

Love from T&J

Postcards from Abroad



Janet Waltham

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Janet Waltham

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Love from T & J: Postcards from Abroad

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Front cover: Contemplation in the desert; a break on the long walk
needed to reach the Sossusvlei sand dunes in Namibia.

Back cover: Yes, that's me, posing on the Diana Seat at the Taj Mahal.

Postcards from Abroad

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Love from T & J

When Tony and I first became a team, I had barely travelled further than Skegness. Future aspirations might have encompassed Wales, Scotland, Ireland even, but that was as far as my adventurous spirit reached. Within months, the first trip Tony took me on was to a caving camp in Matienzo, Spain. It poured with rain the entire time, the tent was sodden, the single shop soon sold out of wellingtons, and the shower block..... er..... there was no shower block. I was unceremoniously introduced to the hitherto inconceivable concept of abluting in the bushes, and washing in the freezing cold stream.

Was this what I'd signed up for? Apparently it was. Forty-odd years later I am still here to tell the tales of amazing journeys that we have subsequently been on together, travels that I have been lucky enough to share. And, looking back, I realise that my whole life since we have been together has been one amazing journey.

This book is to share some of it with you. The chapters in the volume all evolved from the email 'postcards' that we sent while we were away. They start in 2003, because that was when we started sending the longer emails, originally just for Tony's mum and my 'ancient aunts' Dorothy and Joan, all of whom were mainly stuck at home due to their age, but were enthusiastic participants in our travels by following our timetable with atlases on dining room tables and savouring the emailed stories. The 'Postcards from Abroad' mailing list gradually expanded to include many more family and friends. All of them were signed off with 'Love from T&J', which explains the title of this book.

The pages that follow have been only lightly edited from their originals. A scatter of typing errors – which could be blamed either on dodgy keyboards with letters that were in unexpected positions or were prone to sticking – have been corrected.

There has been a considerable input to these pages from Tony (aka The Geologist) concerning names and places and stuff about rocks and landscape, which we both hope will make it a read more worthwhile and intelligent than just my ramblings!



Me and him; photo by a passenger on a cruise ship in Greenland waters.

Postcards from South America 2003

Hello from Sucre, September 27

Well, we got here; eventually. After 32 hours in all, given the time difference; we're five hours behind England. A bus from Nottingham to Heathrow then four separate flights through Brazil and into Bolivia. But having only hand-baggage meant the connections were no problem. Just the two items for five weeks away, including sleeping bags.

We arrived in Sucre feeling fairly knackered at 5pm, but revived quickly when we saw the town. It's beautiful, very old-colonial-style buildings, a bit like Havana but not so crumbly. And the people are a sight to behold. Not so much the younger ones (although Tony wouldn't agree with regard to some of the girls: 'pwhoar' is his usual comment) but the older ones all wear amazing hats of all variations on a trilby/bowler theme, very colourful carpet-bags in bundles on their backs, and the women have short pleated skirts that make their already ample hips look impressively more ample. We are both noticing the altitude a bit just walking about the streets; we're at 3000 metres; but we've a day here to acclimatise before we go to Potosi at 4000 metres. No sign of the general strike throughout Bolivia that Sam had heard about, but we have picked up rumours that there are things happening elsewhere. Sam and Jen are now flying over the troubled area, instead of coming in by bus. This morning we visited the market, then went to a really incredible dinosaur site 15 minutes away by bus. Hundreds of footprints of all varieties across a huge near-vertical slab of rock forming a quarry wall: really impressive.

Hello from Uyuni, October 4

Or *buenos dias* as we say in these parts.

We took a bus to a major Sunday market, at Tarabuco, about 40 miles out of Sucre through hilly countryside, covered in cartoon-style cacti, and trees with what I assumed were pterodactyl nests in the branches (after the dinosaur prints the previous day) but turned out to be the farmers' hay crops drying! The market was fantastic, crowded with people who really aren't in fancy dress even though they look it, buying up their clothes, food, household goods etc for the week. Back in Sucre we shared an express taxi with two other people to Potosi; about three hours, not too bad. We stayed at Potosi's Colonial Hotel, which was good enough but not a patch on the



Sucre hotel; that was brilliant, set round a massive courtyard full of flowers to sit among, and right in the middle of town.

Anyway, just about to go to bed in the Colonial when Sam and Jen suddenly appeared out of the blue. We were supposed to be meeting them the next day, but for various reasons they had to make a series of fraught travel changes when flights were cancelled due to political strikes, and so were with us a day early. Good news from that point of view, but I'm sure they could have done without the hassle.

We gave S & J a chance to catch their breath, looked round the town a bit the next morning, then had a change of plan ourselves, and took the trip to the silver mine in the afternoon. Potosi was the largest silver mine in the world, and in its heyday made Potosi the largest city in the world. It's also the highest city in the world, at 4100 metres.

The mine visit included an obligatory stop at the miners' market en route, where we each had to buy a goodie-bag full of stuff to give to them. It's all part of the deal; and I must say it was quite novel to be buying over-the-counter sticks of dynamite, along with detonators to go with them, bags stuffed full of coca leaves, and sundry bottles of 98% proof alcohol. Duty-free with a difference; how do you suppose that would have gone down at a customs post?



Don't play with the dynamite!!

The mine (now producing zinc, as most of the silver is gone) was not your normal tourist mine. Sad to say, I wimped out about 100 yards in, feeling dreadful, chiefly owing to the altitude. When the others came up they said it was incredibly hard work, very small and poky and hot and horrible little crawlways, and were glad to be in the open air again. But those are the conditions the miners have to work in. There were about 12 in the group altogether, and the guide swiftly christened Tony *Indiana Jones*! And in fact everybody came out early, apart from Tony and Jennifer, and Tony was the only one who went through the last gravel to reach the working face of the mine.

Next day we took a bus to Uyuni; a six-hour journey, but good fun, full of locals, and across brilliant landscapes of deserts and mountains; with loads of wild llamas (very elegant) and vicuñas (very delicate). We've tried llama meat, and it doesn't taste of much and it's pretty tough, so we're letting them go on their woolly way in peace from now on. Uyuni is a bit god-forsaken in-the-middle-of-nowhere, but has an excellent



On the great salt flat of Uyuni.

hotel run by a young American and his Bolivian wife. From there we set off on a four-day trip across the salt flats, and the Altiplano surroundings. The main salt flat was spectacular; 8000 square miles of pure white salt, and us driving across the middle of it! Stopped for lunch on a brilliant 'island' surrounded by salt, with a small hill covered with fantastic cacti; the best we've ever seen.

The four days included:– Views of lots of beautiful conical volcanoes, one of them still steaming. Deserts with spectacular rock formations, one of them called Valley of Dali, because it's very Salvador-ish! Lakes, all of them pretty, but two truly magnificent – Laguna Verde, which is a deep green with mountains reflected in it, and Laguna Colorada, most stunning of all, bright red (algae) and home to thousands of pink flamingoes. Fumaroles, mud pots and steam vents (brilliant at sunrise, after a 5am start!), hot springs, which some people (not us!) felt obliged to bathe in, despite high wind and freezing temperatures. And today, some very bleak desert towns, one very pretty village, and a bizarre collection of ancient and rusting trains in the middle of the desert.

Finally back to Uyuni. The four of us travelled in a 4WD Toyota Land Cruiser with a non-English-speaking husband-and-wife team called Raoul and Rita as driver and cook, sleeping in refugios (fairly basic hostels, but generally OK). Rita was a brilliant cook, and Raoul fortunately proved to be an excellent mechanic. Breakdown quotient: two flat tyres, one broken exhaust, one broken spring, all of which involved lengthy roadside (if you can call them roads) makeshift repairs, and one running out of petrol (luckily there was a spare can on the roof to syphon from).

However, we are safely back to tell the tale! This evening we catch the night train to Oruro, then go by bus to La Paz for a day, before Sam and Jen fly home, and we move on.

Hello from Lake Titicaca, October 8

The overnight train to Oruro was as comfortable as any overnight trip in a reclining seat (ie, not comfortable at all) but on arriving there at 7am we whizzed across



Vicuñas, so elegant.

town to the bus station and were on board the next bus to La Paz within minutes. By the time we set off it was a standing-in-the-aisles situation, mostly harassed mothers with babies and toddlers, which the officials didn't rate at all highly, so we couldn't go until we'd chucked the women and children off, and left them standing forlornly on the side of the road. It's the South American way.....

After that a fairly uneventful journey until we rounded a corner and – there was La Paz. Wow! One of the most spectacular

capital cities we've ever seen. It's in a huge bowl surrounded by snow-capped mountains, with houses, houses and more houses climbing up the sides of the bowl all the way round, and our road in was high up, overlooking it all. The four of us set up camp in the Republica Hotel, another lovely place with courtyards and an enclosed garden for sitting and recovering after shopping excursions and walking the streets of La Paz, which are all horrendously steep. A good day-and-a-half had by all, before an early night, as Sam and Jen had a taxi booked for 4am, for a 7am flight home. (And yes, we did get up to see them off!)

Tony and I had another day practically having to rope-up to tackle the La Paz streets, before the 8am bus the next day to Puno, in Peru. It was a bit touch-and-go whether to join the bus to Puno or change plans and fly to Cuzco instead, because of the ongoing 'disturbances' in Bolivia. It turned out that the strikes, marches and road blocks were part of a full-blown revolution, with yet another colonel aiming for presidential power. However, the bus was going, so we chanced it and arrived in one piece! We encountered plenty of places where there were boulders all over the road (yesterday's road-blocks), but the driver managed to negotiate them all well enough, apart from one, where we all had to get off the bus to help clear the road. What with that, police checks and form-filling at the border, the journey took about six hours, but at least there was none of the free-for-all rock-hurling that we'd been warned might be a significant feature of the bus-ride.

A lot of the road skirted the edge of Lake Titicaca, which provided spectacular scenery, and we had a luxurious bus complete with loo; although a notice on the door stated categorically: 'this is just for urinate'! There are cycle rickshaws all over Puno, and we took one to the quay and then a boat out to SS Yavari, a ship made in pieces in Britain by James Watt (and others) in the 1800s. The bits were all brought over the Andes by train and mule, and welded together here in Puno; it took six years!

This morning we took another boat, out to the floating reed islands, which are literally that – thick platforms of reeds built up over centuries, which once held

villages but are now populated by old ladies selling tourist bits and pieces. We also had a trip between floating reed islands on a reed boat, fortunately also floating. The old women in Peru, incidentally, wear marginally different costume: the bowler hats are slightly dented round the crown, the skirts are longer, and bulked out by layers of crinoline-type petticoats; it's quite formidable to see a stout matriarch advancing down the street towards you!

When we returned to the lake-shore we were greeted on the quay by a military procession and brass band, commemorating some past victory, a sort of mini-Armistice Day without the Chelsea Pensioners. They marched past the top brass who were taking the salute on a platform topped with a canopy sponsored by Coca Cola. We're still debating whether Peru matches up to Bolivia in all sorts of ways, but we're giving it time; early days yet. And our Spanish is coming on well. When we left La Paz I wanted to borrow one of their English paperbacks, and spent a long time with the Spanish phrase book working out "May I borrow this book and bring it back when we are here again in three weeks' time?". I was word-perfect. The hotel receptionist fell about laughing and said (in immaculate English) that I'd asked to borrow the book and throw up in three weeks' time. Ho hum....

Hello from Machu Picchu, October 12

Another luxury bus journey (for about a fiver each) from Puno to Cuzco; about seven hours. It was a double-decker, and Tony managed to get us the front seats upstairs, so we had an excellent panorama view the whole way. Cuzco is a grand city. Very Inca-orientated, and full of tourists-of-all-nations in large quantities (a lot of English) but good fun, and with one of the most magnificent cathedrals we've ever been into. Also good balcony restaurants overlooking the main square, so ideal for eating, drinking and people-watching. We took a taxi out to the Salinas in the morning; a mountainside of salt pans where brine from a natural spring evaporates, before the deposited salt is scraped up; about three tons a month, so it's big business, and a spectacular thing to see. On the way back we stopped off at Sacsayhuamán (pronounced sexy woman) which is an Inca sports stadium brilliantly built with massive interlocking blocks of stone. Another of those 'they don't make 'em like that now' examples of ancient civilisation.

Nothing to touch Machu Picchu, though, where we arrived yesterday, after catching the 6am train from Cuzco to Aguas Calientes, which is the village at the foot of the mountain. An amazing journey through deep canyons with huge granite walls, and then the railway track forms the main street of the village, with shops, cafes, restaurants and hotels on either side.

This morning we caught the first bus from the village up to Machu Picchu, which was in swirly low cloud when we arrived. But that soon gave way to light drizzle, which was quickly replaced by relentless rain for the rest of the day. So a wet Saturday in Machu Picchu, then. The major consolation was that everyone



View from the dinner table in our pizza cafe in Aguas Calientes, as the locomotive for the evening train comes along what passes for a 'main street' in the remote tourist town.

was buying up 50p plastic ponchos in shades of yellow, red, green, blue and lilac, so the effect of massed tour-groups crawling over the ruins in bright primary and pastel colours was very effective. But not even the rain could detract from the site/sight, which is truly extraordinary. Not sure how much is original and how much is restored, but the whole site is phenomenal. This morning we caught the 6.30am bus up again, in semi-cloud, and by half past ten it was brilliant sun and clear blue sky. We re-walked a lot of the stuff we did yesterday, plus one or two new bits, and were back at 1pm absolutely whacked. A *lot* of steps. Why the Incas couldn't build on flat ground, I don't know. Now we're relaxing a while until the 4.15 train back to Cuzco, and a flight to Arequipa tomorrow.

Oh – roast guinea pig is a Peruvian culinary speciality, so we were obliged to try it. It tastes like chicken, and arrives spread-eagled on the plate in its entirety, minus the fur. I don't want to talk about it any more. Except to say that it's mega expensive, and there's only about an eggcup of meat to show for it anyway!

Hello from Calama, October 18

We caught the train and bus back from Machu Picchu to our good hotel in Cuzco for Sunday night. Passed a church group in Cuzco main square making an intricate pattern in the road from different coloured flower petals all tamped down with a blackboard duster. Later that evening (11.30pm) there was a torchlight band parade past our window into the square, which I hope was to do with the flower design because even later that night it poured with rain, and by the morning there was barely a petal to be seen.

Next day, plane to Arequipa, which is a decidedly unattractive big city, apart from the main square which is typically beautiful, with a park and trees in the centre surrounded on three sides by wide colonnades and balconies, with the fourth side taken up by a magnificent cathedral.

We hired a car for three days, and that afternoon tried to get out of the city to a particular Site of Scenic Interest that Tony had read about, but failed hopelessly. No signposts, and all roads led to dismal, concreted suburban sprawls and building sites, and eventually dead ends, so we gave up and went back to enjoy the square! Next day was much more successful, and we drove to, and stayed in, a lovely middle-of-nowhere town called Chivay at the head of the Colca Canyon. A very good journey across the Atacama Desert, with superb dust devils whipping up like tornadoes all the way over, and some great volcanoes; with magnificent specimens of tuff, andesite and pumice that only a geologist could properly appreciate. Tony was very much in his element.

And herds and herds of llamas and alpacas (we can tell the difference now!). Next morning, high-point along the Colca Canyon was a rocky promontory with huge condors warming up in the morning sun before gliding off on the thermals in their search for food. A few buzzards and hawks were up there as well, looking like sparrows beside the condors. We carried on round a big loop back to Arequipa, through some extraordinarily varied scenery, all spectacular. Virtually no other traffic, no habitation to speak of, just dust and desert and us.

Now we've moved to Chile. The bus journey to Arica on the border was across desert, desert, desert, flat desert, hilly desert, more desert – enlivened by videos on the bus and, even better, Spanish bingo! Tony couldn't believe that he was travelling across a desert that was one of his childhood dreams, playing bingo in a language he can barely understand! (We very nearly won, as well! Just two numbers off...!) The border crossing was another dream-come-true for Tony. When he was at school it held the world record for not raining; 40 years since the last drop hit the Arica ground. We're not sure what's happened in the interim, but the chances are it's now 80 years. Just our luck if the weather breaks while we're here.

First impressions of Chile are that it's much richer than Peru or Bolivia, and very much more advanced. MacDonalds, Blockbuster video etc, and the main street is exactly like any pedestrianised city centre. One thing that set it apart was the young guy in combat trousers, spiky punk bracelets and a live rat on his shoulder, who was very keen to sell us something unidentified and rather suspicious in tablet form!

The other new experience is that cars actually stop for pedestrians at crossroads. Quite unnerving after Peru, where there are no traffic-lights or rights-of-way and everyone drives hell-for-leather and without hesitation from every direction.

