

Wednesday August 24 - Heading to L.A.

I was lucky that I planned to do absolutely nothing the morning of our departure. I aimed to arrive at the barn at 7:30 am, and we weren't getting picked up until 11, so I gave myself plenty of wiggle room should anything not go according to plan. Since I had to keep working and taking care of all of our horses, I always made sure to start planning and packing well in advance; usually I have my list made and the first trunk started about a month in advance. We also keep show items packed away in a separate trunk so they are always ready to go. Because I had planned so far ahead I had nothing left to do on Wednesday morning except get Hex dressed and loaded. It was a good thing I did! Sabine had forgotten her drivers license at a store, so I went to pick it up for her as she had an early flight. Once I got to the barn I saw that Jetson had half pulled off a shoe overnight! Nothing went that terribly wrong and it all ended up fine, but I sure was glad that I had everything ready to go the night before.

Our shipper Brent arrived right at 11:00. We got Hex and all of our luggage loaded onto the truck quickly and were heading down the driveway right on time. We were off to a good start!

We made one stop in Temecula to pick up a girl, Sarah, and her cute gray gelding, Kingsbridge. We continued right on schedule.

It's nearly impossible to predict L.A. traffic. While we had planned to arrive to LAX at about 3:30, we flew right through the city and arrived about two hours early. Unfortunately, this meant we had to wait.

Behind LAX, right near the ocean, there is a small facility called Jet Pets where our horses spent the night. This was both so the horses could rest before the long flight and so they could complete their five-hour quarantine under supervision, together.

We arrived to a line of about five horse trailers, waiting for a USDA veterinarian to arrive. At about 5:00, they opened the gates to Jet Pets to admit one trailer at a time, unloading one horse at a time to get their chip scanned and their temperature taken by the USDA vet. Each horse was then led into their stall, which had been fully sanitized following the previous horse's stay. The staff at Jet Pets were incredibly organized, taking careful instructions for exactly when and what each horse should be fed, and so on. We planned to meet at 3:30 the following morning, and Karl took me to my hotel.

Karl of Apollo Equine Transport is the mastermind behind ours and many other horses' journeys to and from Europe. He organized absolutely everything from our flight and transport itinerary to all of the necessary paperwork. He was absolutely essential in organizing our whole journey to Germany, from stall to stall. We couldn't have made this journey so smoothly without him!

Thursday, August 25 - Flying to Belgium

Karl picked me up bright and early to head back to Jet Pets. We got the horses loaded onto two slant-load trailers (there were eight horses on the plane) and we headed to the cargo area of LAX.

In the parking lot right next to FedEx trucks unloading into the same warehouse, we moved the horses from their trailers to their shipping container boxes, in which they would stay until their arrival in Belgium. I have always wondered how this was done! There was a sort of raised chute that connected the trailer to the boxes. It had a ramp which lay flush with both the trailer floor and the boxes, so the horses didn't have to go down or up any ramps. It had high sides and an open roof, so the horses didn't feel claustrophobic. We untied one horse at a time, turned them around to walk into the chute, where they had their microchips scanned again, before loading into the shipping box just like a trailer. We secured panels to the front, back, and side of each horse's compartment before closing the ramp to each box. Hex shared his box with Sarah's gelding, so they both had plenty of room to stretch and move. The other six horses were much smaller, so they shipped with three per box and also had plenty of room.

Once the horses were safely tucked into their boxes, they were moved into the warehouse (alongside plenty of other miscellaneous cargo, including one very fancy-looking car) while we humans got checked in. We did this right in the warehouse office; they checked our passports, wrote their numbers on a piece of paper, and scanned us using those handheld metal detecting wands. They quickly went through our luggage (as the warehouse x-ray machine was down) and let us into the warehouse to wait with the horses.

I wish I could share with you some pictures and videos of this part of the trip! Unfortunately, Qatar has an extremely strict policy against taking pictures or video, so I wasn't able to capture any of this part of our journey. Instead, I will try to describe it as well as I can!

After maybe about an hour or less of waiting, they began loading the plane. Each bundle of cargo was loaded the same way, whether it was stacks of boxes tied together or metal sided containers like our horses were in. They lined each container up on a platform, which then raised like an elevator into a large doorway in the side of the plane. Once at the height of the plane, there are mechanical rollers that work to snugly fit each box in, starting at the front of the plane and packing things in towards the back. The horses were thankfully one of the last things to load. Once they were safely on we climbed a tall, rickety, spiraling staircase into the front of the plane. I wasn't really sure what to expect, as I had heard stories of both passenger/cargo planes, where you basically sit up in a normal plane while the back half carries cargo, and I'd heard horror stories of grooms sitting in an all-cargo plane, right with the horses in the freezing cold. What I experienced was in between, and I think the best case scenario. The plane had the cockpit in front, a small bunk room for the pilots to sleep, a quite nice bathroom, and a very small cabin. It had nine seats, in two rows. We had access to the "kitchen," which was nicely stocked with snacks, meals, cold drinks, and coffee. The only passengers on the plane were Sarah, another and much more experienced professional groom named Jason, and me. As soon as we were at cruising altitude, we had access to the rest of the plane, including all the food we wanted! It was so nice to be able to get up and stretch throughout the flight. The meals they provided were amazing; I had a mushroom and spinach omelet with sausage, cherry tomatoes, and fresh fruit for breakfast, a croissant with jelly as a warm snack, then a chicken dinner with steamed vegetables, mashed potatoes, and a cup of berries for dessert. This is the best way to fly!

