missed since being back on land.

On Thursday we went to a music event in town during the day. It was called 'songs on the lawn' and featured a bunch of local bands and food stands and whatnot. It was good, and then we went to feed the goats and lambs and llamas at the local park. In the evening, Mollie dragged me along to a 'Bodypump' fitness class. It was a pretty intense barbell routine to music, and I felt a bit gay because I was the only guy in the room. However I did ache for a couple of days afterwards and so it must have been a good workout.

Friday was a bit of a write-off. Mollie spent all day driving me around town to try and get my medical sorted for this contract. It was a bit of a nightmare, but we had a couple of drinks with her dad up in Minneapolis before having a pretty quiet night.

On Saturday we set out early to see one of the local College dorm buildings being blown up. I've only seen that stuff on TV in the past and so it was a bit of novelty for me. After that I went with Mollie and her parents to watch a baseball game in the twin cities (Minneapolis & St Paul). The 'Twins' were playing the Kansas City 'Royals', and we had great seats so it was a lot of fun.

The last couple of days have been pretty relaxed. I have spent a bit more time at MSU, and have been trying to sort out the rest of the paperwork for the ship. We have also been preparing to set off tomorrow for a week over in Wisconsin and up in North Minnesota for 4th July fun at various lake cabins. We will hang out with Mollie's grandparents and some family friends. It should be a lot of fun.

Monday 24th June 2013

Well I've finally been able to spend time with my girl again. My flight from Vancouver last week really was pleasant. It all went smoothly and I made it to Vegas in the night. I met Mollie and her parents at the airport and they drove to the Desert Club Resort just off the main strip. Her uncle has a timeshare there and so I met them it was a good deal, and he was there with his wife and kids too. I spent them on the ship last November and they are fun, so the 8 of us hung out a lot during our time there.

On Tuesday we grabbed breakfast at an IHOP and had a walk around the strip for a bit. We barbecued in the evening and then headed to see 'Kat' at the MGM Grand. This is another show from The God of Solei, which I love, and this show really was incredible! We stopped by the Bellagio to watch the fountains, and then headed back to the resort where we played in the pool and the hot-tub with a few beers.

We saw another Cirque show on Wednesday. It was the brand new 'Michael Jackson - One' at the Mandalay Bay. It was another great show and was a lot of fun. In the daytime we hung out by the pool and played some games with the kids. Mollie's parents had to sit through a timeshare presentation as part of their stay, and sure enough after a few hours her dad came out with a timeshare. We barbecued again and had a few drinks before the show.

We flew back to Minnesota on Thursday evening, but before this we took a trip to the 'Mob Museum' and learned all about the gangs and gangsters from the 20s-30s. Then we ate at the 'Mob Cafe' close by where I managed to get a pint of Guinness. It was great, and we even made it to some famous pawn shop just off the older Fremont strip. Apparently it features in a TV show here in the States called 'Pawn Stars'. It didn't mean much to me, but Mollie enjoyed it.

Friday was another fun day. It was good to see Mollie's brother again, Nick, and his new girlfriend Steph. It was her birthday and so we went out to celebrate at Chankaska local winery. We tasted a bunch of wines and ate some great pizza. In the daytime I met up with the Music Director from Mollie's University. He is a super nice guy and so I am going to shadow him for their upcoming production of Monty Python's 'Spamalot' at MSU (Minnesota State University) just to see how he works and whatnot. We also took a trip to Walmart to pick up some food, and I bought a DVD Surround Sound system for Mollie's house to say thank you to her parents for taking me to Vegas.

I can't believe that I had another birthday on Saturday. I've made it to the grand old age of 26, and to celebrate I went to play Mini Golf with Steph, Nick and Mollie. It was fun, and afterwards we hit the Mall of America in Minneapolis. For dinner, the four of us met Mollie's parents at Osoo, the new sushi restaurant in town. Sushi was great, and the waitress brought out some battered ice cream with a candle in as the staff all sang happy birthday. That was nice, if a little strange.

I hung out yesterday at the house and chopped down a big old tree with Mollie's dad and brother. It was a pretty big task, but we barbecued in the evening and drank some home-brewed beer. They also pulled out an ice cream birthday cake for me, which went down well.

Tonight I will sit in on a Spamalat rehearsal at MSU, and then Mollie and I have reservations at a nice Italian restaurant in town. It feels good to be back on land, although so far it is proving quite expensive!