However, out of the city it's more desert: the Atacama Desert, and it's beautiful. We've driven 300 miles south, across totally arid landscape; no people, no animals, no anything apart from very occasional streams in valleys with a bit of greenery. We passed four towns. One quite busy, with people and shops and everything. One a completely abandoned ghost town. One a semi-ghost town (we saw 7 people). And one a very isolated mining town but at least they had a petrol station, so I didn't need

my new Spanish sentence – ‘Help, we have run out of petrol’ – after all! However, half an hour later we hit an unusually deep pothole in the road and knackered the wheel rim. Changed it for the spare, only to discover that that too was totally flat with a large gash in it, so – three wheels on our wagon, and going nowhere! Happily, a passing truck driver came to the rescue with air pumps, buckets of water and a heavy hammer for re-shaping rims, to enable us to limp into Calama, where we stayed the night, and where Budget have an office, to repair the useless spare tyre.

Hello from Calama again, October 21

Mended tyre duly picked up in Calama, we were off to El Tatio, the highest geyser field in the world – at 4300 metres – about 150 km away. We got there in the middle of the afternoon, and it really is quite a spectacular place. No really huge spouting geysers like in Yellowstone, but a large thermal area with lots of little ones. We were the only people there, joined by one other car later, but they kept their distance, so we virtually had the place to ourselves for the night. A warm bathing pool had been created in one place, and I had great ideas for a spot of skinny dipping after dark (ooh er missus!) but soon changed that plan when the sun went down. It was **very** cold, about 10° below freezing, as we discovered, since we spent the night in the car. All windows iced up, and several layers of clothes and sleeping bags not sufficient.

Prime time to see the geysers is at sunrise, when the steam is at its maximum, and it really is a fabulous sight. Normally this entails a 4am start from San Pedro, the nearest town, so spending the night there was the lesser of two evils. I think! By 6am the trucks and land-cruisers were arriving, and there must have been 50-odd



Early morning steam at El Tatio.

vehicles by sun-up at sevenish. People running about all over the place oohing and aahing, and tour guides boiling breakfast eggs in the hot pools, but by 10.30 they'd all gone, and we were on our own again for one last walk to a relatively distant geyser where Tony, in an attempt to take a picture, stepped on a piece of moss that turned out to be a thin layer of algae over a near-boiling pool. One badly scalded foot later....

His actual foot was OK, protected by his shoe, but eight inches of ankle and leg had several layers of skin instantly stripped off, and on a scale of one to ten, it hurt about eleven! He hopped and hobbled back to the car, then hot-footed it (ha! ha!) to San Pedro, about 90 km away on rough roads, including a river

crossing, which I had to wade through to check that we could get the car across. We managed to raise some medics at the local medical centre, despite it being 1.30 on a Sunday afternoon. They cleaned and dressed the wounded leg, but it has to be redressed every day for the next ten days, so at least it's getting the right treatment. Although our next email may be a catalogue of 'Latin American hospitals we have known and not loved very much'!

We're now back in Calama, having driven here via yet another salt lake, quite different from the previous ones, and the Valle de la Luna, which was a fairly incredible landscape of sand dunes and rock formations. Today it's off to the big copper mine – after this morning's surgical dressing clinic, which nearly had Tony through the roof at the hands of a rather butch but very capable nurse. The schedule is generally a bit more relaxed at the moment, as the eight inches of leg still hurts like hell. So not quite sure what we will be doing over the next few days.

Hello from Arica, October 25

This is probably the last instalment in this cliff-hanging, crisis-torn tale of suspense and adventure from the intrepid travellers in Latin America! The trip to the copper mine was OK. The mine itself, Chuquicamata, was brilliant – huge – on an even bigger scale than Bingham Canyon copper mine in Utah, and we enjoyed poking around the town on our own, but the actual tour was a bit disappointing. An hour and a half of warm-up and video, then a 30-minute bus journey to a designated viewpoint, then back to base again.

From there we were on the way back up north, this time the coastal route, and the ocean views were fantastic. A really great day of rocks and cliffs and surf, and all in brilliant sunshine. Pelicans, buzzards, gulls; stark black rock and white rocks, the white all guano from the birds, a couple of rocky headlands heaving with seals, all barking – the noise was indescribable – and just generally terrific scenery. Really good. The second day north-bound had to be farther inland, retracing our previous journey back to Arica, but in clearer weather, where we stayed for three nights, with sorties inland. Today we drove up to the Lauca National Park, 100 or so miles and steady uphill from sea level to 4500 metres, and a really spectacular journey.



The Christmas pudding volcano of Parinacota.

Chilean hospital assessments. Marks out of 10:

- 1. Queuing factor: 10/10. (Even in A&E departments that are heaving with ailing bodies, we are herded to the front because we don't speak the language sufficiently, so they can't wait to get rid of us).*
- 2. Bandaging proficiency test: disappointingly, from T's point of view, conversely proportionate to fanciable factor. (Butch nurse 9/10; male doctor 10/10; others good to look at, 10/10 for TLC, but 5/10 or 6/10 for performance [bandaging]).*
- 3. Quality of treatment and prognosis: consistently good throughout, so not to be faulted (another two weeks till fully mended, is the general consensus).*
- 4. Patient patience: minus nil.*
- 5. Wifely tolerance factor: off the plus scale, obviously.*

We passed flocks of turkey vultures sunning themselves on the roadside as well as in the sky, and at one point a rare type of cactus that only grows between 2500 and 2800 metres above sea level.

And the rocks – well, even I got excited about them. All in delicate tints of coffee, chocolate, strawberry and vanilla (Tony says that 'ice-cream colours' isn't a geologically technical term!), and higher up they changed to deep sunset reds, oranges and yellows. In the park itself there were hundreds of vicuñas, being specially nurtured as they're an endangered wild species. And since vicuña wool, being *so* fine and *so* rare, is worth about £200 per metre of cloth, I really wished I'd taken a stiff brush, rounded them all up and given them a good going over! Main purpose of the National Park, and of our visit, is the suite of beautiful, conical volcanoes, which included Parinacota with landslide debris from an ancient collapse that got a certain geologist really excited.

Tony's leg is frustratingly painful still. We've now checked out five different hospitals/medical-centres/clinics for re-bandaging and rehabilitation and, naturally, scoring each with points for performance.

So – one more day here before we start the homeward trek. Which is one worry that we no longer have: when we left Bolivia we off-loaded a bagful of stuff, including all Tony's Bolivia film, in a hotel in La Paz to collect when we went back to catch the plane home. A week later, Bolivia degenerated into civil war; all borders closed and the airport shut down. So we didn't think we would be able to return to retrieve our bag, or even catch the plane home. However, three days ago the old president resigned, all the revolutionaries were pacified, and Bolivia is all systems go again. Phew!

You know we were travelling so light that we only had hand baggage when we came? Not so on the way home. Among our various acquisitions we have today taken on board, a particularly choice specimen of ignimbrite (rock!) about 18 inches square (round...., rock shaped....) which we are hoping to smuggle back in the rucksack that's now going in hold baggage! Due back Tuesday with our new pet rock!

Postcards from The Afar 2003

Hello from Djibouti, February 12

Our first sighting of Djibouti was at the airport at 2.30 in the morning – never a good time for first impressions! But it doesn't get any better. The country is just so dirty, litter-strewn and generally scruffy and uncared-for. Rubbish wherever you look, with multi-coloured plastic bags caught in gutters, back yards and tree tops in all directions and heaven-knows-what-else in between. Besides the collapsed buildings and bomb damage from wars that have spilled over from adjacent countries.

We had flown in from Addis Ababa, along with our good friends John and Valerie. And we had broken the journey with a few days out in the Bale Mountains of Ethiopia, where Tony and John had been through a fabulous river cave (Sof Omar) that is rarely visited.

Next morning, in Djibouti, the sun was up and it looked.... just as bad. It really is a scruffy place. But hey-ho – we were on our way out, en route to Erta Ale volcano, so off we set in our Nissan Patrol 4WD: John, Valerie, Tony and me, and a driver and guide, plus a seemingly enormous back-up team. A man called **Bara** was the overall Big Boss, with whom Tony fell out on Day One owing to his general incompetence, but luckily he turned out to be a rare presence on board, so we were mainly dependent on **Ali** the driver (who spoke only Afari), and **Salah** the interpreter/guide (who spoke incomprehensible English and Afari, and had no idea of what we were doing or where we were going, so very much a case of the blind leading the blind). We were accompanied by a second vehicle, a Toyota Land Cruiser with non-operative 4WD, which contained different numbers of people at any one time, but consisted mainly of **Adbara** (French-speaking former nomad who was quickly established as leader, as he could not only communicate, but knew everything that needed to be known); **Abra** their young, verily capable driver; **Hasan** (man-mountain and self-appointed bodyguard in times of crisis); **Lubeck** the Lugubrious (elder statesman who was like a human donkey; much put-upon, but always willing; the sort you feel obliged to shed tears over); and **Kadu** the cook (or 'the cooker', as Salah translated, to our delight!). You need to know the cast list for future reference!

So there we are, setting off on mainly dirt roads, and through not-totally-barren landscape, with various wildlife hovering into view from time to time, including baboons, mostly on the road grabbing wheat spilled from lorries, ostriches and all sorts of gazelles. And in the background scattered villages have circular huts woven from grass and leaves with very distinctive, domed roofs



of canvas and sackcloth, with people milling around – all **very** black, and very beautiful and/or handsome. The children in particular must be the most attractive in the world – huge white eyes, sparkling teeth, and for the little girls, painstakingly plaited hair with multi-coloured ribbons and elastic bands all over their heads. It must be hell for the children when they take them off (once a week, one mum told me). Hairstyling, in fact, is a huge culture in that part of Africa and we saw a lot of variations on a theme.

First stop is the border town of Dichiotto, between Djibouti and Ethiopia, where we spend many hours waiting to cross. (For reasons which I still haven't grasped, we spent a lot of time criss-crossing from one country to the other, each time necessitating lengthy sojourns in dimly lit huts for endless paperwork to be completed, and large sums of money in the form of entry visa fees to be handed over.) We stay the night in a hotel in Dichiotto (a row of concrete rooms each containing a bedframe and mattress and lit by a dark green 15-watt Christmas tree light, with the loo in a field beyond the donkey and goat shed, OK in the dark, but clearly visible from all directions in the morning!). In the meantime we are eating well: staple diet is green beans, rice and macaroni with spicy sauces, and fried goat and chicken and, in Ethiopia, lots of injera, which is a sort of flat bread that looks, feels and tastes like old dishcloth. It's made from a local grass called teff, and is just too disgusting to talk about. We stuck with the rice!

The next day's main delay is in a town called Logia, waiting for a 'permit' to travel away from the main road. More bureaucracy, more paperwork, more reasons-to-exist for black-men-in-suits! By the time we leave Logia, we have only a couple of hours' daylight left, so we only get as far as the village called 60 (so-called because it's 60 km along the dirt track from the main road). It is also a police post, therefore bristling with armed guards in all directions. By then it's too late to go



Our wonderful Danakil team contemplate the prospect of just three wheels on the wagon along the way to Afdera.

further, so we pitch camp here, and Lubeck, Adbara *et al* put up two tents, for V & J, and for Tony and me; while Kadu-the-cooker produces supper. It's dark when we finish eating, and a really strong wind blows up from nowhere, so we get into the tents (to hold them down as much as anything!) and are asleep by 9.30pm. At 11.30pm, we're all woken up by thunder and lightning, and

when the first giant raindrops start landing we realise we have to get up, owing to the fact that the tents have no flysheets and only mosquito-net roofs, wherefore very unwaterproof! So we bundle everything away in the pitch dark and huddle back into the car for the rest of the night, all sitting semi-upright and very uncomfortable, with a tremendous thunderstorm all around us. Valerie says things can't get worse.

Into the Danakil Desert

Next morning, after a sleepless night, we have to bump-start both vehicles, but finally get going, and set off along barely passable 'roads'. Tyre changes, digging out of sand, a wheel comes off the second car (but is recovered from the desert and put back on the hub), excavating the ground with shovels and crowbars to make a path.... it's all par for the course, and everyone pitches in to help at each calamity. It becomes evident that everyone is becoming more laid-back by the minute. "Our progress is similar to that of an archeological dig," Valerie observes.

Our eventual next stop was in a town called Afdera, where we were obliged to kowtow to the chairman of the community in order to gain permission to travel to the volcano, Erta Ale. We arrived about noon, and waited in the courtyard of the police station, sitting on the concrete floor, until the chairman arrived about an hour later. He said we must make an appointment to see him in his office at 3pm. We asked why we can't complete the formalities now. He said "Not possible; I will see you *at 3pm*". Tony said unrepeatable things. John (who is always placating) said "It's their way." Tony said more unrepeatable things. At 3pm we all walked over to the chairman's office, and were invited to sit down at 3.20pm – that's us, the chairman and two of his henchmen, John, Valerie, Tony and me, and Salah hovering uncertainly in the background. Nothing happened. At 4pm, we all got up again, and processed back to the police station, where a single sheet of paper changed hands, and two armed soldiers were dispatched to travel with us, one to each vehicle, in case of trouble from bandits out of nearby Eritrea, which is virtually at war with Ethiopia. (The previous day, we had passed a huge tented refugee camp in the middle distance, filled with 40,000 people from Somalia, and there were intermittent tales of bandits and shootings on the road at various places.)



Camel train in the Danakil Desert: the locals' means of travel.

A bit before dusk, though, we seem to be well on the way, following previous vehicle tracks across a vast expanse of desert. But that's before we run into The Sandstorm. A major unwarranted event on our itinerary, and quite an unbelievable experience. Visibility was totally nil with a wild wind whipping up dust for miles around. Our guides had high-powered torches, and for a few hours tried navigating by sitting on the bonnets of the vehicles, trying to pick out tyre tracks, but finally admitted defeat, and we resigned ourselves to another night in the car (and remember there is now a soldier equipped with primed Kalashnikov adding to the population of each vehicle, so even less room than there was before). After a lot of shuffling about we got ourselves into a state of marginally less than acute discomfort and tried to sleep. An hour later we were all up and about again, when the locals suddenly realised that we had to try to make it to higher ground in case the rains came and we got submerged, so we had another blind foray through the sand and dust! Eventually Tony purloined a tarpaulin from the roof of the other car, then he and I wrapped ourselves up in it and slept on the ground for the rest of the night; we managed to get some sleep, and it was far preferable to being inside the car (and down on the ground the sandblasting effect wasn't quite so bad). So – quite comfy, then – for us! Although Valerie says things *definitely* can't get any worse.

The next morning the wind has dropped and the sand settled, and in the light of day our route is patently obvious, of course. We are only a few kilometres short of where we're heading for, but it had been quite impossible to find it during the storm. Anyway, we press on, and get to Base Camp for the volcano about midday. We stop for lunch, and to sort out our gear. We're walking from here to spend one or two nights on the summit, and camels are to carry our overnight gear – sleeping bags, extra clothes, lights, food etc. We set off about 2.30pm: four of us, and four of them – Adbara, Hasan, Salah and a soldier. "The camels will come later", the Africans say.

Erta Ale – the volcano

It was actually a good walk up the volcano. Ten kilometres, not too steep, and thankfully cloudy, so not in super-hot burning sunshine (temperatures were about 40°C, even in the shade), and spectacular lava formations to look at on the way. We did it in about four hours, and established a little shelter among the rocks while we waited for the camels ("The camels will come" said the Africans), and still had time to go over the top into the crater and look down on the red-hot lava lake that was bubbling away, and which is what we'd chiefly come for. A brilliant sight, although we had to cross some really choking fumes to get to the viewpoint. I mean, choking *choking* fumes. Scarves round heads and hankies stuffed down throats made no difference. It was a real hands-and-knees-crawling, coughing/sneezing/wheezing, eye-wateringly scary experience. And then after having got to the lava lake, we had to re-cross the fume zone thing on the way back! It didn't smell particularly sulphurous, which would have been easier to cope with. I don't know what it was, really bitter and throat-grabbing, and almost certainly it wasn't healthy!

By then it's about dark, and getting chilly. We go back up to the mountain-top and we sit, and we wait, and we sit, and we wait. Nothing seems to be happening. Eventually Adbara and Salah emerge out of the darkness exchanging nervous glances and bearing a plate of cold tinned beans that they happened to have about their persons, as a sort of peace offering. "The camels will not come," is the latest, and final, news of the night. Camels, they say, do not walk in the dark (not on lava, anyway). We're stunned into temporary silence. John says it wouldn't be so bad if he liked beans. Adbara and Salah shrug, and backtrack into the darkness. We huddle together for warmth. Adbara returns after a bit and leads us to a very primitive shelter designed for two people maximum in a half-collapsed lava tube that is semi out of the increasingly cold wind, on very gritty hard ground, and the four of us have no choice but to settle down for the night. Not to sleep much, obviously. Valerie doesn't comment on how much worse things might or might not become.

We get up with the daylight to find that our shelter was just as bleak as we thought it was during the night, and exchange weary greetings with our African minders – who are equally shock-horrored that the camels didn't arrive, and had just as uncomfortable a night. Much gazing down the hillside provides no evidence of camels hurrying up to join us, but out of the blue the faithful Lubeck emerges over the horizon with pancakes and strawberry jam, closely followed by Ali with a flask of hot cardamom tea. Clearly the base-camp crew are also appalled by the turn of events, and doing everything they can to rectify the situation. Lubeck promises to return later with lunch. "No, no," we shriek. (Remember, this is a four hours up, four hours down, journey each time....) "We don't need lunch. Please don't bring it up." "I do it for the honour of the camels," says Lubeck, his face getting prouder, longer and more mournful by the moment.