Jason suggested, and Sarah and I agreed, that we only check on the horses every two to three hours, so we wouldn't disturb them too much. If you spend too much time with them on the plane they will tend to get restless and fidgety. We bundled up (as the cargo hold is kept at a brisk 10°C/50°F) and snuck through the tightly-packed cargo, walking sideways flat against the wall of the plane. Each time we visited the horses, they were either sleeping or eating; they were really quite happy in there. Despite the freezing temperatures, their little enclosed boxes stayed toasty, while the cold air circulated well and kept them from getting too stuffy. I was thrilled with how well Hex ate and drank! Keeping the horses well hydrated and their stomachs moving is key to having happy horses at your destination.

I talked to Jason and Brent (our shipper, who was also a professional groom for many years) and got some great advice for the next time that I fly with a horse. I'll be sure to pack a

bag with a spare halter and lead, some sedative (not that I think I would need it, but better to have it than not), apples (I had these, they were a great hydrating snack for the horses, and if you teach them ahead of time they like to bob in their water bucket for them, encouraging them to drink), some mash (I also had this), a pocket knife (we had one hay net get stuck in the panels and no one had a knife to cut it free), and any little things that will help keep them comfortable. The boxes have about a foot and a half of space in front of the horses, where we kept jugs of water and extra hay nets, and a tote with these things would easily fit here too, for easy access during the flight. It's always better to be over-prepared!

We checked on the horses one last time just before our descent. Jason, since he was the most experienced and also because he had a safety vest (which is a requirement during taxiing, takeoff, and landing), went back again to check on them just as we landed in Liège, Belgium.

Friday August 26 - Belgium to Germany

Since they were the last on the plane, the horses were one of the first things off the plane in Liège. They got a little startled from the sound of the surrounding aircraft, but the airport staff was great and ran to shut off a nearby plane until the horses were settled and a safe distance away. They really took us seriously when we asked them to do something for the horses, which I appreciated!

They connected the three horse boxes to a cart and, like a small train, they drove around the airport, with us three grooms following behind closely in a shuttle.

The horses waited in their boxes while we quickly ran inside for "customs," which just meant handing over our passports to some people in an office for a minute. We ran back out to unload the horses. Each box was backed like a shipping container to the entry of a warehouse-like building. They stepped down a short ramp into a holding area, where their microchips were scanned again. We then walked down a hallway into the Liège Horse Hotel, which is a very clean, spacious barn with four wings of about ten stalls. I put Hex in the stall in the furthest corner, as there were quite a few mares that would be staying in the barn with him. Luckily, he is such a good stallion and I think he was too tired to really be bothered by them. After Sarah and I helped Jason unload his six horses, we gave everyone hay and water, then closed the barn doors and shut off the lights so they could rest while we waited for our transports to arrive.

Jason had a train to catch, so Sarah and I waited in the grooms' quarters. This was at about 5:00am and our transport wasn't expected until at least 8:00, so we took this opportunity to nap! It felt so good to stretch out after the ten hour flight.

At about 8:30 we started to get a bit nervous that no one had checked on us, so we checked on the snoozing horses and looked to find help. This was challenging as neither of us spoke the language. We even accidentally got locked out of the Horse Hotel for a stressful moment, but eventually we found our drivers and we left to gather our horses' trunks from a warehouse on the opposite side of the airport.

This ended up taking much longer than we had expected, almost four hours, but we eventually got all of our boxes and were quickly on our way back to the Horse Hotel.

The shippers, Sarah, and I quickly got Jason's ponies loaded, then Sarah loaded Kingsbridge, and finally Hex got on his own giant trailer (or a bus, called "lorry") and we were on our way to Germany!

Saturday August 27 - Day 1 in Germany!

Today was our first full day here in Germany! I drove my fancy rental car a quick 10 minutes to the barn and started getting Hex ready for Sabine to ride.

In the days leading up to the show in Ermelo, we stayed at a beautiful facility in Krefeld called Gut Auric. The spacious stalls and big grassy pastures were just what we needed to keep Hex happy and healthy. Between the two indoor arenas, standard outdoor arena, trails through the woods, a galloping track, and even a shallow pond, Sabine had lots of options for keeping variety in Hex's work. The staff were so accommodating and everyone was willing to give me or Sabine a hand, or bit of advice, whenever needed. Krefeld is also Sabine's hometown where she grew up riding horses; it was so fun to listen to her stories and see the places where she spent her childhood. I really hope I can return one day!

Hex is *such* a good stallion. I was so jet-lagged this morning that I didn't realize until halfway through his grooming that I had put him in crossties right next to a mare! He was such a good boy he barely looked at her... or maybe he was just hoping I wouldn't notice, and leave them alone together!

