



A MODERN 'GRAND TOUR' (OR TWO)

In 2007 Julie Rae, then at the Central Highlands Regional library, suggested a tour for Victorian public librarians to see the best libraries in the world. After a reality check (no, we can't go around the world in 90 days) an itinerary was drawn up, a travel consultant engaged and the adventure began. Christine Mackenzie recalls the highlights.

From my experience, the best libraries are in the Nordic countries and The Netherlands, and we also became aware that there was a conference being organised in Copenhagen, so that fitted in very nicely with our tour plans. To add an Asian flavour, we had stopovers to see the excellent Singapore libraries on the way over and Hong Kong libraries on the way home.

Some of the highlights of that tour in 2008 were not about libraries. The authentic Finnish sauna at the gymnasium built for the Helsinki Olympic Games in 1952 eased the muscles after the long plane trip and bonded us all in a special way. The late afternoon reception hosted by the Stockholm City Council at their small gatekeeper's house perched on top of a hill overlooking the magic of this beautiful city and its islands, complete with a storyteller and music is another special memory; as is walking around Copenhagen and quickly getting familiar with this small charming city.

And then there were the libraries – the largest public library in Europe, the fabulous Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam, surely the pinnacle of public libraries at this time, opened in 2007. DOK, the Delft Public Library is the coolest library in the world, home of the Shanachies and innovation. We visited Malmo, with its Calendar of Light added to the original building and its rival in the beauty stakes, the Black Diamond in Copenhagen, with its stunning architecture and space overlooking the canal. And Sunday evening at the Asplund library in Stockholm, just us and our hosts, enjoying a reception and a tour of the library; dark and moody with its rich decoration and furnishings.

Such a success was this first tour that people started asking – when is the next one? There was plenty of interest and in June last year we headed off for the USA and ALA in Washington DC. The US trip started in

Los Angeles, then Seattle, Chicago, Columbus, ALA and finished in New York.

Again many of the highlights were non-library and undoubtedly the one experience none of us will forget is having dinner with the first lady, Michelle Obama. It had seemed a little excessive when we pulled up in our taxis at a fairly modest looking restaurant in Hollywood to be patted down by Secret Service men and have our handbags searched, but once inside we saw why.

There was the Saturday morning we spent walking around Oak Park in suburban Chicago visiting Frank Lloyd Wright's home and office and the streets of houses designed in the Prairie style. The cocktail party at the Library of Congress with colleagues at the ALA International reception was special, as was our final dinner at a very smart restaurant facing onto Gramercy Park in our very own private dining room.

And the libraries were a feast for the eyes. The Los Angeles Public Library with its Egyptian influences and beautiful fountains and gardens and the multi-award

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winning Seattle library were great starters. That is where we also spent over an hour with Susan Hildreth, now the Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services in Washington, who shared her ideas about the future of libraries. We saw the monumental Chicago Public Library, purposely built in the early 90s to mimic the traditional style and make a statement about the importance of libraries to the city and Columbus Library, an original Carnegie building that has been adapted and renovated to ensure that it can deliver excellent services and had just been recognised as the ALA Library of the Year before we arrived. And to finish off the tour there was the New York Public Library, in all its glory and whimsies.

“Sometimes you can travel a long way and end up at the same place,” says an ad for wine in a local supermarket window. This is a good analogy for library tourism. There is a reassuring familiarity about going around the world and finding colleagues who share your passions and values and who delight in introducing you to their cities and libraries that, while exciting and different, are also the same.

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