In the event, we have a last look at the lava lake, still bubbling merrily away, and set off down mid-morning, so we meet Lubeck and lunch halfway: honour is satisfied all round! By the time we get down to the vehicles again, we're raring to go for the hotel that is scheduled for the next night. Well OK, the night after the next. There's one more night's camping to go in the meantime, but a very good site – middle of nowhere, but no rain, no dust, and even the odd rock to go for a wee behind, so that's all right – and *then* we get to the 'hotel'. This is another row of concrete rooms, but rather unfortunately



The lava lake at the top of the Erta Ale volcano.



Weekly market at Dese, on the Ethiopian Highlands.

when we get there only one of them is available. John and Valerie win the toss; so Tony and I sleep outside on mattresses in the car park. OK apart from the cats, dogs, donkeys and trucks mawling, bawling, hooting and tooting throughout the night!

It appears that Salah has spent half the night chewing khat, and by the morning is as high as a kite. Khat is the local hallucogenic leaf which most Djiboutians are addicted to, stuffing it into their

cheeks like cartoon-toothache-victims, and getting increasingly spaced-out in the process. This whole experience has been too much for him, and he and Ali are taking on board industrial quantities of leaves at every village along the way, to the extent that Ali in the driving seat is weaving an increasingly erratic course along whatever passes for a road. Eventually Tony calls a halt, and confiscates the remaining in-car vegetation. Ali is subsequently not a happy man.

At some time around this point, Bara appears again, we have another border crossing, and various members of the team seem to come and go. It's easy to lose track, and I've lost it by now! We go to an enormous Monday market in the highland town of Dese, which Tony and I both enjoy very much, escorted by Hasan the bodyguard. Needless to say we don't need a bodyguard; this is the guides being ultra-cautious, as all the local people are really friendly, and we couldn't have been more welcome, and several small boys attach themselves to us as self-appointed minders/chaperones/guides anyway. But for everybody's peace of mind we stick with Hasan, and discover that goats sell for £1, the spectacularly long-horned cattle are £70 and camels £100. If you run over a goat in the road, as Bara unfortunately did when a little one ran across with no warning and we left it squashed on the tarmac, you have to stump up £20 in compensation (he owned up at the next checkpoint). A worse danger is kamikaze camels wandering across the road, as they are liable to go through the windscreen, but luckily we didn't encounter any.

Hello from Djibouti again, February 24

We were then back in Djibouti, and on the way to two lakes. Lake Abhe is famous for its spectacularly unusual rock formations up to 30 metres tall, which The Geologist said were tufa towers. Then Lake Assal, which is primarily a salt lake, 150 metres below sea level surrounded by some very recent lava flows and fault scarps that had moved only a few years previously (and got The Geologist really excited).

From there we went to a rainforest on the coast mountains of Djibouti: dripping wet, slithery mud paths, but a good campsite, an hour or so away from the main 'road' up an amazingly difficult dirt road; thatched huts were full of bats when we arrived, but they disappeared and didn't come back while we were there. And in the morning we went to a village wedding. Obviously we didn't have a thing to wear....! The guests, however, were definitely in their best bibs and tuckers. They were all in traditional costumes, added to which they included an attempt at high-heeled shoes and sharp Western-style suits, despite the umbrellas and puddles that they were having to contend with. They were all really, really enjoying themselves. An excellent occasion to have experienced.

There was a great deal of meal-preparation going on in the form of freshly-skinned goats being heaved through the mud to the vast cooking pots that the women were looking after, mountains of potatoes and onions peeled and chopped, and wood fires stoked up and smoking in every hut in the vicinity. In the meantime the men of the neighbourhood were giving it all they'd got, lining up in ranks, dressed in matching white skirts with blue trim and carrying upturned walking sticks, and stamping, kicking and dancing while inching their way along a great circle round the Big House (big straw hut!) that housed the wedding party. All very ceremonial, and later (having done the complete circuit, which took about an hour) they lined up again brandishing scimitars instead of walking sticks, and repeated the process. In the meantime the women who weren't cooking were following them round, dressed in exotic face and finger jewellery (hired for the occasion, we learned) and glittery sequinned dresses and sheltering under old grain sacks as they squelched their high heels through the mud, singing all the while in time to an elderly lady beating time on a yellow plastic water container. The whole ceremony lasts for two or three days, and people travel 50 kilometres or more to take part. Obviously we only had time for a very brief visit, but it was an excellent occasion to have seen – and a very genuine one.

Drama and ceremony in driving evil spirits away from the newly-wed couple at the big performance that was the Afari wedding.



The dhow that brought us from Tadjoura across the bay and back to Djibouti.



After a false start camping in the forest before rain stopped play, we decamped to a hut 15 km away on the shore of the Red Sea, which turned out to be brilliant: the sea was phosphorescent, and there were bright-white-light waves coming in the whole night. Despite the fact that for once we actually had a comfortable bed, I had to keep sitting up just to watch the waves!

From there we were homeward bound, having dried off and scraped most of the mud away! But Tony and I stopped off short of Djibouti town at a coastal town called Tadjoura, across the bay from Djibouti, while John and Valerie went back with the car to the big city. It was just good to have a bit of time to ourselves, and to see the town. Not that Tadjoura was very much to write home about – typically dirty and scruffy, and chiefly populated with goats that occupied each abandoned vehicle on the side of the road, as well as every pile of forgotten breeze blocks, kerbsides or doorsteps, and all the rubbish tips. In the middle of the day it was like a ghost town, until suddenly, at some unseen (by us) signal, everyone suddenly woke up and made a beeline for the quayside, and gathered there in great excitement. It transpired that the boat from Somalia, carrying large quantities of khat, was due to come in, and every man, woman (and occasional child) was there to grab what they could get! There was a frenzied few minutes of unloading, and then everyone disappeared whence they came, triumphantly bearing bagfuls of leaves, and settled down for a happy afternoon's chewing!

We spent the night at an unexpectedly good hotel (hot *or* cold water at any one time, mattresses *and* bedframes *and* clean sheets, roofs, doors, everything....) owned by an ex-pat Frenchman and his African wife (plus four children, four dogs, and quantities of goats and donkeys in the yard). Next morning we took the boat to Djibouti town: an excellent two-hour trip across the bay in an ancient wooden dhow, in which we squatted on the deck along with about forty people, nine goats and 700 crates of empty Coke bottles, of which Tony and I probably accounted for the last two in town! It was obviously a much-needed refuelling trip to the big city!

From there it was a matter of one last night in a capital-city-type hotel (luxury to die for!), a Last Supper for the four of us at a passable out-of-town restaurant overlooking the sea (well it was dark, but we could hear the waves!), and the usual dismal airport stuff the next morning to catch the plane home.

Postcards from Ladakh 2004

Hello from Kullu, August 27

A surprisingly good journey to Amritsar all things considered, with overnight flight courtesy of Turkmen Air, and very little sleep. We arrived in Amritsar a bit jaded but took ourselves along to the Golden Temple, the biggest Sikh focal point in all India and really phenomenal. Never seen anything like it. The temple itself is covered top to bottom in gold leaf, courtesy of the Birmingham Sikh community at the last refit, all set in the middle of an artificial lake surrounded on all sides by shining white buildings that are stunning. The floor is beautiful inlaid marble and limestone which caused Tony to have to get down on his knees to examine closely, looking uncharacteristically devout. And the temple itself is equally lovely inside with painted walls and marble inlaid with gems and of course thronged with people sitting round a priest reading from The Book (their equivalent of the bible – a huge thing nearly three feet square with enormous script, which has huge religious significance to Sikhs).

The best bit about the temple is actually the kitchen. In true Sikh tradition, they provide food for anybody who happens to pass by. In the Golden Temple, that amounts to 35,000 people *every day*. They file in, sit on the floor of the dining room, and servers come round with a bucket of rice and a bucket of dhal, and slosh it all on to the metal plates along with a cup of water and a chapati. When they're finished eating, they hand their plates over to be washed up (a huge operation in itself) and the next lot of feeders come along! What is truly amazing is what is going on behind the scenes. Armies of volunteers (they are all volunteers working here) are making mountains of chapatis, shelling industrial quantities of peas, and stirring dhal in massive great stew pots five feet across over open fires. And this goes on day after day after day. An experience to behold.

Next morning we caught what turned out to be the slow (very slow) train from Amritsar to Delhi. It took more than ten hours, but it was a pleasant journey. Good seats, plenty of Indian snacks being hawked up and down the train and lots to look at, particularly as we stopped at nearly every station. It's not quite post-monsoon yet, so still a lot of rain and we saw dramatically flooded fields and roads. On one road a lad with a cycle rickshaw was heaving it out of a veritable lake while his mate (or maybe his customer?) was up to his chin in water shoving from behind. Still, the water buffaloes were enjoying it.



Arrived in Delhi in teeming rain and nearly dark, so didn't see much of the city this time. Picked up our rental car first thing next morning (a small and rather old Tata Indicar with a diesel engine) and drove nearly 400 km to Shimla, the one-time Raj hill-station (when it was known as Simla). Most of the road was easy going, the last third and particularly the winding road up to Shimla were a bit more hectic, but for Tony it was an opportunity for some particularly creative driving which he thoroughly enjoyed. And I was very proud of him!

Shimla is brilliant; wonderful old, thoroughly British, 19th-century houses still in use as hotels and government buildings. I think the best of all was the Gaiety Amateur Dramatic Theatre founded in 1837 – and it is still an am-dram theatre. We found an excellent hotel, the Sukh Sagar, furnished with old colonial-style furniture, and a bathroom with beautiful brass fittings from literally another century! The whole town is built on a series of incredibly steep hillsides, and all the best buildings are on the highest road, The Mall, which runs along the entire mountain ridge.

Khllu, where we are now, is another town built on what amounts to a cliff side!. We drove through something of a resort area to get here, with mountains, gorges, and a major river, but not busy, as the holiday season starts next week. We are just back from trawling an excellent bazaar and tomorrow we are on our way to Manali and then onwards into Ladakh.

Hello from Leh, September 1

We arrived in Ladakh yesterday, after some strenuous mountain trekking (in the car needless to say). We drove over four passes in three days, each higher than the last, culminating in the Taglang Pass at 5328m (that's 17,480 feet), and we both felt the altitude somewhat. The pass has a Buddhist temple at the top, loads of prayer flags and bunting and a notice proclaiming it to be the second highest pass in the world. Its second claim to fame is that it has the highest lavatories in the world!



A solitary truck descends the Lachalung Pass towards the blue waters of the Zaskar River.

The yurt village that is set up each summer midway along the mountain highway from Manali to Leh, which was our very welcome overnight stop going to Ladakh and on the way back south.



Scenery throughout the Himalayas has been spectacular. Pinnacles, painted-desert rocks in fantastic colours, superb glaciers and beautiful rivers; if it was in America it would be a national park and probably the best of them all. As it is, it's unremarked – except by us. It's..... just part of India. Huge distances across vast expanses of mountain and desert, with absolutely nobody in sight, and only the occasional trio of petrol tankers crawling up the gradients; they travel in trios to offer mutual help when needed, and were generally amazed to see us on our own. No petrol stations either, but we were prepared with two large plastic cans in the boot, bought in Shimla as we knew we would need their contents

Driving has been OK, as many of the roads have been good although some sections admittedly atrocious. And Indian truck-drivers are excellent, and really helpful with overtaking, so nothing like as bad as they're cracked up to be. In fact they are some of our new best friends, after we gave one a lift for several miles to find water for his radiator in the middle of nowhere. Our little Tata Indicar has had its share of being temperamental, but nothing that an entrepreneurial garage mechanic and a roadside puncture repairer operating out of a tiny tent with a generator-driven air compressor couldn't fix. Not good for Tony's stress levels, mind you, but Indians can fix anything! We had one night midway between villages, something like 250 km in each direction, and we slept in a sort of tent village, in a huge yurt-like tent with mattresses all over the floor, attached to a family of about seven including two babies who lived in their own tent. And they also provided us with an excellent dinner of dahl and rice for good measure.

Now we're in Leh, capital of Ladakh. Much more Tibetan than Indian, very hot in the day and a bit cool at night. 'Tibetan Incantations', the chanting monks' *om mani padme hum*, is playing all over the bazaars; great memories of Kathmandu. There are dozens of monasteries around, so we're having a few days checking out some of them and sightseeing around the town. Then we're off for a couple of days along the Indus Valley before we set off back over the mountains, same way as we came.

Hello from Manali, September 7

We had an excellent time in Ladakh. Visited five monasteries, which sounds a lot but they were all carefully selected for being different and each was beautiful in its own way, one with 500 steps to it! The furthest, and the turnaround for our trip, was the monastery of Lamayuru, so beautiful perched on its high crag and surrounded by higher mountains. We loved the town of Leh, and caught the start of the Ladakh Festival. Saw the main performers all dressed up and preparing for the opening parade (more fun than the parade itself), watched a polo match (very pleasing, as it's the traditional sport in Ladakh, and believed to have been invented there) and then attended a cultural musical evening – for about 20 minutes! We were hoping for loads of song and dance acts, but it was extraordinarily heavy-duty, with solemn and unintelligible chanting. The locals loved it, it was absolutely packed, with people standing on arms of chairs, railings, anything for a better view, but I'm afraid that we made our excuses and left!

We made an early, 6.30am, start leaving Leh, and drove 100 km. to just two kilometres short of the top of the first and highest pass, the Taglangla, where the car, which we thought was struggling due to altitude, packed up completely. A long story (and a story in itself), but after free-wheeling down from the mountains for 58 km (only possible because the road is largely tarred, very well graded and descends 2000 metres, so we only had to push on a couple of short and gentle up-hills) we made it



The monastery at Lamayuru.

back down to the Indus valley. Still an hour or so away from Leh, but not downhill, so no more free-wheeling! A very kind passing stranger gave us a lift into town and then organised a truck to take us back to the car and tow us back into town.

However, the promised tow rope was the size and consistency of a cheap washing line. It broke 16 times, each time necessitating a stop, and a knotting of the rope. Of course, each knot made the rope shorter. I was in the truck next to the driver, so I could yell at him to stop, every time we lost the headlights, which meant the rope had broken again and Tony was stranded! In the end Tony was about three feet from the back of the truck, and..... let's just say it was a stressful journey. Finally we were back in Leh where we had started from, at 10pm that night, and walked up the road to find somewhere to stay the night.

Next morning we walked down to the car to find the driver's window broken in..... or so we thought. In fact, we had been so tired when we got back to Leh that we had left the window, and the car, open, with all our bags and belongings in the back, in one of the rougher areas of town. Nothing was taken. Somebody could have had the lot; but nobody did. Another reason why we love India so much.



Polo match at Leh.

Anyway, time to put yet another Indian mechanic's ingenuity to the test; he solved the problem when he discovered that altitude and diesel fuel don't mix, so the manifold and exhaust were almost completely bunged up with carbon. He hammered it all out, the car was immediately fit for purpose again, we gave him his asking price of £2, and off we set once more.

We necessarily had to reschedule a bit, but we stopped at our yurt between the high passes for another night, where we were greeted like long-lost friends. Such genuine and generous people. That day's journey was fairly incident free, apart from another puncture, of course. We're not quite averaging a puncture a day, but the good news is that Tony has now got it down to such a fine art that he can change a wheel in less than four minutes flat!

Now we've left 'Little Tibet', as they call Ladakh. On the way back we decided to take a three-day loop-road along the Spiti valley, highly recommended for its superb scenery – mountains, glaciers, another high pass and again very Tibetan in character. Kaza, the main town on the loop, was the end of the first day. Except for the last 40 km or so that were on tarmac, the road was really rough – boulders, stream beds, huge gaps and crevices, a very rocky road indeed. We finally rolled into Kaza, to find that the road onward was closed, taken out by a landslide a month ago! So – back along the hundred miles of rocky road again with two more 4000-metre passes, the next day. This journey has been nothing if not unpredictable!



Re-fuelling stop on the road back out of Spiti.

Now we're in trekker/hippieville Manali where it's clearly holiday time. Streams of traffic on the long, winding road up the pass, where everybody is headed. It's like a kind of Goose Fair: candy floss for certain, plus horse-rides, yak-rides, and every type of food-and-drink stall you can imagine. Definitely all the fun of the fair!

Hello from Amritsar, September 12

After Manali we had a considerably more sedate journey to Shimla (just one more puncture; hardly worth mentioning) where we had a stop-over at the same hotel. They were very welcoming and pleased to see us again. And then to Chandigarh; India's "new town", designed by Le Corbusier back in the 1950s. We hated it! It's a very 60s-type concrete jungle, with blocks of flats built on a grid-like set of streets, and reminiscent of Stalinist Russia. We hated it because it doesn't look like India. The Indians who live there love it, because it has all the mods and cons that the rest of India doesn't have. So – two sides to the coin. Maybe Le Corbusier had a point.