Sabine gave Hex an easy ride, starting with some stretching in the indoor, followed by a hack around the track and through the woods, finishing with a little more stretching in the

outdoor arena. I think I picked up at least a dozen poop piles while she rode; every arena was super busy that morning! I gave him a quick shower, towed him off and gave him a nice warm mash for lunch.

Sabine left at midday to do some horse shopping. So as soon as Hex was settled in his stall, I headed off to one of the many nearby tack stores, Equiva. When I first arrived to the busy strip mall, I thought that my GPS had taken me to the wrong place. Nope, that's just Germany!

Shopping in Europe is one of my favorite things. They carry all of the best brands for so much less than what you would pay in the U.S.! I got a cute red jacket, two pairs of Roeckl gloves, a leash and two collars for my dog Astro, a bottle of special edition coat spray, some braiding supplies, a grain scoop, a Fleck whip, a set of black Eskadron polo wraps, a big tub of banana cookies and a tail brush, all for about 100 euros!

I spent the afternoon at the barn pampering Hex. We started with a handwalk in the smaller (20x40) indoor arena as there was a very cute miniature mare walking around the property, whom Hex found extremely interesting! We then walked for a while around the barns, and eventually made our way to the galloping track, in the middle of which we grazed some of the tall, yet sadly brown grass. Though Germany is still far more green and lush than California, they too have had a very dry summer.

Sabine came back in the early evening to take Hex for another handwalk and graze while I organized his dinner and breakfast, and finished tidying our areas for the night. He got a second mash on top of his dinner, and we said goodnight!

Sunday August 28

I woke up feeling SO sick! But luckily a few hours at the barn always makes me feel better, and it worked again today.

Since it was a Sunday, we had an easy day. I spent the morning pampering Hex and organizing before tacking up for Sabine to ride at 11:00. One of my favorite things about being here is getting to watch Sabine and lots of other people ride. Usually when I'm grooming at home, I'm too busy to sit and really watch some riding with my full attention. It's been so amazing to see how much Hex has changed in the year that Sabine has had him. He's really grown in his gaits and his confidence, and really is looking like a serious dressage horse! I can't wait to see how they compare to the competition in Ermelo.

After Sabine's ride I gave Hex a bath, then turned him out in one of Gut Auric's grassy paddocks. He's very well-behaved outside and never runs, but he loves to show off his big impressive trot and shake his neck and do all sorts of leaps in the air. He also found a perfect sandy spot where he rolled and rolled and rolled. So, after a couple of hours of this, he got another bath.

We had an open afternoon so I ran into the town of Krefeld to find the only restaurant open on a Sunday, and ate lunch in the apartment. It feels so luxurious to leave the barn in the middle of the day—it's not something I've ever done!

During our week in Germany I stayed with Sabine's childhood friend, Tanja. She was a wonderful host and incredibly gracious.

I went back to the barn in the early afternoon to take Hex for a walk around the property, do some of his stretches and therapies, and feed him his dinner. Then, I went back to the apartment and was in bed by 8:00!

Monday August 29

I woke up feeling so much better. Apparently all I needed was a good eleven hours' sleep! It was a bit chilly this morning so Hex was fresh and ready to go for Sabine's ride. He seems to have recovered from our three days of travel super well (and probably better than Sabine and I have).

We left before noon to do some horse shopping. Though my understanding of the German language is barely at the two-year-old level, it's so incredibly fascinating to listen to the really thoughtful, theoretical conversations had by Sabine and some of these top German dressage trainers. Dressage is such an *incredibly* old sport in this part of the world, that visiting all of these generations-old barns and talking with people makes American dressage seem like its still in infancy (which it kind of is). Here are some of the notes that I tried to take on my phone from the backseat of our car, on our way to see some horses, translating in my head as fast as I could:

Not just riding action/reaction always but analyzing the horse, it's mind, body and spirit/soul/emotions, controlling not just what you see (the head and neck) but the feet, legs, shoulders, withers. Considering a horse's formative 1, 2, 3 years and what that does to them emotionally, having no human contact. Understanding the why, why is the right rein stronger, where does that begin? Poll, shoulder, back, hind leg, etc. Analyzing foals standing in the field

(standing LF and LH out, RF and RH under the body, the left hoof will want to grow out and the right hoof small and under the foot, the weight is on the right shoulder always so the right side is heavier/tighter/blocked.) Where do you begin, supple the right side or close the left? And how? And when? And why? You have to know and understand your horse.

Another one of my favorite things about traveling is seeing all of the little things that are the same, yet different to how we do things in America. Gas stations are one example. For one, you pump gas into your car first, then go into the store to pay at the register! There is almost no paying at the pump. To me, this was crazy! From what I could tell, there is nothing stopping you from just pumping €90 of fuel and driving off except your conscience, the honor system, and maybe some security cameras. The inside of the gas stations are very different, too, with delicious fresh sandwiches, and coffee stations where you can get lattes or cappuccinos or anything you'd like. I could get used to this!