Driving back into Delhi was predictably frenetic. We passed four or five overturned trucks, and there were roadside stalls all the way along selling crash helmets! However we made it in one piece, and the Hertz man came to collect the car in the afternoon, after which we were back on Shanks's pony. We had an excellent walkabout round a local bazaar, finishing up with a superb meal at a little restaurant, where I was offered subterfuge beer served in a pot mug, from a bottle wrapped in newspaper!

Next morning we were on the express train to Amritsar for the flight home, sitting next to a delightful Sikh gentleman who lives in Vancouver. During the course of the conversation, it transpired that he owns 29 turbans, all in different colours. Each length of material is seven and a half metres long, and it takes about 15 minutes each morning to put one on, in any number of different styles. It's very much a fashion statement. Boys begin to wear them any time between the eighth and twelfth grade at school. Some people glue them up for instant wear in the morning, but that's a bit frowned upon by the Sikh cognoscenti!

So after a last look at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, with another tour round the giant kitchens and the dahl-cookers and the chapati-makers and the washer-uppers..... we fly home. Considerably better educated in the art of turban-design, if nothing else!



Giant dahl pot in the Golden Temple kitchen.

Postcards from China and Southeast Asia 2005

Hello from the Yangtze, October 14

We are here safely in China, after two days of seemingly interminable flights, via a night in Dubai. We just had a morning in Hong Kong, so not much sightseeing time, before catching the overnight train into mainland China. Chaotic railway station, about 800 people crammed into one waiting room, and military-uniformed women screaming incomprehensibly through loud-hailers. But we successfully managed to get on the right train, thanks to Tony's still-not-bad Mandarin. On to another train in Guangzhou, where we shared a six-berth sleeper section with five Chinese, but it was OK, as the bottom two bunks were for two grandparents and a small girl who shared with grandma.

Yesterday morning was a five-hour bus journey from Wuhan to Yichang. Entertaining, with most of the motorway under serious reconstruction with concrete blocks littered all over the place, and a driver continually blaring his horn at sundry chickens crossing the road, overloaded coal-trucks weaving from lane to lane in an agony of indecision, and the occasional old man dragging a large tree along the fast lane. As they do.

This morning we had a trip to the Three Gorges Dam, which is not finished but not far off, and impressive and fascinating to see. Tomorrow, we board the ferry for a three-day cruise up the Yangtze through the gorges themselves, from where we are here in Yichang, upstream to Chongqing, where we are meeting Zhu and the other geologists for Tony's field trip. And tonight we hope to repeat last night's dinner, of a really good buffet in the rooftop revolving restaurant of our hotel, for rather less than £4 each.

Hello from Chongqing, October 18

The Three Gorges cruise was brilliant. The ferry was excellent and Tony had booked a cabin to ourselves which was well worth while; most of them were four or six berth. Apart from two small tour-groups of Australians, we were the only Westerners, and being on our own we had a certain novelty value. We made some





Yangtze Three Gorges.

good friends despite having minimal language between us, and people were lining up to have their photos taken with us.

We had a second trip to the dam on the first day of the cruise, this time in brilliant sunshine, and a couple of extra locations thrown in, so definitely worth going again. Then the next day, by which time we were upstream of the second major gorge, we were all decanted on to smaller boats to go up the Small Three Gorges, branching off the main river. And then we shunted on to even-littler boats to navigate

the Mini Three Gorges. We felt like Russian dolls. Along the way we had three stops at temples and shrines with assorted goods and goods on offer from hundreds of stallholders, selling everything from temple bells to tiny whole birds roasted on sticks. Back on the big boat again, we had an afternoon sunbathing on deck.

We had various other trips ashore in the three days, including more temples and emperors' palaces, each of them up several hundred steps of course. Also the town of Fengdu, which is a huge new city on one side of the river, but we stopped in the old town, built in the '50s we guess, on the other side, which is being totally demolished for when the water level rises during the next two years. It was built just too low for the new reservoir level, so half a million people are moving house.

In general though we have seen very little evidence of major displacement, certainly not without equally major rehousing. And the gorges themselves are so vast that the extra 60 metres of water will have very little impact. So that's all right then. They have our seal of approval, and can get on with it.

Now we are off the ferry, and have met up with Prof Zhu in Chongqing, a city which seems extraordinary with the amount of high-rise development newly built since we were here 12 years ago. The other geologists are arriving this afternoon, so it's all rocks and caves for the next 10 days.

Hello from Guilin, October 30

We have just come to the end of a very action-packed tour during which we have not had a moment to stop and think, let alone write. There were thirteen of us: five Brits, four Americans, two Slovenians, a Ukranian and an Australian, plus varying combinations of Chinese at any given time. We have been to some truly spectacular

places that have got all the geologists very excited. Some of the sites were already developed for tourists, show caves, amazing deep, narrow gorges and natural bridges, for which the Chinese want to get World Heritage status, and are looking to our scientists for advice and backing. A highlight was San Qiao, near the city of Wulong, with its provincial park containing three enormous natural bridges in between giant sinkholes, fortunately with a lift for the 400 feet of descent to the path across the floors of the sinkholes and beneath the bridges. Much of the scenery has been hidden in the mist and thick cloud, which was disappointing, but the weather has gradually improved, and all the individual sites we went to were OK, including the giant sinkhole of Xiaozhai Tiankeng, down 2800 steps – and the same up again. Sadly though, the lengthy bus trips in between were not as scenic as they should have been.

Travelling around has been an experience. Hours and hours on buses or convoys of eleven jeeps, all behind a police escort with flashing lights leading the procession, thankfully not with sirens blaring, but plenty of horns at all times. At several places we visited there were great banners strung up over the entrances saying ‘Welcome to the International Karst Scientific Expedition’, and at one tiny village in front of a huge cave entrance (Erwang Dong) we had an ear-splitting reception of fire crackers. And photo shoots with television cameras following us at all times.

At the village with the big cave, Lilian Eavis and I let the others go off for their caving bit and we stayed in the village, much to the entertainment of the inhabitants. I was invited into a couple of houses where families were having their lunch, but since polite conversation was not an option there was not much more I could do than make my excuses and leave after a quick cup of green tea. The next few days were taken with a flight to Nanning and then a lot of sinkhole-spotting in the Leye area, before a long bus-ride to Guilin.

When not travelling or sightseeing, we were eating. Since the whole tour is local-government sponsored, hospitality has been laid on with a very heavy hand at every lunch-time and evening. A lot of the dinners were banquets with umpteen local dignitaries, therefore many speeches, many toasts and dish after dish after dish of interesting, to say the least, food. Some tasty, some dubious, some I would rather not touch with a 10-foot chopstick. One lunch we managed 42 dishes, and one of the evening banquets we got up to 57. The ducks’ heads and feet were only marginally worse than the ducks’ tongues – well, they *said* they were tongues – and the sliced pigs’ ears so far hold the record for awfulness, although the bees and



Bemused villagers at the Erwang cave.



Limestone towers at Yangshuo, down the river from Guilin.

wasp grubs were not up to much either. But there has been a huge amount of good stuff as well, and we have eaten an enormous amount. Now we are on our own and paying our own way I suspect we shall be on rather more of a starvation diet.

It was actually rather sad to see all the other Westerners fly home, as we had a very good 12 days with them all, ending up yesterday in a day-long meeting and discussion with about 40 Chinese, that Tony chaired. That was followed by a final farewell banquet, obviously, and a brilliant evening boat trip through four inner-city lakes that were linked by canals with amazing carved and painted bridges, and full of fairy-lit pagodas, dancing fountains, flashing coloured lights everywhere, all very over-the-top and Hong-Kong-Disney-theme-park style. All very different from the rather primitive mainland China town that Guilin was when Tony came first in 1982.

Today our Chinese hosts are joining Tony and I for one last show-cave visit (Guanyan, which Tony and the caving team mapped back in 1985 before it was made into a show cave), then tomorrow we catch the lunchtime train for Vietnam.

Hello from Hue, November 4

We are currently sitting in a pavement café in Hue, with Vietnamese girls peering over our shoulders and giggling, and thousands of cycles streaming along the road in front of us. Very agreeable!

We came into Vietnam on the overnight train from China. We set off at 2.30pm on a very comfortable Chinese sleeper, sharing with a Norwegian headmaster and his wife. That was fine until 1am, at which point the Chinese customs came aboard and we were all up for passport inspection. Then at 4am we were up again at the border, where we had to change to a very **un**comfortable Vietnamese train! We arrived in Hanoi at 8am, and spent the day walking round the city – busy, but fun, with lots of French-influenced architecture, and some concrete buildings and squares from the era of Ho Chi Minh and the communists.

We went on a bus-and-boat tour next day to an area of limestone towers, and the two-hour boat trip went through spectacular scenery and through three caves. Interestingly (as in, that was an interesting experience) it was teeming with rain, the

boats were bamboo punts with no roofs, and the umbrellas weren't quite up to the job. We were soaked, but dried out after about a day and a half.

The proposed night train to Hue was cancelled at the last minute because of a typhoon that had affected Hue quite badly, but the same train went the next morning instead, so we had a very good day's journey, again through beautiful countryside, with good weather, and in the end we were glad that the overnight train had been changed.

Today, another boat trip, up the Perfume River, which was really good, stopping at a selection of pagodas, temples and tombs. We visited one of each, and passed on the remainder, especially since they involved sums of money and pillion rides on the back of motor bikes to get there. Instead we wandered the villages, and ended up in one playing pontoon with a group of Vietnamese children, to their great glee, particularly when Tony teamed up with one little girl who proceeded to help him cheat!

We do like Vietnam, although it suddenly seems very backward compared with China. It's very clear that China has come on at a great pace, and is whole-heartedly westernising, whereas Vietnam is still essentially gentle and peaceful and rather behind-the-times, but full of lovely smiley people. The traffic is the same as before. Bikes and motor bikes criss-crossing from all directions at road junctions like a military tattoo. The only way to cross the road is to walk straight ahead steadily and slowly, and they wend their way round you. Scary, and it takes a bit of nerve, but it works! Anyway, tomorrow we take a bus south to Hoi An.

Hello from Phnom Penh, November 11

We had an excellent couple of days in Hoi An, a lovely town, not huge but with a great atmosphere, and very much the place for a mid-term break. It has a good beach, lovely buildings in the Old Quarter, and an enormous local market where the local people can buy literally everything they could possibly think of to want or need. Hoi An's chief claim to fame, though, is made-to-measure clothes for tourists. They'll create or copy anything, or make something up from a photograph if you like, at reputedly ridiculously low prices. There are dozens of tailors' shops, all doing a roaring trade, I would like to come back sometime when we haven't got three weeks more traveling ahead of us on hand baggage only!



Waterfront at Hoi An.



A little closer to the edge? In the Mekong Delta.

fact there is a very apparent awareness of bird flu in Vietnam, in all the papers and on the television. Not so in Cambodia, where chickens are everywhere.

From Hoi An to Saigon (night train, in at 4.30am!). I had recollections of Saigon as being a vibrant, rather bohemian kind of a place. I must have been thinking of somewhere else. It was quite dirty, concrete-city-ish, so not tempting to stay long. Instead we took a two-day tourist trip through the Mekong Delta en route for Cambodia. That was wonderful. It included a few more compulsory touristy visits – among other things we've seen are silkworm-breeding and silk-spinning from cocoons, rice-paper-making, coconut-toffee-production and catfish-farming. All come with their 'factory-shop', obviously, but are delightful fun nevertheless.



Village house just outside Kampot.

We went over to one of the little islands off the coast on a local ferry, squashed in between a good many passengers and their various bicycles, scooters and boxes and baskets of shopping. But not, you'll be pleased to hear, cratesful of ducks and chickens like you often meet on ferries. Apart from the occasional couple of hens and a cockerel scratching around a back yard, there is a noticeable lack of poultry in both villages and markets. We fear they may all have sneezed their last. In

Next day, just drifting along the canal-side markets and houses and general river-bank activities was absolutely magical, before we crossed into Cambodia along the main Mekong River, and took a bus into Phnom Penh.

Another preconception foiled! We had understood Phnom Penh to be backward, dingy, threatening and all things bad. And the bus station where we arrived was not good. But the river-front area where we found a very good, cheap hotel is brilliant, and Phnom Penh is a cosmopolitan and sophisticated city. Maybe a bit sleepy compared with Saigon, but delightful to be in.

Email reply from son Jonathan

You've got hand baggage!!!, call yourself seasoned travellers!!?.... that's luxury that is!! Whenever I travel, I don't even wear clothes.... or hair!! In fact I usually have a colonic irrigation on the runway, just to make sure I'm travelling extra light!! Paaah.... amateurs!!

We are going back to Phnom Penh this afternoon, after hopping on a bus yesterday to the 'seaside' town of Kampot. This is really third-world, and no sign of the sea either, just a rather murky river, but all the people are really friendly, and it's a fascinating place to visit and just wander around, which we did, both around the town and to some outlying villages. We had a great bus-ride here as well, literally round the houses, as the driver went on back-roads through all the villages, picking up and dropping off. It meant we didn't get here till after dark, but it was worth it.

As far as weather goes, we are now in the rainy season, and everywhere is quite hot and humid, but we're having a fair amount of sun as well. After Phnom Penh we are off to Angkor Wat for a major dose of ancient temples, and then Thailand.

Hello from Krabi, November 18

After a wonderful boat trip to get there, up the Tonle River and across the huge lake of Tonle Sap, we have ticked off Cambodia's must-do and have-seen Angkor Wat. Very impressive it is too, and we got round by hiring a tuk tuk for the day, so the driver dropped us off at all the right places. We went to four of the dozens of temple sites that were sufficiently different from each other to be good value, particularly the temple ruins of Ta Prohm where they have deliberately left the trees untouched. Massive roots and buttresses of trees hundreds of years old are growing through, on, over and around the thousand-year-old carvings and buildings. It's brilliant.

The magnificent stone ruins of the Buddhist temple of Ta Prohm have been left with the giant forest trees growing on them, to illustrate the condition that most of the Angkor Wat buildings were in before restoration.





Off-road on the bus journey out of Cambodia.

But our archaeological threshold is easily reached and we only had one evening and one day there, before catching the early morning bus for the Thai border and Bangkok. That *was* an experience. The 95-mile journey to the border took 10 hours over truly atrocious roads. At one point we had to make a detour because a bridge was washed out, which involved paying a farmer to cross his field and fording a sizeable lake in the middle of the track. The driver took a run at it, causing a bow wave that hit the windscreen and the engine predictably stopped. Nothing for it but to push the bus out and up the mud bank beyond. Well, the men pushed and the ladies took photos! Then the driver had to drain the fuel as it had water in it, and send off for more fuel from the next town via a passing motor cyclist. All good fun, but once at the border we crossed on foot and sped 130 miles to Bangkok in just over three hours on superb roads in a luxury double-decker bus. That's the difference between Thailand and Cambodia and Vietnam. Thailand has made it into the glossy First World, the other two are still working on it. But we love them both, though unhappy about the numbers of land-mine-victims in Cambodia, legacy of Khmer Rouge.

Over a full moon we managed to pull in a quick couple of festivals. One involving dragon boat racing in Cambodia, and the other was Loy Krathong, which involved floating decorated and lighted baskets down rivers at Chumphon, in Thailand. Both are supposed to mark the end of the rainy season, but so far not!

Now we're in Krabi, right down on the tsunami-flattened west coast of Thailand. An excellent bus trip to get here through miles of rubber plantations, tapping the trees and hanging sheets of latex out to dry, which I still think is so exciting to see. Possibly because it was the only geography lesson that I ever remember listening to. Well, we're not in Krabi exactly; Railay to be precise, which is a beach village on a peninsula that is only reached by water taxi; this involves wading into the sea to get on to the boat and then the same at the other end. We have our own little bungalow under the coconut palms a few metres from the beach and it's all very idyllic. We arrived here in good time yesterday before the afternoon rain-storm which was mega. Really torrential, brought coconuts and palm fronds crashing down, and with terrific thunder and lightning. The lightning went on long into the evening and we had dinner watching it light up the entire bay, which was very dramatic.

Yesterday morning we took a trip round Phangnga Bay through mangrove swamps, sea-caves and past massive limestone towers rising out of the sea quite freakily; including the one they call James Bond Island, since it was used as the baddy's hideaway in *Man with the Golden Gun*. There is little tsunami evidence here except that all the beach buildings were flattened and are all either new or being rebuilt. Sadly we have to leave here soon, for more islands and then on to Malaysia. Time is running out.

Hello from Penang, November 26

We left Krabi and Railay, had a night in rather nondescript Trang, and then did bus and speed-boat to Ko Muk – we decided against Phi Phi in the end. Ko Muk is small, very quiet, but very pretty. One day we walked across the island to a fishing village on the other side, stopping to watch a rubber production operation – one man in a small shed tipping buckets of liquid latex into trays, then after a couple of hours (on our way back) turning out the now-blubberty stuff on to a mat and kneading and treading it into the squares that are then hung out to dry.