After horse shopping I ran back to the barn to feed and walk Hex, then back out to Sabine's old childhood trainer, Steffi's barn to watch her teach some very talented pony riders, preparing to compete at the Bundeschampionate and the German Championships in the following weeks. These kids are so impressive! There is definitely a common theme in the well taught German riders. Of course, like anywhere, you can find some not so great riding. But in general I have found (and this is not a new phenomenon) that the German riders have a certain softness, yet high standards to their riding. Everything the rider does is done with a purpose. There is a clear ask, action, and reward, always. The young riders in particular all have very soft, giving yet playful hands, deep and quiet seats, but they are all looking up with determination in their eyes. I hope I can ride as well as some of these 14-year-olds some day!

I was back at the barn by 8:00 to take Hex out one more time, then it was back to the apartment for me to eat a late dinner and try and decipher some of my notes from the day.

In the days leading up to the Championships, we fell into a routine that more or less stayed the same. I arrived to Gut Auric at about 8:00 each morning to take Hex for a little walk and therapy session. I would then get him ready for Sabine, and take videos during their ride. After, I took care of Hex, set up his meals, cleaned his tack, and tidied our area. Other than turning out and evening handwalking, my afternoons were usually pretty free. Some days I

would head to the local Bäckerei Höhen for a cappuccino and sandwich, or run to the tack store to pick something up for Hex (or myself!)

On Tuesday the 30th, Sabine and I went to one my favorite, and one of the biggest local tack stores, Voss, less than half an hour north of Gut Auric. Shopping in Germany is so much fun! I love finding new things that aren't sold in the U.S., and it is so interesting to see the difference in trends. For example, in Germany most people like to wear riding tights, while in the States most riders prefer breeches. Also in Germany, it's common for horses to have stylish halters in different nylon fabrics with sparkles or soft padding, while most American horses don plain leather halters with the occasional nameplate.

Especially with the exchange rate in our favor, the prices of everything were so much lower than they are at home. At Voss, I bought three sets of Eskadron polo wraps for the price of one set in the U.S., and they weren't even on sale. I was very glad that I packed lightly on my way here, because my suitcase would be bursting at the seams for the journey home.

After doing some serious damage to my credit card, I spent more afternoons visiting local stables and observing their riding. On Thursday, I got the chance to head to a stable in Rheinberg, home to none other than Isabell Werth! Unfortunately she was away for the day, but I got to tour her beautiful stables and observe some of her riders for a couple of hours. The whole barn and arenas were busy yet very peaceful, and everyone was very friendly. I was surprised to see lots of young riders running around, and I wondered if there was maybe a camp going on that week?

Here are the notes I took while at Isabell's:

- Most riders mount from the ground, or use a step hidden in the wall of the arena
- Folded saddle pad in half under a surcingle when lunging, for the horse's comfort
- Riding very forward-thinking
- Most horses wear polos with under wraps on front legs, and boots on hind legs
- Not always the most fancy horses walking into the arena but they become very beautiful with the work, the way they are taught to use their bodies makes them really grow and become more expressive
- Stalls are all very airy, bright, and clean, as well as spacious, maybe 12x14 feet

- Overall it was a really nice atmosphere, lots of people said “Hallo” to me and it looks like everyone contributes to the work, the riders help put away horses, the stable hands are happy and friendly, the horses are all quiet and happy and playing in their paddocks

The next day I visited the stables of Heiner Schiergen, whom I had never heard of but is a very successful and popular trainer at the national level in Germany. I was worried when I arrived that everyone had gone home for the day. The stables were quiet, the lights were off, and the aisles swept. After walking through the stables I found a man cleaning stalls. “Heiner?” I asked him. He pointed back towards a path in the trees, which I followed. The path was short and the trees were thick until I came to a clearing with a very busy dressage arena in the middle. There were seven riders all circling around who I came to find out was Heiner, giving instruction to whoever was closest or maybe seemed most needy at that time. He saw me, pointed to a bench by E, and continued teaching. I got out my Notes app and started typing as Heiner told me the ages and pedigrees of each horse. This is what I wrote:

- One youngish girl on a 7yo stallion, who was a bit difficult but she rode very well
- Half steps from the ground Heiner taps very lightly with a short in-hand whip, sort of on the tail just above the hocks, like behind the stifles
- All horses very forward from behind but also waiting in the hand, not running through the rider but to the bit
- 9yo Johnson ridden by an older man, I’m not sure who, this horse also seemed a bit difficult, especially when he was backed apparently, but very talented, the older man warmed up in posting half steps and some canter before Heiner got on and finished the ride

It seemed like their system was for the seven riders to all ride in front of Heiner, getting help when necessary, then he would ride his own horse while they put their horses away and got the next ones ready. Some new riders came to the arena in the second group as well.