The second day we took a small boat along the coast of Ko Muk to Emerald Cave, which is just a small tunnel through the rock that you swim along for about 80 metres through the dark to a hidden lagoon with a sandy beach at the far end. Lovely, and some very exciting 'sea monster' roaring caused by waves and pockets of air on the way through the cave. Later, we took our own sea kayak out to poke around the limestone coast, but harder work than the longtail boat that took us to the cave.

We left in teeming rain the next morning, bussed down the coast, and then took a ferry across the Malaysian border to the island of Langkawi, for a night in a scruffy little beach hotel. It looked very beautiful, even through the relentless rain, but because of the weather, our planned day there was cut off in its prime by catching the 11am ferry to the mainland – along with many other Malaysian holidaymakers who didn't rate the rain either. The ferry port was reminiscent of a lot of rats leaving the sinking – er – island!

Anyway, we finally fetched up at Georgetown, on the island of Penang, where we are now. It's a really attractive town, very old, Chinese and colonial houses, all a bit faded and knocked about, but still good to see. There are loads of Chinese here, also hordes of Indians, and traditionally it was home to Thais and Burmese as well, so we don't really know who is Malay and who isn't. But all really enjoyable. We have spent today walking round the town, almost in sunshine for once.

Hello from Kuala Lumpur, November 30

We rented a car in Georgetown, from an Indian in a tiny back-street office, no deposit, no credit-card, paid a pittance, "here's the key, and leave it at the tailor's shop if I'm not here". But it worked, and we managed to see some of Perak's limestone areas. Gua Kelam was a fun stream cave, now a bit of a recreation area, but it reaches for



Painted walls in the temple cave of Perak Tong, Ipoh.

a quarter of a mile right through a ridge and is the main route for the locals into an isolated valley of farmland. So a boardwalk all the way through, suspended above the large and noisy stream, and with locals roaring through on motorbikes.

Stayed for the night in the magnificent old Majestic Hotel that is actually the upper floors of the railway station in Ipoh, after an excellent dinner in a Chinese food court that we found in town. Next morning we went to the Perak Tong temple cave, a fantastic sight with hundreds of beautiful paintings, each done by different artists by invitation, on the sweeping smooth walls of the cave chambers, and the usual giant Buddha in the middle. A good drive back past lots more limestone hills, and a few caves, then back over the causeway to Georgetown and the key-drop tailor's shop.

Next day was mostly on a luxury bus to Kuala Lumpur, six hours of relaxed comfort passing endless rice paddies and palm oil plantations, to a high-rise hotel above the city bus station. We had heavy rain most of the evening, followed by a brilliant thunderstorm.

It was still a bit rainy next morning, so we took a local bus to Batu. This was for Tony's benefit, as the site has a tall limestone hill containing a single enormous cave passage that is an important Hindu temple. The bad bit was the 250 steps up to the entrance, but the cave was spectacular and was easily seen with daylight through a series of large holes in the roof. There were hordes of Hindu pilgrims. Then a bus back into town and a ride up the Menara K L Tower for spectacular views across the city, to the Petronas Towers, and of a huge thunderstorm sweeping across the suburbs.

Last evening in Asia, so we had another roast duck dinner in Chinatown, before a late trip to the airport, and the long flights back home.

Postcards from The Asian Ice Festivals 2006

Hello from Harbin, February 5

We had an excellent flight to Beijing on Tuesday night. The plane was practically empty, just 16 of us in our section designed for 150, so we each stretched across four seats to sleep and reclined over three seats with our windows in the morning. We think it was because Chinese New Year was the previous Sunday and they had already travelled home. The festivities go on for a fortnight and there are firecrackers in the streets morning, noon and night, quite mad. We are now in Harbin, in northern Manchuria, where temperatures are between minus 15° and minus 30° (that's Fahrenheit). Literally breath-taking. We have the right clothes but faces and hands suffer, especially when the wind gets up. My yeti boots cause much amusement. Taxi drivers point, total strangers want to stroke them, passers-by have to stop their dogs worrying them. Everyone laughs, in admiration I like to think. However they keep my feet warm which is very important.

And the Ice Lantern Festival we are here to see is spectacular. A large park by the river is filled with nearly life-size copies of the Arc de Triomphe, the Bell Tower in Red Square, Winter Palace in St Petersburg and various cathedrals, all built and carved in blocks of ice. An adjacent park has huge snow carvings such as a giant Buddha, and another was of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Both were beautiful in the sunlight, then at night they were all lit up, by coloured lighting set inside the ice structures and by floodlights on the snow models; it is all quite stunning. The ice bar with ice stools covered in animal skins was lovely but distinctly chilly, so luckily there was a proper cafe to thaw out in.

We went to another park with similar ice structures, and also a collection of smaller but truly fantastic ice sculptures, each created by individual teams from all over the world as part of an international contest; just incredible. We went back to see these in the evening as well; they were really beautiful, our favourites we think, and the whole place had a very Goose Fair atmosphere; it was great. And we were also treated to a grand display of fireworks into the bargain.

For a change, we took a bus tour out to a nearby safari park that doubled as a breeding-centre for Siberian tigers. It began 20 years ago with about 30 animals, now there are 300. We saw loads from the bus that you go on through the park; all seemed quite docile, apart from when the truck delivered their consignment of live guinea fowl and the huge tigers went into overdrive





Day and night at the cathedrals of ice built in Harbin's ice town.

to catch them. Quite glad we didn't see them being fed sheep and cattle. Visitors can buy a variety of live creatures for the tigers' consumption and the spectators' entertainment. Twenty yuan for a chicken, 600 for a sheep, 1200 for a cow. We did not, but it must be better for the tigers than being fed a bowl of Whiskas.

On day three in Harbin we took a cable-car across the river to yet another park, this time specialising in snow sculptures rather than ice, and yet again amazing to see, such elaborate designs, beautifully created and very sparkly in the sun. We spent a couple of hours there before we walked back over the frozen river into town. Altogether Harbin has been a fantastic experience and we have loved it. Tomorrow morning, it is off to Japan. It will be interesting to compare the ice festivals there.



Siberian tiger in the reserve at Harbin.

Hello from Nagano, February 12

We are now in Nagano, near Tokyo, having called in at various ice and snow festivals on Japan's northern island of Hokkaido. Except for the 'town' of ice cathedrals and buildings in Harbin, the carvings and sculptures in both ice and snow are in the same style as those in China, but there is a very different atmosphere somehow in Japan. Still totally beautiful and hugely impressive. One park was quite different, with wooden frames and trees that had been sprayed with water from the lake, so it was a mass of icicles and twinkly lights, all very winter-wonderlandish. The temperatures in Sapporo, our first

town in Japan, and in Abashiri, our second town, were a mere minus seven or eight, positively warm compared with Harbin. We also had a short trip in an icebreaker out on the Sea of Okhotsk, pushing through pack ice, which was great fun.

There is no snow in Nagano, although it is very cold and there is snow on all the hills. But it's a decent town and more sophisticated than Sapporo. We came here on the Shinkansen (bullet train); it was all very smooth, quiet, very quick, comfortable, and of course dead on time. Just had a very Japanese dinner, no clue what we ordered, not much clue about what we ate. Out of ten separate dishes, we could identify three. Mostly good though. The restaurant was called Sam's Diner, which I suppose is why we chose it!

Tomorrow we go to some hot springs in the mountains, and will stay in a ryokan, a traditional Japanese guest house with the added delight of excellent Japanese food. Then back to Tokyo and home on Thursday. We still totally love Japan.

Hello from Tokyo, February 15

We had a really comfortable train ride through suburbs and apple orchards in clear-blue-sky sunshine, although when we arrived in the town of Yudanaka, it was virtually knee-deep in snow, very slippery snow in fact, and we had to help one elderly lady who slipped over. Having dumped our bag in the ryokan for the night (more of that later), we shared a car with an Australian couple to go to the Jigokudani Onsen. Known to you and me as the monkey park! It was a mile-long walk through woods to the hot springs (the onsen/spa bit)



In the park of snow sculptures at Harbin.



A temple sculpted from snow in Sapporo.



A young audience at the snow festival in Abashiri, all dressed against the cold and in the height of fashion.

where hundreds of monkeys live around and about, and come to bathe in the warm water. Pictures of them in the water with snow falling on them are in every Japanese tourist catalogue, but sadly there was no snow dropping from the sky when we were there! Still, it was lovely to see a few monkeys really enjoying the water. One old chap was in there for over an hour, and when he finally came out he could hardly hobble. The warm water must have given him a lot of relief, but I worry for them all when they come out, because there aren't any hot towels around to dry themselves, and they just have to jump around in the freezing cold to get warm again.

We caught a bus back to town, and to the ryokan – which was actually a sort of cross between a traditional Japanese guest house and a youth hostel. There was a communal supper in the dining room at 6.30pm, which was superb – and with chairs to sit on rather than the floor, which was a bonus! We slept well that night, and next morning it was boiled eggs and toast for breakfast, again in the dining room, where we were most entertained to see a drawing pinned to the wall explaining 'how to eat a boiled egg'.

From there, a local train and then the Shinkansen again back to Tokyo. Weather still good, so we opted to go to Mount Fuji. A bus took us to Kawaguchi-ko, from where we had a good view of Fuji, but it was a fairly grotty town. We stayed the night in an equally grotty hotel, and the next day walked a mile or so down to the lake, a much more fun area, and rode a cable-car up to the view-point for some more excellent photos of Fuji. Came back down and just caught the 0941 train out of town. We would have missed it if it had been the 0940! Thank goodness Japanese trains are punctual to the second!

Back in Tokyo we had a 'last supper', this time in a chain eatery called Jonathan's, where the main advantage was an unlimited coke machine! Then an early night, and ready for the flight home the next morning.

Postcards from Europe 2006

Hello from Grindelwald, June 8

We arrived in the Swiss Alps via Dinant in Belgium after the Channel Tunnel and a night in the lovely, medieval, lakeside town of Twann, near Neuchâtel. Then to Kandersteg, where we had a couple of good walks, one up via a cable car and a long walk down in the snow in the Gasterntal, site of the Lötschberg tunnel disaster, which is a geological classic (and the reason that we were there). Then another walk out to a lake and back up. Since then we have had to put plans B, C and D into operation as the mountains have been in perpetual cloud, the funicular train that was a vital component of a two-day trip is being renovated for the year, the walk Tony wanted to do is too deep in snow still, and the road to the Gotthard is impassable due to a rock fall. Actually that bit of road does not affect us, but the pass around it is still blocked with snow, so we are still stymied. The hotel we had last night was totally empty because no one else can get there, so you get the picture.

We were in Lucerne yesterday, which is a lovely city, and today's plan C was a walk to the Reichenbach Falls where Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty met their fate (or did they?... we shall never know). But the falls are very spectacular. The town and all surroundings are full of Conan Doyle cafes, Sherlock Holmes hotels, Dr Watson wine bars and Moriarty muffin shops (I made the last one up, but I'm thinking of opening one next week).

Finally the weather came good. We woke to a beautiful, clear, blue sky over the Alps. Really hot in fact, and just a bit of cloud in the afternoon, but nothing to panic about. We took a series of cable cars to Wengen, a spectacular but very quiet village, inaccessible by road and all built on a very steep mountainside. Well, I took a series of cable cars, while Tony walked the middle section which was uphill for two hours, with the second half in quite difficult, slushy snow. Very character-building.

Today (after 6am sunrise photos of a particularly beautiful peak) we had a series of short train rides and walks up to Wengenalp, then on up to Kleine Scheidegg, before we really enjoyed a lovely long walk, nearly all downhill, to Alpiglen, through the meadows and woods that lie at the toe of the Eiger's infamous north face. And then a train up the hill to Grindelwald, where we are now sitting out in the sunshine.

There are more Japanese here than there are Swiss, together with a fair smattering of Korean and Chinese, some Indians, and plenty of Brits as well. All very cosmopolitan.

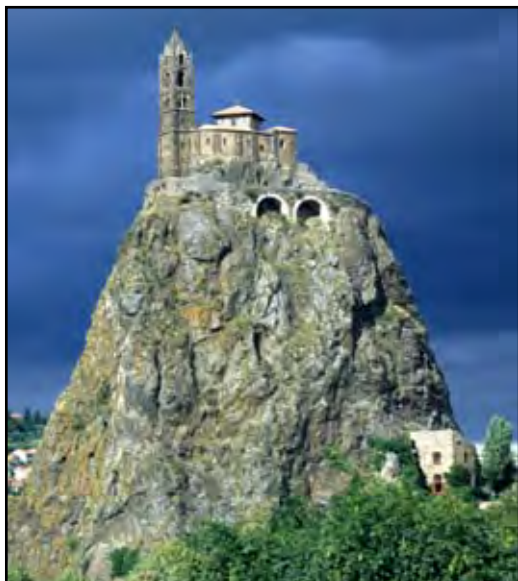


Hello from the Ardèche, June 18

France now, after a good day travelling over numerous Swiss passes including Grimsel, Furka, Neufenen and Gotthard; stayed one night in a beautiful remote little village called Binn, before we went over the St Bernard pass into Italy and to Courmayeur. Or at least Entrèves; the little village one up from Courmayeur, where we stayed for two nights. Took the cable-cars up to the ridge above the Glacière Blanche for good views of Mont Blanc.

Then came to France where we have stayed three nights with John and Valerie, who are renting a lovely old mill house for a month near Annecy. John took Tony off on a long walk over a great limestone plateau on the first day. Then took him up a Via Ferrata on the other day. This is an 'iron road', a route up vertical cliffs and narrow ledges made possible by safety cables and bits of metal steps, so that it offers safe rock-climbing. Safe but seriously scary, and John chose a route of some difficulty, enough to be exciting he said, without telling Tony about the climax overhangs at the top of the cliff. Enough said. Valerie and I meanwhile went shopping and sat in pavement cafes drinking coffee and beer and coffee and beer and..... we had a good time in other words.

After leaving Annecy, we drove to the Vercors, which is a huge limestone region, spectacular scenery and a major caving area, so a bit of a nostalgia trip for Tony. We stayed in a lovely little town called Villard for two nights before moving on to Le Puy-en-Velay, which I had visited on a press-trip five years ago. It's a beautiful old town with a big cathedral on the top of a hill and a small church perched on an adjacent rocky peak, which is apparently a volcanic neck, and which we therefore climbed.



The church of St Michel at Le Puy-en-Velay.

The weather has been a bit mixed, some good days, some bad. We are now in the Ardèche on a camp-site overlooking a sparklingly clean river. Yesterday was a bright sunny day, so we drove to the Causse Mejean, another limestone plateau along the rim of the Tarn Gorges, very beautiful.

Today woke up to grey sky again but the sun is doing its best and it may come good. We are going to the Ardèche Gorge and then hopefully back to camp for a swim in the river. We are thinking of visiting Lourdes in a few days on the way to the painted cave at Lascaux, and then back north.

The never-ending crowds of pilgrims passing in front of the Grotte de St Bernadette at Lourdes include so many who are just hoping for a miraculous cure for various ailments.



Hello from Calais, June 28

We had a couple of nights camping in Cap d'Agde on the south coast (interesting views) and then on to Carcassonne, an old walled town, and very touristy. Pitched tent in a good camp site, which was good until we had a mega thunderstorm, but the tent survived the night, and so did we without getting wet! Next morning we drove to Lourdes, via Col de Tourmalet, with its big Tour de France monument, up to Cirque de Troumouse – a bit of a walk, but good weather by now – and finally into Lourdes. To the Grotte de St Bernadette, **the** place where all the walking and not-so-walking wounded and sick and ailing come to be cured. It's actually extraordinarily moving. Huge queues of people with sticks, wheelchairs, stretchers even, many with minders/carers, and all believing that they will be restored to health by St Bernadette. If that belief helps them, then it's worth while. Quite humbling to witness.

We went into the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception (the magnificent main church) and the Underground Basilica (its equally magnificent bit beneath), and also into the town, which is one huge block of not-nearly-so-reverent tourist-shops selling every statuette, tea-towel, T-shirt and post-card you can imagine!

It poured that evening, and was a very grey day the next morning, so we packed up our wet tent and set off to Pech Merle, a show cave with prehistoric drawings. Stalactites good, drawings OK. Drove on to Terme d'Astou, after a bit of a petrol frenzy (and getting fined by speed police!), and accepted the offer of a caravan on the camp site, as the weather still a bit iffy. Drank our beer and coke while watching England win the quarter finals in the World Cup! Next day to Grotte de Font de Gaume, for a guided tour round part of the cave with petroglyphs of bison and reindeer.

Another day, another caveful of drawings! This time to Lascaux, the ultimately famous one. The cave is now sealed off from the general public to preserve the paintings, but they have created a faithful reconstruction, which in itself is almost as impressive as the prehistoric reality. Then one more overnight stop before a speedy drive through Chartres and Rouen, stopping for a walk through a military cemetery near Le Touquet (the war graves are remarkable), and finally to Calais, ready for the Channel Tunnel and the drive home.

Postcards from America 2006

Hello from Delaware, July 9

Good flight to Toronto, and picked up car, and spent a night at Niagara – very neon-lit, theme-park, but good people-watching fun, before we walked down to see the Falls, and next morning crossed the border into USA. Drove to Sam and Jen's in Newark, in Delaware, on Thursday, via some friends with a sinkhole problem in Pennsylvania. I am commissioned for an article on Delaware, so Tony and I spent Friday touring round most of it (it is very small; the local joke is that it is called Dela-where?), and have since had an excellent weekend with Sam, Jen and 14-month-old Jack who has entertained us enormously.

Saturday we all went to one of the Amish communities just across the border in Pennsylvania, where their main town is the improbably-named Intercourse, and today have been out together again to mop up what remained of Delaware.

Tomorrow Tony and I are off at 6am with three days to cover 2000 miles to New Mexico to our next assignment with caving friends Art and Peggy Palmer, and their trip together down Lechuguilla Cave.

Hello from the Rio Grande, July 17

The long journey from Delaware to New Mexico wasn't too bad. Tony drove for 15 hours virtually non-stop the first day through Virginia and Tennessee, winding up at Memphis for the night after 970 miles. We went to peer over the wall at Gracelands (it was closed for the evening) and trawled up and down Elvis Presley Boulevard, but decided not to stay at the Heartbreak Hotel, assuming that it would cost an arm and a leg. Instead we had a very OK motel round the corner, and woke up next morning to TV news that police were investigating an overnight shooting on E. Presley Boulevard. Nice.

The next two days to New Mexico were a bit easier driving and we reached Carlsbad Cavern National Park mid-afternoon on Wednesday. We stayed in a little stone cabin, one of two reserved for visiting research scientists, which we shared with various comers and goers including a very amusing couple of bat specialists. There are more than half a million bats roosting in Carlsbad Cavern, and each



night we could sit on our front porch to watch the bat flight – when they emerge *en masse* to eat every available insect during the night. We went down the Carlsbad tourist cave. Tony had been before and it's a very spectacular show-cave.

But the main event of course was Tony's trip down Lechuguilla Cave, which he was

looking forward to enormously, albeit with some trepidation! It's very special and totally restricted for fear of damage to the amazingly beautiful and delicate crystals and formations; but Art and Peggy Palmer, who were with us in China last year, have been involved since it was discovered in the '80s, hence Tony's invitation. It was a long trip, 17 hours underground, and pretty hard going; they were all, Tony, Art, Peggy and two of Art's geology students, fairly well exhausted when they got back at 4.30am. But now that he's recovered, two days later, and more or less regained the power of sensible conversation, Tony reports that it really was out-of-this-world fantastic, and worth all the pain and effort.

After leaving Carlsbad, we headed across into Texas, then right down south to the Rio Grande, and a town called Del Rio, with Mexico just across the river. We're writing this in a restaurant with an eat-all-you-can buffet, a great treat after five days of fairly minimal rations!

Hello from New Orleans, July 24

Now we're in Pensacola, in the far western tip of Florida, having driven from Texas through Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Since last week, we have been keeping to the south coast all the way, so there have only been quite short stretches through Mississippi and Alabama.

Before we left Texas we had a quick look round San Antonio, and the Alamo Fort (not a mention of John Wayne!) and went to Bracken Cave – again by special invitation, to see the most spectacular bat flight ever. Carlsbad has about half a million bats; this one has more than **fifteen** million. They came out in three or four batches over as many hours, circling round and round in the cave entrance before streaming away in wave after wave after wave until it was too dark to see them.

We went back next morning at 6am to see them re-entering. Quite different, not so concentrated, but a constant steady stream gathering from all directions, spiralling overhead, then dropping down like stones into the cave, each with a distinct zipping noise. Very, very impressive.

Then we headed for New Orleans, via some small town that barely exists any longer, wiped out by Hurricane Rita last year (that we barely heard about in England), and then saw quite a lot of the chaos that still remains in New Orleans itself from Hurricane



Bat flight out of Bracken Cave.



Katrina damage in New Orleans.



Moving house – the American way.

Katrina (which was in late August 2005, a few weeks before Rita). Whole districts were totally devastated, and although some areas show signs of rebuilding, others appear to have been completely abandoned. There are piles of furniture and possessions heaped in the streets, with scrap-metal merchants still fork-lifting away wrecked cars, and the most sign of activity is from enterprising bus companies taking coach-loads of tourists around.

The French Quarter, with all the lovely old buildings and streets, was untouched by the flooding, and is very much up-and-running for business. We had a couple of brilliant evenings there, eating gumbo and jambalaya, and listening to some really excellent jazz, including one evening at Preservation Hall, which has been kept exactly as it was in the 1960s hey-days of jazz, and which we both thought was wonderful.

We left New Orleans along the coast through Gulfport and Biloxi, and saw yet more extensive damage from Katrina, in this case just from the storm-surge that washed away all the beachfront houses. Along the coast, we've had some pretty magnificent thunderstorms, and temperatures over a hundred a lot of the time, which has had even the locals wilting!

But we're now on our way north, back towards Delaware, so it might be a bit less extreme. A final weekend with Sam, Jen and Jack to come, before we head for home.

Postcards from Southern India 2006-07

Happy Christmas from Darjeeling

Here we are, relaxing in colonial luxury in Darjeeling in a wonderful old Raj hotel (the New Elgin) with very discreet decorations and one enormous Christmas tree. Seems a world away from Varanasi where we spent the last three days. We still think Varanasi, Benares as it used to be called, is the most magical city; all India seems to be there in one microcosm. It's noisy, crowded, dirty, colourful and just wonderfully Indian. We found a really excellent place to stay overlooking the ghats (the long terraces and steps) beside the Ganges and right in the centre of things with the old town just behind us, a maze of narrow streets with tiny shops the size of cupboards selling everything imaginable and seething with people, cycles, motorbikes, cows.... and of course cow effluent.

The Dalai Lama was in town and speaking in a suburb of Varanasi a few miles out. We didn't go as it would have taken up a big chunk of time, and apparently it was a bit heavy-duty philosophy and heavy-duty listening. Instead we took a boat across the river to the sandbanks on the other side where they were shooting a film. No Bollywood dancing girls, sadly for Tony, but quite fun, with lots of extras dressed as sadhus with orange robes, dreadlocks, tridents etc, and 'wild' mangy dogs straight out of Animal Casting in a supposed Madras desert scene.

Back in town, we saw a snake charmer in action, and a deceased monkey being carried to the burning ghat on its own litter covered in a golden shroud with all the accompanying ceremony; we knew it was a monkey because they inadvertently dropped it right in front of Tony and its little body fell out on to the ground. Rather macabre, but that's daily life, and death, in India.

We left Varanasi on a rowing boat for an hour down the river to the main road bridge (which was closed for repairs), then crammed in with eight others in a *tempo* (a little three-wheeler shared taxi) to reach the Mughalserai station for a train that was hours late, but got us here overnight (actually to New Jalpaiguri, for a bus up to Darjeeling). We whiled away the time on the station counting rats on the line (14 in ten minutes) and then one followed us into the waiting room and did several circuits before it disappeared. Not sure where to.....

You travel to Varanasi and think it is wonderful, and India cannot get any better. Then Darjeeling is totally different but just as perfect.



Happy New Year from Calcutta

Well, Christmas in Darjeeling *was* different, but a lot of fun! We spent Christmas Eve afternoon at the zoo, which was a bit of a sad place for some – the various deer didn't seem to have much grazing – but they do have very good and successful breeding programmes for the rarer animals, it seems, and the tigers and red pandas in particular put on a very fine show for us. We were especially excited about the red pandas, having seen two, very fleetingly, in the wild when we were trekking in Nepal ten years ago.

Christmas Eve evening was party time at the hotel, with a bonfire and cocktails on the patio, entertained by a local school and youth orchestra, who did a lot of singing and dancing and cultural programming, and then launched into carol singing: a quick-tempo *Silent Night*, followed by *Jingle Bells* followed by a sort of Indian reggae version of *Oh Come All Ye Faithful*, and a few others we either didn't recognise or can't remember. But it was all so jolly, and they were so enormously enthusiastic, we really enjoyed it.

Then into dinner: decorated tables, very superior party-hats and party-blowers, and to eat: lamb, pork, chicken and cottage pie. And Christmas pudding. We were with an expat British couple our age living in Delhi, and a younger couple from London, all very good company, and who were our New Best Friends all the time in Darjeeling! The hotel was absolutely full, all Indians apart from us six, with a great many children, all of them totally out of control. But we kept telling each other "it is Christmas after all"!!

In contrast, Christmas Day was very low-key, in fact totally ignored by the locals, nothing special going on in town or in the hotel, apart from more party-hats and blowers and another excellent dinner, but we all had a good day. The hotel was absolutely brilliant, with a wonderful atmosphere, and really friendly staff. Central heating didn't come into the equation, but they provided fantastic coal fires in all the rooms, and come bedtime, there were hot water bottles in all the beds.



Bagatelle booby-prize was a sticky sweet.

We were sorry to leave Darjeeling after four days, but we moved on to Gangtok in Sikkim, not far from the Tibetan border. A slightly traumatic journey, owing to the road being closed for several hours because the Indian president was visiting, but we arrived in the end, and it was a lovely drive through forests of giant poinsettia trees: very Christmassy! We arrived in rain, sadly, and it was very cloudy next day as well, so we spent the afternoon at the local cinema. Excellent fun.

There were separate queues for men and women, although we were allowed to sit together inside, and it was all in Hindi, apart from the occasional phrase or sentence when they unaccountably lapsed into English – quite bizarre. Every time the picture faded off the screen, not infrequently, there was a chorus of whistles, jeers and catcalls from the hoi polloi downstairs (15p seats), while we in the rich people's seats (50p) were rather more restrained!

Next day was good sunshine first thing, and we took a taxi to a high-altitude lake close to Tibet. Icy roads, we got up OK, and were the first car there, but later on other vehicles weren't so lucky, and there was a major jam at a bridge caused by VIPs who were stuck (hopefully the same ones who held us up earlier) and when we finally got through there was a queue of 120-odd jeeps and taxis waiting to cross. Then it was a four-hour shared jeep down to Siliguri, and next day an eight-hour train to Calcutta, where we arrived last night, and we're setting off to look around now.

Hello from Hyderabad, January 5

Calcutta is still as brilliant a city as ever. Suffering from a tremendous surfeit of rubbish everywhere of course, but the old Colonial buildings are magnificent; nothing quite like them anywhere else, and one or two actually being done up in a desultory sort of way. We woke up on New Year's Eve to a huge racket outside. Our bedroom window was opposite a massive red-brick Salvation Army building with a notice fixed outside: 'Mass feeding of the poor, every Sunday at 9am'. People were gathering from 7am onwards, and there were hundreds by 9am, forming three incredibly orderly queues. Everyone was given a chapatti, a banana and a ladleful of dhal sloshed into whatever plastic bags they'd brought along!

Elsewhere Calcutta was much quieter than usual, with it being Sunday, and again the next day on New Year's Day, which is generally a public holiday. So quite a lot of shops and stalls and markets were closed, with the owners sitting around playing cards, karam (a variation on a shove-ha'penny theme) and bagatelle, and endless cricket in the streets, some of them even more needle matches than England's fifth test (widely reported over here because cricket, anybody's cricket, is of paramount interest). There are no cows in Calcutta anymore; still hundreds of rickshaws though, but their days are numbered, as man-powered rickshaws are being phased out (in Calcutta) from January 1, 2007. Ostensibly because the job is so degrading, but more likely



Rickshaw wallah in Calcutta.



Satisfying to find your own name written on the train.

because they clog the traffic up, and at the end of the day it will leave a potential 18,000 rickshaw wallahs out of work. People don't think that way. It's a poor man's job, I know, but it's a poor man's living.

Sunday evening livened up, with thousands out on the streets celebrating, quite daunting really, but dozens of police handled the traffic and the people very well. Midnight brought a crescendo of bells and whistles and hooters, but afraid we were in bed by then, absolutely knackered!

We spent New Year afternoon on the Maidan, a huge, three-square-mile park in the city centre, thronged with people, balloon sellers, pony rides, roundabouts, kite-flying and of course cricket. Then a 27-hour train journey out of Calcutta, arriving in Hyderabad 10am on Wednesday morning. It's always so pleasing to see your name and seat number on the passenger list that is pasted to the outside of the carriage!

Hyderabad is a big sprawling city, with a huge Islamic population. The main bazaar is lined with gold and jewellery shops to match Dubai, and thronged with Moslem men trailing retinues of black-veiled wives in their wake. We spent a morning at Golconda Fort, a very impressive set of buildings, ruins and gardens, and walked around much of the old city. Then we found ourselves outside the Little Flower High School at going-home time: some very funny pictures of lumpish great 16-year-old lads under the school sign, who must be mortified to be known as little flowers! All in all, Hyderabad is a bit bland and characterless, but it is admirably clean, with immaculate public lavatories – very relevant when you're away from base from 8am till suppertime!

Goodness me: orderly queues, spotless loos, I don't know what India is coming to!

Hello from Pondicherry, January 11

From Hyderabad, we caught the night train to Tirupati, way down in the south. Had a very good couple of days there, in what proved to be a cheerful little (relatively speaking) town, and still very Indian in character, despite being so far south. It only really exists by virtue of the temple town of Tirumala, 27 km up the hill, which apparently eclipses Mecca, Jerusalem and Rome for sheer numbers of visiting pilgrims. The most worshipful act when there is to have your head shaved

and give your hair as an offering, so loads of men, women and children are walking about looking like Kojak after a visit to the 'Temple Tonsure Entrance'. We wanted to go in and have a look, but didn't dare, just in case! It's no big deal for the men, but a bit extreme for the women to have several years' worth of glossy black hair razored off in a fit of religious fervour. (Among the usual hundreds of temple tat shops there are long, long lines of hat shops for them to cover up the damage when they realise what they've done, and to protect their newly-exposed heads from sunburn!)



Before and after worshipful visits to Temple Tonsure Services at Tirumala.

We didn't go inside the actual temple, either, because it would have involved a seven-hour queue, densely packed in Alton Tower-type zigzag formation, but in covered 'cages' and separated by floor-to-ceiling iron grilles. Not good in a panic situation, or in the event of changing your mind halfway there. Actually, to be slightly less melodramatic, we could have bought VIP/foreigners' tickets and walked straight in, but that would have meant leaving cameras and bags in an open, only-vaguely-secure, room, so we didn't.

Next, a pair of buses down to Mamalapuram on the coast, a very popular backpacker chill-out place. A culture shock for us, as we saw virtually the first westerners since Darjeeling, there had been none whatsoever during the previous week, but we quickly got into the swing of 'feet up, get the drinks in and..... relax'! There was an excellent granite-boulders park, where we spent much of a day; a lot of sculptures and temples carved out of in-situ rock, and some rock scrambling that was fun, including one particular 'short cut' that involved leaving most of the skin on my knees behind. Mamalapuram has also gone down in the book for its great fish-straight-from-the-sea beach cafes in the evenings.

Now we're in Pondicherry, another seaside town, though not exactly 'beachy'. It was a French colony, so still some French influence – street names etc – but otherwise not overly exciting. There's a canal through the centre of the town which is, not to put too fine a point on it, an open sewer. But there is also a cool and shady botanical garden to walk through, and a splendid promenade



Bas-relief elephants in granite at Mamalapuram.

that people – er – promenade along in the evening. And we went to a fun-fair: a rather ancient swing-boat and rickety big-wheel, three or four children's roundabouts and a few side-stalls, where the must-have item to buy or win appeared to be a cauliflower. There was a huge mound of them at the entrance, and heaps on every counter and stall! This was not Goose Fair, it was Cauliflower Fair.

The weather has been warm all along, and now in the south decidedly hot, and here in Pondicherry quite humid for the first time. But altogether very pleasant.

Hello from Chennai, January 20

We're now as far south as we're going, it's back up to Chennai/Madras tomorrow and then home, so this morning we visited our last temple for this trip! We've been to about half a dozen Hindu temples in a variety of towns during the last week or so, so are a bit templed-out, but each is different, and all are well worth calling by. We also went to an ashram before we left Pondicherry, a Hindu retreat, very popular in southern India for a spot of meditation and yogic therapy, and full of Indians and westerners wearing floaty clothes, sitting cross-legged and motionless, or chanting and waving incense at each other. All a bit mystic....

To complete our devotional activities, we were taken to a Christian service last Sunday morning, by a group of children we'd collected during a village walkabout! The pastor and his congregation of nine stopped the service to bring us chairs, so we were obliged to stay for a session of hallelujahs, tambourine-bashing and arm-waving, to the children's great glee. This was in the countryside near Thanjavur (used to be called Tanjore), which had yet another huge Tamil temple.

The last three days have been really fascinating. We stayed in a hotel called Chettinadu Mansion, in a town of derelict and semi-abandoned grand houses, in the middle of absolutely nowhere. It was quite surreal; when we arrived and got off the bus in a rather nondescript village, there was no sign of activity whatsoever, let alone any local transport, so we just set off walking, luckily in the right direction, until we



Temple elephant at Thanjavur.

came upon these massive houses. All built by traders with Burma in the 19th and 20th centuries, but the money all dried up after 1945 and it's now a bit of a ghost town.