- In between lessons Heiner rode a 9yo Sir Donnerhall x Florescount (I think?) that I liked a lot, he had just done his first “real” Grand Prix the previous weekend
- Lines of changes on diagonal always ending in the counter canter, I’m assuming to make the horse wait and not run through the corner or anticipate the final change

- Passage almost always in two point or posting
- (Second set of lessons) One very young rider was absolutely flying around on her fancy little FEI pony, who was trained to the PSG; she was showing off with piaffe and flying changes and extended trots, an absolutely brave and gutsy little rider
- In the half steps from the ground holding whip parallel to horse and use handle to tap knees and use flick end to tap behind (walking alongside the horse holding whip in outside hand)
- All horses hack before and after rides, to and from the barn
- Younger girl riding an older schoolmaster, Heiner got on briefly after she warmed up and did some tuning-up of half steps/changes for her
- Rider's legs never squeezing or holding, always breathing with the horse
- Never big reactions from the rider but very quiet riding with good reactive response from horse, very effective riding, all horses well between the rider's seat, leg, and hand

Heiner and his riders were all very friendly and so generous to let me spend my afternoon sitting at their arena. During the second group of riders Heiner gave me a bit more of a background on each horse and rider, and I wish I could have stayed there all day. But after a few hours, I had to head back to Gut Auric to put Hex away for the evening.

For dinner, my host Tanja invited me to the Biergarten in the forest of Krefeld. On the way, we stopped at the beautiful stable where she keeps her horse. I absolutely love visiting all of these different stables, and this one especially had some really interesting designs! This barn featured: (you may have to check the photos to see what I mean by some of these descriptions)

- Stables with high ceilings and sun roofs, so lots of air and sun for the horses
- Loft for storing blankets, each horse has their own long rack hanging from the ceiling
- Large closets for each boarder to keep their belongings
- Turnout boots are kept on pegs mounted on a wall, one or two for each horse, so they are kept tidy and can air out while not in use
- Ponies or horses who have to get special food or medications have stacks of containers sitting right on their stall wall, for the ease of use of the stable hands
- Hay nets are all weighed to ensure the proper amount of hay is fed, and dozens are prepared in advance for each feeding

- Corrals with multiple horses has a big, roofed house (structure with walls and roof) around a round bale of hay, which lifts and lowers according to a timer, so the horses don't overeat
- In paddocks which have multiple horses, there is a big round bale of hay. To keep the horses from overeating, they created an automated feeding system. There was a shed-like structure suspended by a cable. On a timer, the structure would raise and lower around the hay.
- Each stall has a small "in-and-out" run right onto the pavement of the parking lot, so the horses can go outside when they want, but it's kept clean and doesn't flood (due to the pavement.) This is in addition to the large grass paddocks that they share during the day
- A cute touch, they have a statue of a butler right next to the arena, who can hold your jacket while you ride

After I purchased some honey made from the stable's own bees, Tanja and I were off to the Biergarten!

When we arrived, I was not too surprised to see that there were dozens of bikes in the parking lot—far more bikes than cars! The whole place was beautiful, hidden in the trees and sitting on the edge of a river with a big lawn where people were reading or having a picnic. Close to the building were picnic tables where we sat and ate. Our waiter didn't speak English, and I couldn't read the menu, so I asked Tanja to order me the most German thing on the menu, which ended up being Jägerschnitzel (pork with a mushroom sauce) and Berliner Weisse mit Schuss (German beer with a shot of Waldmeister: a sweet, woodruff-flavored syrup). It was delicious!

Sabine and I had a bit of a panic in the couple of days before our departure to Ermelo. Especially because we are traveling with a stallion, there is a lot of paperwork necessary to show that the stallion was accounted for at all times while he was in Europe, mostly to prove that he did not breed. I knew I had to have his stallion tracing papers signed by a veterinarian, but what we did not realize was that for the show, we also needed a health certificate signed by a special German government vet, who are much harder to find and get scheduled than a regular vet. Plus, the vet who had already signed the stallion tracing papers had signed in the wrong box. After lots of phone calls to friends and friends of friends, we were able to get a special German government vet to make a health certificate and sign our papers the morning of our departure—phew!

Tuesday September 6

Sabine took Hex for a hack and a light ride in the morning, and after his shower and mash, we loaded him up along with all of our things. Auf Wiedersehen, Deutschland!

Sabine and I drove ahead of Hex in her rental car (we had returned mine a couple days before), and stopped for some lunch at a rest stop on the highway in Holland. Holy cow, it could not have been more different than our American rest stops! There was a cook preparing fresh smoothies and juices, sandwiches, soups, and salads, plus there was fresh bread and delicious coffee available. Heaven!

While eating we got a call from Hex's driver that she had arrived to the show, but they wouldn't let her unload. We finished our lunch and raced to meet her at the showgrounds to find out what was going on.

From what I understand, two things went wrong to make us arrive two hours too early. One, we had told the transport company that Hex should arrive at the showgrounds at 4:00pm, which was when the showgrounds were supposed to open. Somehow, whether the traffic was better than planned or this wasn't communicated well enough, they arrived at 3:00 instead. Second, Sabine and I, as well as the five or so other horse vans that arrived before we did, were under the impression that the showgrounds opened at 4:00, but when we arrived the show office said they weren't opening until 5:00. I don't know if this was changed last-minute, or if lots of people somehow all made this same mistake, but long story short, we had to sit in the parking lot for two hours before unloading. Luckily, we were able to park in the shade, and our van had fans and plenty of hay, mash, and water, but no one was happy. People started unloading their horses (mind, mostly very young breeding stallions who had traveled for hours if not days at this point) and were handwalking around the parking lot just to keep them calm. What a nightmare! Luckily everyone stayed safe, and we were all ready to go when they opened the gates at 5:00.

Before entering the stables, each horse had to have their microchip scanned and their temperature taken. To me, this was so stressful! Some of these horses had already been standing around for hours, and were really not happy to stand quietly while being checked. I was so grateful that Hex was a super good boy for this, and we were quickly walking off to the stables. Here we met our third obstacle of the evening, finding our stall. There were no signs that I saw (certainly none in English) and I had no record in my email of a stabling chart. So I hand walked

Hex around the barns while everyone scattered to try and find some information. Finally, we found our stall, found the shavings, and got Hex all settled into his new home for the week. We were so fortunate to be put in the permanent barn with automatic waters and windows that opened; and because Hex was in a corner stall, he had two windows! The stalls were really nice and roomy, and he rolled and rolled happily while we set up our Team U.S.A. tack stall.

Sabine's plan had been for Hex to hack in the morning at Gut Auric, which they did, and to school with her coach Christine Traurig at the show in the afternoon. I don't know who found out, but we quickly learned that riding and even lunging was absolutely not allowed anywhere on the showgrounds until Wednesday. We were only allowed to handwalk around the stables in the parking lot. What?! None of us had ever heard of a rule like this, especially at a show where you have lots of nervous and antsy young horses, some arriving after long journeys. So then we had to go back to the drawing board and make a new plan for the week. Christine and I spent half an hour (half an hour!) deciphering and decoding the schedule of the arenas to find out when and where Sabine could ride each day. I copied down the times and arenas where we wanted to school each day, and taped it to the wall of our tack room so there would be no more mistakes.

Wednesday September 7

The next day was pretty quiet other than one more small blip. We lost our tack stall! Sabine rode in the morning, and we headed back to the hotel for a little while in the afternoon. While we were gone, Hex's owner Sandy and bodyworker Julie were ordered by the show management to quickly pull all of our things out of the tack stall and into the aisle in front of Hex's stall. If I've learned one thing on this trip, it's that you have to just go with the flow and make the best out of every situation. So we packed the unnecessary things into one trunk which Julie generously let us keep in her car, and I made do with working out of two trunks. Since we were using the show's hay and stall cleaning tools, this worked out fine. But it sure was crowded! Wednesday was also the day that our stablemates and fellow Team U.S.A. members arrived; Jennifer Hoffman and her two horses, six-year-old Mani's Endeavor and Rondoro Noblesse who would be competing in the Grand Prix, as well as her groom Jenna and her husband Jürgen. It was so fun to have our own little corner of American flags among the sea of orange!

Thursday September 8

We had a huge thunderstorm Wednesday night (at least it seemed huge to this California girl, I don't think my old New England self would have thought much of it!) Which meant that the parking Thursday morning was absolutely flooded. And because the show had officially started, the grooms were no longer allowed to park near the stabling, but on the complete opposite side of the showgrounds. I was *not* happy. I had already killed my barn sneakers earlier in the week (the poor things disintegrated) so I was stuck wearing my nice wool Allbirds sneakers. Sabine made a valiant effort to find me some rainboots but to no avail.

Thursday was the day of the jog for the six-year-old horses, so we had a real schedule to stick to.

In any international event ("CDI"), the horses competing must "jog" (or trot in hand) in front of an FEI veterinarian to judge their soundness, to make sure they are healthy and fit to compete. At the jog they also check each horse's microchip to verify their identity, and take the horse's FEI passport to hold during competition.

Sabine wanted to ride in the morning before the jog. I wasn't sure if I would have enough time to braid in between her ride and her jog, so I decided to braid before her ride. Well, I definitely should have practiced my braiding at Gut Auric, because they were not nearly as good as I would have liked. I decided at the last minute between her ride and the jog to redo them, after purchasing some braiding gel and new waxed thread. While it was stressful, I'm glad I made that decision as the braids looked much better the second time. Phew!

Ahead of time, I had been sure that Hex's paperwork was all in order to present to the jury at the jog. This included his FEI recognition card, his KWPN breed passport, and a paper stating that he has extensions in his tail (this must be declared to the ground jury at the time of the jog). But when I picked up the book to head to the jog, it felt too light. Sabine had taken the breed passport out, and when I asked she said we didn't need it. She certainly knows what she's doing, and has been to many more CDI competitions than I have, but it didn't feel right to just leave the breed passport behind, so I put it in my backpack just in case.