The adjacent village was full of life, particularly as we were there for Pongal – the big festival in Tamil Nadu, celebrating harvest. Everyone goes home for it and the key ceremony involves heating a clay pot of rice over a wood stove until it boils over – the boiling over

The half-way challenge in the 100-yards-including-thread-a-needle race that was the main event for sari-clad ladies during Pongal Games in the village of Chettinad.



is the critical bit. As we walked around, everyone was out on the street wishing everyone else Happy Pongal, and we were plied with goodies including handfuls of sweet rice pudding, cold mango juice and Bengali syrup sweets, invited into people's home and village temples and even asked to be part of the family photographs!

Then in the afternoon, we had the Village Games. This was a bit like going back half a century to our old school sports day. They had a sack race, skipping race, egg-and-spoon race – then variations on a theme! For lads there was what they called a 'getting-up race' that involved a bucket-of-water over the head, then buttoning up a wet shirt and pulling on a pair of shorts, before running there and back again. And for girls, it was running to the far post, then threading a needle with cotton, before running back again! Much easier said than done, when you're out of breath and the pressure's on! And – very sweetly – the little children who were too young to take part in the official games made their own amusement with sticks and hoops made from bicycle tyres. It was a lovely afternoon, and a great atmosphere.

When we left Chettinad we hired a car-with-driver to take us to a post-Pongal bull-running festival, known as Jallikattu, and again all very traditional. Our hotel manager, who we persuaded to organise the car for us, was very disturbed that we were going, because he didn't think we would be safe. What happens is that decorated bulls with garlands round their necks are let loose to run amok among huge crowds within a huge field, and the local lads try to remove the garlands, grab the bull's hump or get trampled into the dust. It was a massive event, but very chaotic, with protection only behind bits of granite walls, which the bulls

Ornamentation on the towers of almost any Tamil temple; this one is at Chidambaran.





Jallikattu - with no protection at all for the young men of the district who have to snatch flowers from the garlands placed over the bulls' necks.

sometimes came behind anyway. All very exciting, and we reckon there were getting on for 100,000 people there. The queue of trucks, tractors and trailers, tuk tuks and people coming away afterwards was more than enough to test the T. Waltham patience, but we managed to get away in the end.

From there, it was a bus ride to Madurai. Having arrived and settled in our hotel we were rushed off to “see the temple lights before 7pm: from government building rooftop: no extra charge” by a somewhat over-excited taxi driver. We were totally unimpressed by the lights, and still have no idea what the 7pm significance was, but we went again the next day to see it in daylight, and were suitably taken by the beautifully carved interior, guarded by a long-suffering temple elephant at the entrance. It was the famous Sri Meenakshi Temple, which has the four tall towers adorned with hundreds of painted statues in typical Tamil style. We also came across the Tailors’ Market, with dozens of men making up shirts and trousers on sewing machines, all in long lines within the outer colonnades of the temple.

Next morning it was a 5am start to the railway station and the train to Chennai, which we all know as Madras, en route for the plane journey home. Chennai isn’t much to write home about, we walked along the big, sandy beach past the rifle-range stand and had an ice cream each; then we found a very jolly temple, all lights and music, but Tony was only allowed in part of the way because he was wearing black trousers. Don’t ask, I don’t know either! I was allowed to go further, but I have to say, he didn’t miss much!

And then it was to the airport. Predictably huge delays, we finally took off at 6am the *next* morning.... but, hoorah, we were upgraded to Traveller Plus, which made the wait sort of worthwhile!

Postcards from Western Australia 2007

Hello from Esperance, June 16

We love Australia already! Picked up the campervan on arrival at Perth, but spent the first night with Jim Winterhalder, an old college friend of Tony's, when he and his lady friend, Sue, spent the evening regaling us with a long list of things to avoid in their lovely country. Suitably terrified, but resisting the impulse to catch the first plane home, we went next day to the town of Margaret River in the far southwest, where there are some very pretty show caves. Tony gave a talk to the local caving club, and we stayed the night with the managers of one of the caves. So it wasn't until the third night that we slept in our campervan which is really, really comfortable, very well equipped, easy to drive and altogether excellent. We love it, and it's home-from-home already. We pitch up at nights in parking areas well away from the road, which we have to ourselves as it's so quiet; in England we'd be sharing with a dozen truck drivers!

We've come along the southern coast, through some amazing forests as far as Albany. All variations on a eucalyptus theme, such as karri trees, immensely tall with clean white trunks, one of which is a 'climbing tree' with a circular ladder spiralling up to a platform 68m high. Scary; we didn't! But we did do the 'skywalk' above the canopy of a Red Tingle Tree forest, which was brilliant.

Up to there we had mixed weather; rain is the norm down here at this time of year, so sunny spells have been a bonus (it will be high season and should be lovely when we go north) but after dark it's been fantastic – starry, starry, **starry** skies, and an amazing Milky Way. Now we're in good sunshine, en route through Esperance and Norseman to the Nullarbor Desert, where there is **nothing**. At all! So we've stocked up with six days' supplies for while we're there. (Although what there is, of course, is a significant abundance of caves.)

We've seen a few kangaroos – amazing creatures – sensibly keeping to the side of the road, and a couple of emus stupidly

Scary things in Australia

1. *Camping under eucalyptus (falling branches).*
2. *Bathing in lakes or rivers (crocodiles).*
3. *Swimming in the sea (box jellyfish).*
4. *Nasty spiders (the old myth about checking under lavatory seats isn't a myth).*
5. *Nasty snakes (stamping your feet does scare them away apparently/hopefully).*
6. *Kamikaze kangaroos (with a tendency to fling themselves at passing vehicles).*



wandering down the middle of the road. Oh, and a man said “G’dy” to me this morning, so that definitely is worth a point in my ‘I Spy Australia’ book! If he’d said “G’dy Sheila”, it would have been perfect.

Hello from Kalgoorlie, June 23

We’re now back to something approaching civilization, after four days of cave-hopping in the outback! After we last wrote we spent a couple of days more or less burning up the miles travelling east on really good roads, 500 miles in all, including 90 miles of ‘Australia’s longest straight road’, as the road sign said! A few road-trains along the way – trucks pulling two or three or more trailers – and a smattering of caravans and campers, but really very little traffic.

We crossed from Western Australia into South Australia, where we were frisked at the border post for illicit plants, flowers, fruit, vegetables and honey – they’re very fussy about different states keeping their bugs and diseases to themselves; fair enough, although I can’t quite make out why a jar of honey is classed as a weapon of mass destruction. Anyway, we were ‘clean’, and met up at the border town with four other cavers – Julia, who Tony has known for years and years (and was on the international cavers’ jolly in China last year), Tony White (who he’s also known for ever), and Dave and Craig. All excellent company.

The first couple of nights they were staying in an abandoned shearers’ shed, which was very comfortable with a big fireplace and loads of wood to burn, so we did a lot of cooking on that, with the copious supplies that Julia had brought. The others dossed down in the shed, while Tony and I slept nearby in the van. They all went down one cave from there, then we moved back into Western Australia for a couple more caves. The plan was to all camp at one of the cave entrances, but there was so much rain about that they couldn’t face tents, so the four of them all piled into a motel room at the roadhouse 20 km away for two nights, and we parked outside. The third cave was more like 60 km along dirt road, we went with Julia and Craig in their 4WD as there was no way our van would have made it. With Dave and Tony White in another 4WD we all only just made it, as the road was a sea of slippery slidey wet clay with deep ruts and huge potholes-come-lakes. It took three hours to do the journey each way. And all for a three-hour cave trip, but



Sinkhole entrance to Koonalda Cave, far from anywhere, out in the Nullarbor.

*Sundown
in the Oz
outback.*



very worthwhile according to both the Tonys. I didn't go underground, but did lots of walking on the surface in the meantime. Apparently the Nullarbor caves are the oldest, biggest and altogether most interesting in Australia, and quite something to be seen, so thanks really to Julia who organized it all.

In between skating over mud slicks and disappearing down holes in the ground we've seen some good scenery. The Nullarbor Plain is not a traditional sandy desert, but has lots of scrubby grass and brush, and despite the name – Null-arbor, no-trees! – there are actually plenty of trees dotted around, some of them very beautiful. We're also keeping up with the wildlife-spotting, plenty more kangaroos and emus, a school of dolphins below the cliffs, a whole flock of lovely pink and grey cockatoos (we saw white cockatoos and green parrots in Jim's garden in Perth, forgot to tell you), and dingoes; and Great Bustards (like emus but rather smaller) have also been seen.

We're now in Kalgoorlie, which is an old gold mining town – well, still is a gold mining town with a huge open-pit mine, but the heritage bit is very strong. Weather is still mixed – yesterday was clear blue skies, and we thought we'd left the rain behind, but it's back with us today off and on. Dozens of rainbows! So we're off up north as quickly as possible to the better weather.

Hello from Derby, June 29

We have come north to Derby, right up on the north coast and on the edge of the Kimberley, after many miles of relatively empty, featureless road. The town is full of great fat boab trees, which are brilliant, and we stopped at a bridge on the way in and saw 12 crocodiles! Could have been freshies (fish-eaters) or salties (people-eaters), but we weren't going to find out.

From Kalgoorlie, which was a bit of a low point weatherwise, we have had cloudless blue skies, although cold at nights. Had to scrape the ice off the windscreen one morning. We drove up to a decidedly non-town called

Just a freshie.





Gorge walk in the Karijini National Park.

Wiluna, and from there along dirt roads to Newman, just up the road from the Capricorn roadhouse, so-called because it's right on the Tropic of!

At Newman we joined a guided tour round the iron-ore mine, which is the only notable thing about Newman; everybody works at the mine, and they reckon it's the biggest open pit mine in the world, although Tony says it's not. If you want a lengthy dissertation on the subject when we get home, just ask!!! From there we've driven along miles more dirt roads (don't tell the van rental company!),

mostly good, although the ones in the Karijini National Park were horrendous, really badly corrugated all the way, and a pig to drive on. Good or bad, though, they all create a huge amount of dust. Everything is covered in red dust – clothes, food, bedding, Tony, me..... was it in *A Town Like Alice* that the continual presence of red dust eventually drove them crazy? I can feel myself going.....

All worth it, though. The Karijini Park was brilliant, full of deep narrow gorges, waterfalls and emerald pools that we walked to, and in one case walked along a gorge, which meant wading through said pools, mostly knee deep, but occasionally as far up as – well, as far up as uncomfortable! Tony is very, very excited about the banded iron ore rock that they are all formed in; even I can see that there are some very beautiful patterns of folded rock. And of course it has necessitated heaving mega-heavy specimens across rocks and ravines, and up steep hillsides to become likely contenders for our pet-rock garden. (No, it will not be hand baggage only on the way home!)

We called at the little town of Wittenoom, which existed only because they were mining blue asbestos until the 1960s. Very shock-horror nowadays, of course, and the government is desperate to bulldoze the whole town, even though monitoring proves that no asbestos dust remains. Officials have cut off the power and water supplies, but the eight remaining townsfolk won't budge! They've sunk their own well which gives them their water, and generate their own electricity. We ignored the asbestos-hazard road-signs and talked to one old codger, the only person we saw, when he gave us the low-down. The most astonishing thing is that of the eight residents, six are neighbourly and get on, and two aren't and don't – to the extent that they refused to contribute to the cost of the water supply. So the six

took matters, and hacksaws, into their own hands and literally cut them off! But the two are still there – fascinating, quite extraordinary. I would have like to have stayed and found out more about the domestic intrigues of Wittenoom, but time is pressing. We still have a fair way to go, further north and into the Kimberley region, before we head back for Perth.

Hello from Karratha, July 7

We reached the coast at Port Hedland, and turned towards the northeast. We managed to be in Broome on July 1, when the full moon coincided with low tide, so when the moon comes over the horizon it creates a phenomenon called Staircase to the Moon, which is the moon reflecting in a succession of water channels across the mud flats. It looks great in the paintings; in reality – well, it was all right, quite pretty, though not as stunning as it might have been. But it was a great party atmosphere, hundreds of people on the beach having picnics and cracking open bottles of Jacob's Creek and tinnies of Castlemaine XXXX, and a fun market to add to the excitement, so we were glad we were there. Broome is also apparently world famous for pearls, so we went round a cultured pearl farm as well. Admittedly, watching pearls grow isn't much of a spectator sport, but it was surprisingly interesting, and we really enjoyed it.

Back on track eastwards again, we returned towards Derby and veered off on to the Gibb River Road, a dirt road that careers off for hundreds of miles in to the far yonder, and is largely impassible without 4WD. But the first part, which has a link back on to the Great Northern Highway, you can do, so we did! Very worthwhile too. We stopped off at Windjana Gorge, which was a lovely walk between red limestone cliffs alongside the river. The river isn't in full flow at this time of year, but there are plenty of pools and channels remaining, so dozens of freshwater crocodiles in the water and up on the banks. Allegedly, freshies eat nothing bigger than a fish, but even so it's a bit unnerving when you're posing for scale and all you hear is "Go on, get a bit closer..."! We also walked through Tunnel Creek Cave, a visitor-friendly (ie flat and sandy-bottomed and easy to walk along) river cave, with a bit of paddling involved. We walked underground for about half a mile right through a ridge, and then back again. It's a cave that Tony's known about for years, and wanted to see, and it didn't disappoint. From there we went on to Geike Gorge, where we took an extremely pleasant boat trip along the river there and back. I must say, for an area



Midway through Tunnel Creek Cave.

that can sometimes seem a bit flat and featureless, Western Australia comes up with some terrific special effects when you least expect them.

We finally got to Halls Creek, on the southern edge of the Kimberley region, and end-of-the-road as far as we're concerned. It's a small town (make that **very** small town) mostly populated by Aboriginals, and the local highlights are the Bungle Bungles, a range of hills that have eroded to create spectacular red, yellow and black banding, and the Wolfe Creek Crater, created by a meteor in the dim distant past, and one of the finest meteor craters in the world. Both are best seen by air, so we took a flight over each of them in a small five-seater plane which was great fun (although not for two of our co-passengers, who had their faces in sick bags the whole time!).

We're now in Karratha, one of a number of little towns on the Pilbara Coast, and very pretty. We're on our way back south, aiming to follow the coast road down to Perth. We spent the night before last camped on the beach, lovely to watch the sun go down into the sea in a blaze of colour, although with no clouds around there are no terrific sunsets. Then last night we were by a mangrove swamp, with no-one else in sight, just 20 or so herons for company! Still beautiful sunny days, but nights getting noticeably colder again as we go south.

Hello from Perth, July 16

Right, well – proceeding in a southerly direction – we have visited Exmouth, at the tip of a small peninsula, which to be perfectly honest was supremely unremarkable, so carried on down the Coral Coast to a little resort town called Coral Bay. That was much more fun, and we had an excellent afternoon viewing and snorkelling from a glass-bottomed boat. The Ningaloo Reef (which it is) is made up of hard coral as opposed to Great Barrier Reef soft coral, therefore not as colourful, but with spectacular shapes and sizes, and with plenty of fish flitting around. Later,



Blowhole at Point Quobba.

just short of the town of Carnarvon, we went along a spur road to Point Quobba, a really craggy piece of coast with blowholes in the rocks. The waves crashing into the sea caves sent plumes of water dozens of feet in the air. Quite mesmerising to watch; we could have stayed there all day.

Next was Shark Bay, where the principal attraction was a patch of stromatolites by the shore. Hmm. Yes, quite. Stromatolites are very very geologically important, the earliest-ever form of life, that 3500 million years ago were giving off oxygen that enabled all other forms of life to exist. This is one of only two

Urban skyline of downtown Perth, seen from one of the city parks.



patches in the world that are still living and growing. Unfortunately, in all those 3500 million years we chose the one day with no sun and when the tide was exactly wrong to photograph them to their best advantage, but we did get some pics, and it was great to see them. (Although pearls grow faster...!!!) The Shell Beach at Shark Bay is pretty amazing too, consisting entirely of tiny, intact cockle shells, not ground to sand at all, just the complete shells, and really lovely.

Then Kalbarri, another resort town, in the middle of a national park with loads of cliffs and gorges and rivers – one more dirt road to get to them all, and after that we could start cleaning off the red dust! We seemed to have lost the sun for good, and it was definitely a bit wintery – by Australian standards, that is, which means some days going back into long jeans, and maybe even a jumper. Along the coast, The Pinnacles is a national park with a drive-around road among a lot of limestone pinnacles sticking up through the sand, all very exciting for the geologically-minded.

We continued southwards along a rocky coast and then inland through sheep country that was well into a prolonged drought, all very sad with flocks of very thirsty sheep standing around on barren, parched ground. Stopped off near the forgettable coastal town of Horrocks for a view of some Aborigine cave paintings (always difficult to make out, although I think I found a horse....!). At Yanchep, we went through a pretty little park that included a nature reserve, with a dozen or so koalas living there, so they say: they're quite difficult to spot in the trees, but we saw six.