Well, when the time came to give the ground jury Hex's paperwork, sure enough they asked, where is his breed passport? I have to admit I was very relieved and glad that I had brought it with us, and quickly handed it over. Crisis averted! And lesson learned, always listen to your gut and when in doubt, bring everything! I'd much rather walk around with a heavy

backpack than not have access to something I may need, whether at the jog or at the warmup arena. It's so important as a groom to know when to stick to what you know and feel in your gut. I think part of what separates the good grooms from the great grooms is knowing how and when to think for yourself, not just strictly follow orders, and always doing what's best for the horse and the whole team.

That evening, Hex's breeding manager Edgar Schutte of Eurequine Stallions had arranged for him to be seen by the KWPN, to see if they would license him for breeding. The KWPN is known to be the most strict of the registries, and also hard to reach from the U.S. Being at their headquarters in Ermelo was the perfect opportunity for them to see Hex in person. I don't fully understand the KWPN licensing process as it is very complicated, but from what I understand they needed to see him in hand and in person to first judge his conformation, then they would watch his test the following day. I was nervous presenting him, as they only spoke Dutch, and as they also seemed very serious, I wasn't very hopeful that they would approve him. We wouldn't hear the results until much later, anyway. (Edited later to add, they did!)

On the way back to the hotel we saw a glorious double rainbow filling up the whole sky, and I thought that must mean good luck for tomorrow's competition. Once inside my hotel room I turned on the TV and flipped to the only English-speaking news channel to hear that Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II had passed. As a lifelong and passionate equestrian herself, I think our community felt this loss especially. The news station spoke about the unusual number of rainbows around the U.K. on that day, which I thought was really special.

Friday September 9

Friday morning brought the first day of competition for the six-year-old horses. Sabine and Hex were set to compete in Arena 2 at 1:36pm. I arrived a bit early to give Hex his warm mash, go for a couple of hand walks in the morning, then I plugged in my headphones to get in the zone for his braiding and grooming. As a groom, I get even more nervous before a test than I do when I'm the rider! Maybe it's because as a groom, I can do everything as well as I can, but ultimately I have no control over how the warmup or the test goes. It's so nerve-racking!

Christine coached Sabine quietly while I stood by waiting to provide anything Sabine might need. At their time, they went through a path in the berm separating the warmup arena and the competition arena and... the gate was closed. They were the first to go after a break, and the

gate keepers hadn't returned. She stood at the gate, unsure of what to do. I was pretty sure that she would get disqualified if I, as a groom, tried to go in, but I wasn't sure if that would count under the circumstances. Ultimately, the judge at E got out of his box to open the gate (to the laughter and applause of the audience) and Sabine went into the arena to wait for the bell.

They had a really nice test. I didn't see the judge's comments, but from what I remember it was a very clean, if maybe a bit tired test. Hex didn't quite have the amount of brilliance that we know he can show. But for a six-year-old horse who had flown halfway around the world to his first international competition, I think he was absolutely brilliant. They earned a 81.4% to land them in 14th place out of an enormous class of 42 combinations, just one place behind a spot to the Finals.

The way it works at this competition is that every horse competes in the Qualifying class. The top twelve combinations in the qualifying event get a ticket straight to the Finals on Sunday. The remaining horses continue onto the Small Finals, or Semifinals, where the top three then earn a spot to continue onto the Finals. There was a tie for 12th place in this year's Qualifying class, so thirteen horses moved directly onto the Final on Sunday. Since Hex placed 14th, he would have to compete in the Small Final on Saturday to try and earn a top three finish to move onto the Final.

Saturday September 10

Saturday was just as stressful (for me, at least) as Friday. My morning routine was more or less the same as the day before as I prepared for their 11:15 ride time. This is my favorite time, as it gives plenty of time to get everything done without too much waiting around. I followed the same routine as the day before, this time planning for a slightly shorter warmup time. This is also always stressful, because the closer you cut the warmup time, the more precise and on-time everything else needs to be, as there's no room for error!

Christine warmed them up again and they looked fabulous. He really is such a good boy. We pulled their boots at the very last minute, and they were off into the main arena!

Honestly, the whole test was a blur for me, I was so nervous! But from what I remember it was clean and slightly more precise and with better quality than the day before. They finished the test with an 84.4%, with every score above 8, landing them in 4th and once again just one place out of the Finals. The judges commented, "In the walk, super relaxed from the start, elastic

and supple, really powerful trot, very talented canter, well balanced. A really outstanding horse very strong, capable of super high marks.” It was disappointing that they didn’t make it to the Final but I don’t think we could have asked any more of Hex. He absolutely did his job, tried his heart out, and didn’t put a foot wrong the whole weekend. And being the absolute ham that he is, he thought he had won the whole thing, and could not have been more pleased with himself. After a good gallop in the awards ceremony, he had earned himself a warm mash, a massage from Julie, and a nice long vacation in sunny California.

Sunday September 11

I spent most of Sunday morning packing up our things, an enormous feat that I can’t believe I pulled off. I checked Hex out at the show office, made sure that we had the proper stallion tracing paperwork, collected his passport, and our transport arrived a little after lunchtime to take Hex and me to our next stop, the Gelissen headquarters, a few hours away. Hex and I were to spend the night there, getting the final paperwork ready for our flight back to L.A., and we would leave for the airport early Tuesday morning.

No one was there when we arrived, so the driver offered to drive me into town to find some dinner. I ended up getting something that looked like breaded sausage, but ended up being some kind of pork in a peanut butter sauce (which may sound good, but it wasn’t), so I just had fries for dinner. I walked the 45 minutes back to Gelissen before dark, and found a key that had my name on it. I found a door that the key fit into, which I assumed was to be my bedroom for the night. (Remember what I was saying about going with the flow?) I tucked Hex in for the night, and went to bed myself.

Monday September 12

I gave Hex breakfast and walked back into the little town to look for a grocery store. I bought myself breakfast and some snacks for the flight, and a nice construction man helped me check out, which for some reason seemed a more complicated process than it is at Trader Joe’s... I think I was supposed to have some sort of membership or card.

I walked back to the barn through an old cemetery surrounding a beautiful cathedral. None of the doors were open, but it was beautiful to see from the outside. Many of the tombstones dated back to the 16th and 17th centuries.

When I got back to Gelissen, I found a lady in the office and asked when the vet would be coming. She said 1:00. So at 12:30, I sat down in the lobby to wait. I found an old book called *The Leading Stallions of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg of the year 2003*, which was fascinating, and luckily had English translations.

I sat there for a while, never seeing or hearing another person, until finally at 2:30 someone came into the lobby.

Are you with Gorgeous Latino, they asked.

Yes.

Well, he's leaving now. Did you want to go with him?

Eek! I ran upstairs to grab my luggage, and raced into the van. Of course I had been planning for an early morning departure the following morning, but once again you have got to be ready to go with the flow. I asked the driver where we were going, and that's when I found out we were flying out of the Amsterdam airport.

There were already a few lorries there when we arrived so we had to wait for a few minutes before unloading. Just like before, we took Hex off the van, scanned his microchip, and put him in a nice big box with hay and water all ready for him. He had a whole wing of stalls to himself, and I think he appreciated the peace and quiet. The flight crew asked if I wanted a hotel room, and I said yes please! So they made some calls, gave me a printed receipt for the room, and took me to the hotel, just a few minutes away.

The line was long, and the person who dropped me off had to get back to the horses. But when I presented my receipt, the receptionist told me they had booked my ticket at the wrong hotel! Apparently this is a common mistake because there was a line of people standing outside of the hotel, waiting for a shuttle to bring them to the correct hotel. I joined the crowd and called Sabine to figure out how to let the flight crew know that I would be at a different hotel in the morning.

Long story short, it all got sorted out. I had a delicious dinner at the hotel with a flirtatious bartender, and got a few hours of sleep in before my early morning pickup.

Tuesday September 13

I met the shuttle outside my hotel at 4:45 and we headed straight to the horses.

There were two full flights that day, one to L.A. and one to Miami, so we had to receive lots more horses before loading them onto shipping boxes. Hex stayed nice and quiet in his stall while loads of new horses kept coming into the airport.

I was very grateful that Hex was the very last horse to load onto a box, so he didn't have to stand around long. Unlike at LAX, we didn't stay with the horses between loading onto the boxes and onto the plane, I think because this was a much longer distance. Once they were in their boxes they were connected into a long train and slowly transported across the airport, while we took a shuttle into the crew entrance to go through security and get a quick breakfast. It was actually really cool to see where all of the pilots and flight attendants go, behind the scenes. We took another shuttle with our pilots to our plane, a 777 I think, and we climbed up the long and rattly stairs (carrying all of our luggage) onto the plane. We quickly dropped our things off and headed to the cargo hold to get the horses situated. As each box was raised into the plane, we quickly opened up their little windows to give them more air, as the flight was going to be so full (about 38 horses) there wouldn't be room to move between them during the flight.

I have no idea how long this took, but eventually all of the horses and cargo were loaded and the doors closed. We headed into our little cabin with only four seats to get settled for our long flight. I was the only one with a one-way ticket, this time. The three other grooms had to turn right back around as soon as we landed, with another shipment of horses!

The flight was the same as before. We had food and blankets and the chairs on this plane reclined even more, with foot rests. I slept and watched downloaded movies and read by book in between our checks on the horses every two hours. Everyone flew super well, they all drank and ate plenty of hay. I think Hex slept most of the way. Landing went smoothly, and as soon the horses were on the ground they were in the hands of the quarantine crew from JetPets. I followed the pilots through customs, and eventually landed outside of arrivals at LAX. It was a bit of a shock to be standing back in my home country, surrounded by people who have probably never seen a horse in real life, after the adventure I had just had. I had a bit of stress finding a way home, as an Uber was going to cost about \$400, but I eventually found a bus that took me to a train station, which I took to Solana Beach, from where I took an Uber to the barn, where my car was parked and my dog was waiting for me. After three days of traveling, I was home by 11:00 and ready to sleep for a week! I had so much fun on this trip, and learned so much. I am so glad

that I was able to spend this time with Hex and Sabine, and I hope this may open more doors for me in the future! I certainly made lots of new friends and have a renewed taste for adventure!