We are now back at Jim's home, just outside Perth. On the way in, we called at Fremantle Market, which was a sort of cross between Camden Lock and Covent Garden, and notable for a performance from an absolutely brilliant young opera singer. Today was spent hosing the van down (very necessary!) before taking it back to the rental company, and the plane home. Sad to be leaving. We love Australia!

Postcards from The Middle East 2008

Hello from Iran, January 29

We – John, Valerie and ourselves – are back in Dubai briefly, after a brilliant ten days in Iran. It really is a lovely country, and the people are incredibly friendly and welcoming. And despite the fact that we're inevitably a curiosity, they are fantastically polite. They are vehemently proud of being Iranian, as opposed to Arab, they have a totally different language, and while they are predominantly Muslim, they seem to have a culture that is very distinct from the rest of the Middle East.

No sooner had we got on the plane in Dubai than we were told, "You are in Iranian territory now, so all ladies must cover their heads." Luckily Valerie and I had come prepared, and so dug out the scarves we'd brought with us. We arrived in Bandar Abbas, in southern Iran, and were met by Mehran, our guide (a Tom Hanks lookalike, who spoke near-perfect English, and was very vociferous on politics and religion – he and apparently most Iranians hate the mullahs and their puppet Ahmadinejad and all the extremism that they impose) and driver Reza, a bit older and with very little English, but both of them good people and excellent to be with. Reza fought on the front line in the Iran-Iraq war, and when most of his platoon were killed or captured he managed to escape, but lost his rifle in the process. His reward was a month in military jail and then made to pay for a new gun. Nice.

Our first night in Iran we were caught up in the major Shi'ite festival of Ashura at the main mosque. Hundreds of people were outside, and then a huge ceremonial procession came down the road with drums and cymbals and chanting, men ritualistically beating themselves with chains and slapping themselves about their chests and heads, and faceless black-veiled women and little children carrying candles. It was all very emotive and quite hypnotic to watch; you can understand how they sometimes manage to whip themselves up into religious frenzies. We were a bit hesitant about intruding, but Mehran persuaded us, and in fact we were made very welcome by the crowds.



Next day we took the car ferry to Qeshm Island. Easier said than done, it was totally disorganized chaos at the port, every vehicle for itself when it came to getting on, no such thing as a queue, and all the vehicles, including massive great trucks, had to reverse on to the ferry up a narrow ramp, as they haven't yet thought of roll-on-roll-off. Once on the island we



A salt mountain near Bandar Abbas; the grey is all salt; it's what we had come to see.

met up with Colin, another caving friend who was working in Dubai, and we set off to establish our camp for the next three days. A terrific site, about six feet from the sea at high tide, and behind us was the salt dome that we'd come to see.

Actually more of a mountain than a dome, caused by salt pushing up through limestone over millions of years. Domes like these, exposed on the surface, are more or less unique to Iran, so very special geologically, and very beautiful to see, with salt-encrusted rivers that look and sound just like ice to crunch over and, best of all for Tony, John and Colin, a series of salt caves. Over two days they went to five caves, including one long one that involved crawling over very unfriendly sharp salt crystals for nearly a kilometre, and they all came out with shredded hands. But all very well worth it, apparently; they were completely knocked out by the truly spectacular formations and salt decorations, some of the most beautiful caves Tony reckons he's seen anywhere.

Back on the mainland we spent a couple of days in Lar, a town about 250 km from Bandar Abbas, where the main attraction was a series of salt glaciers – just like 'proper' ice glaciers, but made of salt flowing away from the domes. I have to admit I wouldn't have identified them as such if I hadn't been told, but again, very exciting for Tony to see. The drive back from Lar should have been through spectacular scenery, but unfortunately we didn't see much of it, as it rained solidly the entire day. Bit of a disappointment – we've had unusually mixed weather altogether – but thankfully the next day was beautiful again, when we took a speedboat over to Hormuz Island, which has another salt cave. It was a lovely island, the boat ride was good fun (apart from the usual nightmare of getting in and out of the thing without tipping into the sea!) so altogether it was a brilliant last day in Iran.



On the citadel above Lar.

We stayed in some really good places, one was memorable for the fact that it was hugely impressive at first sight – all scenic lifts (one working) and indoor aquaria (lots of tanks, one fish) – but the bedrooms were freezing cold, minimal bedding, and various electrical appliances with no sockets to plug them into! But we've had worse, and on the whole the accommodation has been excellent.

Now we're off to Yemen in the morning. Valerie and I have become quite attached to the headscarves we had to wear in Iran every time we set foot out of the bedroom door, I don't know if they're obligatory in Yemen or not, but they probably will be. No matter, I feel positively undressed at the moment without it!



The old city of Sana'a.

Hello from Yemen, February 8

We landed in Sana'a, in southern Yemen, after a brief stopover in Dubai. It is a magnificent city, famous for its beautiful architecture, tall, narrow buildings of heavily pointed stone with arched windows of multi-coloured glass, really lovely. Our hotel was right in the old city, behind an excellent open-air souk, so we had a very good couple of days there. One day was spent driving to some local sights and small desert towns around Shibam, in one of which we luckily chanced upon wedding celebrations that involved groups of men dancing while waving around massive knives. We also stopped for a typical Yemeni meal. Fortunately, looks aren't everything to go by; it was served up in battered old tin pots and appeared absolutely disgusting, with unmentionable items floating in turgid soup – but each dish turned out to be totally delicious. Tony says “as a media production, Yemeni cooking is made for radio”.



Food fit for radio.

Valerie and I had been assured by various people that in Yemen we didn't need to wear head coverings, but when I went out with Tony for a brief sortie down the road a nasty old woman swathed from head to toe in black quite deliberately threw half a cup of tea over me, which I took to be a sign of disapproval, so it was scarves on for us after that.

Wedding ceremonies in the town square in Thilla involved various men dancing while wielding rather large knives.



We then flew to the island of Socotra which is part of Yemen, although very removed from Sana'a in character. We were warned that it was very basic, which I think was an apt description to say the least. The first night was in a bit of a rough-and-ready hotel, where John and Valerie's bed fell to pieces, but they managed to wedge it together again. We had been met at the airport by a guide, Shihab, and driver, Dar, so next morning we set off for five nights of camping, after stocking up with cokes and snacks and stuff to make the whole experience tolerable. I was owed 50 rials change, about 10p, and the shopkeeper tried to persuade me to have a handful of khat leaves in lieu, the narcotic of choice here. I declined, so I am still owed 50 rials.

We drove through some areas of excellent fretted and fluted limestone, and brilliant trees. Some that look like umbrellas, called Dragon's Blood Trees. Some like fat baobabs but aren't, called Desert Roses – Tony and I would cheerfully have gone on our way calling them baobabs, but John's a botanist and knows about these things. And frankincense trees, which I in a senior moment managed to call Frankenstein trees. There were some really rough roads, very 4WD, but Dar, who doesn't look old enough to walk to school on his own, is a good driver when he's not talking on his mobile phone or bouncing up and down to the pop music he plays constantly at full volume.

And so to our first campsite. A fixed camp, as opposed to tents, and the four of us shared an open fronted palm shelter over a stone and timber frame, and water-proofed with plastic sheeting that was horrendously noisy in the wind. We arrived at lunchtime and then had the afternoon wandering about the hillside tree-spotting and goat-watching until dinner, a delicious stew made of mutton, albeit uncomfortably fresh from the hillside. By this time we had been joined by most of the local village



Native to Socotra, the Dragon's Blood Trees are named after their red sap.



The main shopping street on Socotra.

all crowding into our shelter, and the remainder standing outside waiting their turn to inspect the 'foreigners'. We had some difficulty shooing them out when we wanted to go to bed, and when we finally succeeded they just stood outside in the dark watching until we were actually in our sleeping bags, at which point they reluctantly concluded that the entertainment was over.

Next morning we walked down a steep, rocky path for a couple of hours, met Dar with the car again, and drove along to Camp Two, where we pitched tents between two huge sand dunes and beside a freshwater stream; totally idyllic. The men went up the dunes and beyond to the Aher Cave in the hillside which took them about four hours, while Valerie and I sat in the sun and read. The day after was another cave visit, to the Hoq Cave, which took up all morning. So Valerie and I were taken by Dar, our non-English-speaking driver, to the nearby village, where we sat in a dim room drinking many glasses of tea while various men, women and children came and jabbered at us loudly in Arabic. We repeated *mahaba* and *shukran* (hello and thank you were the extent of our vocabulary), many, many times before we called it a day and went back to wait for the cavers.

That night we didn't camp, but went back to the hotel, which made sense as it was *en route* for the next two days. But sadly that turned out to be more or less the end of the caves that were either accessible or that the guides could find. It was all a bit of a communications failure with the tour company, and especially frustrating for John, as it was he who wanted to go to Socotra specifically for the caving. As it was we had some alternative scenic spots and mountain walks that Tony and I enjoyed, and two more very good camp sites. One camp was in a canyon with a river through it, which we shared with some Czech mountain bikers, and the last night was spent in little palm huts through the roofs of which we could clearly see the stars.

Sadly stars were not in evidence by the morning, as it had gone cloudy by then and we had some rain, although patchy sunshine too. Just like British weather in fact. Which has largely been the case the whole time, plus a lot of wind on Socotra. It is a terrifically windy island altogether, and in the **real** windy season whole stone walls and entire stone houses can be flattened. But all told it was an excellent week, very good camping and absolutely brilliant food.

Now we have just flown back to Sana'a, on the weekly flight from Socotra. Tomorrow we have another touch-down in Dubai, where we each pick up our own cars, no more guides and drivers, and go our separate ways, John and Valerie further north within the Emirates, us to Oman.

Hello from Oman, February 13

Now back in Dubai after an excellent few days in Oman, just the two of us. We picked up the car as planned on Saturday, bright red, excellent for spotting in busy car parks, and spent that night in a smart hotel in Al Ain in Abu Dhabi, close to the Omani border. The hotel was almost at the top of Jebel Hafeet, a mountain that sticks up on its own in the middle of the desert. The Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi has a palace at the very top of the mountain, and Tony had been here a few years ago with a couple of caving colleagues at royal request, to explore and map the cave beneath his palace.



Wadi Ghul.

We then drove over the border into Oman – a lengthy process involving eight separate border control posts to leave the Emirates, obtain an Omani visa and drive into the country (and ten on the way back!). Time consuming, but no problems, and we had an easy drive on good roads with little traffic to Nizwa, a town with a lovely mosque and souk, although the old souk has been completely modernised and prettied up for the tourist market, which is a shame. A new attraction in this area is the Al Hootah Cave, which Tony had visited 23 years ago with a few caving friends, to explore and survey the cave from end to end (which are a few miles apart). Now the chambers near the downstream end have recently been opened as a super-de-luxe show-cave. The management knew we were coming, and we were given suitably VIP treatment!

We also went to Wadi Ghul, a fantastic dry river bed in a deep canyon with the ancient, now-abandoned, village of Sap Bani Khamis on a remote ledge near its upper end. We had been there before in poor weather, but this time it was lovely, so Tony got some excellent pictures, and we mopped up a few more photo opportunities that we'd missed when we were in Oman four years ago, so a good few days well spent.

Coming back to Dubai we chose the scenic route through the new Jebel Ali port area. Eight-lane highways, miles of massive industrial warehouses, giant construction sites, and acres of concrete camps where they keep the Indian labourers in less than perfect conditions. And monumental traffic jams. Once back into town we visited some of Dubai's more exotic sites, like the ski slope, and the world's tallest building, still under construction.

And now we're back in our favourite Riviera Hotel, overlooking the dhow harbour within Dubai Creek, and are ready to fly home tomorrow.

Postcards from Central India 2008-09

Happy Christmas from Darjeeling

We've now been in India for seven days, it seems forever, and we're enjoying it as much as always. A long and tedious flight, including a seven-hour stopover in Abu Dhabi. We went briefly into the town, but it's rather modern and soulless, so we didn't linger. We arrived in Delhi 7.30 in the evening, got a bus into town then walked about a kilometre to a street packed with hotels, and chose a really good one for two nights with a balcony overlooking the street (noisy but fun!). We were just inside Paharganj (the chief backpackers' area), which is in the heart of the old city, so it was very colourful and lively when we walked through it the next day. But it always takes a bit of getting used to the noise, and the seething crowds – along with the cycle rickshaws, scooters, tuk tuks, inevitable cows, potholes and hippy travellers. Streets full of men ironing with flat-irons filled with hot coals, men having hair-cuts and shaves, and men performing in the public loos. And the latter very publically, nothing so sophisticated as a door.

On Tuesday we flew into Bagdogra, at the foot of the Hill Cart Road into Darjeeling, and hired a taxi up, about a two-hour drive, to arrive at the New Elgin, our lovely hotel that we had stayed in two years ago. Two or three of the staff recognized us, which was gratifying. We have a lovely room with an excellent view, so are very happy!

We've revisited much of the town that we've seen before, and it's actually quite comfortable to feel familiar in a place, and Darjeeling is a fun town to be familiar in, albeit all on a nearly vertical hillside! One new place was a huge department store, a bit jumbled up, Indian-style, but containing everything you could think of. Including 'Men's Bottom Wear'. So much more descriptive than boring 'trousers'.

Christmas Eve was party night at the hotel, with half a dozen bonfires, or more accurately braziers, in the garden, a table set up as a bar, and folk dancing in the gazebo, followed by a dinner complete with party hats, unpullable crackers with gunpowder snaps, blower thingies, and a buffet including chicken with brandy sauce, and then plum puddings – about a dozen of them, brought in well alight by somewhat harassed waiters, and served with more brandy sauce.

The local junior school singing carols should have been part of the entertainment, but they failed to turn up, and we were very disappointed, but they came on Christmas

evening, with their orchestra of seven violins and a cello, and played in the lounge, which was completely delightful. Earlier in the evening we chanced upon a candlelit ceremony in the main square; hundreds of women processed in carrying candles, formed a huge circle, then all took turns to place their candles



to spell Merry Christmas on the ground. It was lovely, and we happened to be in the right place at the right time.

We spent the day in a town called Kurseong, an hour's drive down the road, in order to take pictures of the steam engine pulling the Toy Train (as it's called, an ancient, narrow-gauge passenger train) through the main street in the town. We



Toy Train in Kurseong.

had tried to do this the previous day, but it was delayed, so by the time the photo opportunity arrived it was too dark. But yesterday it went to plan, so – result!

Today we're off back down the Hill Cart Road in a minibus, and then out to New Jaipalguri to catch the overnight sleeper to Varanasi.

Happy New Year from Khajuraho

We arrived safely in Varanasi on the overnight train, and had a good couple of days there. This was the fourth time we have been there, so really nothing new, but it is still a magical place. Dozens of boats full of pilgrims on the water in the slightly misty light are enormously atmospheric, and in the evening the pilgrims launch little offerings of flowers and lighted candles down the river, which is lovely to see. The streets – tiny, narrow and a complete maze of them – are crammed to over-capacity with people, cows, motor-cycles and funeral-processions led by singing, chanting and drum-beating mourners, while the ghats down to the Ganges are full of bathers, sadhus, snake-charmers and, rather sadly, performing monkeys. The relentless pursuit by persistent sellers of boat trips, haircuts, postcards, head-massages and worse, visits to family silk factories, shaves and more boat trips gets a bit wearing, but it's worth it.



Ghats along the Ganges at Varanasi.



Christmas candles in Darjeeling.

each evening, with sitar one night, and a different unidentifiable instrument the next. The latter was fun to see, but to be honest, hearing it was not *that* good....

From Varanasi we moved on to Allahabad, which by contrast was a haven of peace and quiet. Very few tourists, with wide boulevards built by the British in their heyday, and relatively modern without losing all its character. Not many hotels, we stayed in the cheapest we could find which was very expensive by usual standards at £30 a night, and quite luxurious with a spectacularly beautiful garden. Dinner, on the other hand was on the pavement, served from a converted caravan called 'Meals on Wheels', a bit like the ones you see in motorway lay-bys.

Allahabad's claim to fame is that it is on the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, therefore especially holy. Lots more pilgrims, then, with lots of very poor beggars and cripples looking for alms from the pilgrims and various performers trying to entertain the pilgrims. We saw some amazing circus acrobatics and contortions from three girls in their early teens and an even younger little boy. We were the only Westerners in the whole town, I think.

An almost total lack of tuk tuks helps to make the town so quiet and peaceful, although it is a slight drawback when you have to be at the railway station for 7.30 in the morning, a half-hour walk away. There is the odd cycle rickshaw drifting around, but we did try one once earlier, and they are actually very narrow and not designed for two western bottoms side by side. Not ours, anyway. And why we actually bothered to get there on time is debatable, as well. No Indian train is on time; so far the record is four-and-a-half-hours late, and we seem to have spent several days either travelling or just sitting in stations, but since a great deal of the attraction is people-watching and seeing India go by from an open train window, it really doesn't matter.

We are now in Khajuraho, after a late train journey, and an eventful taxi drive involving a half-hour stop in a remote village to have a tyre mended. Tony and I were surrounded by interested villagers, so to avoid sitting and grinning like idiots we resorted to taking photos of them, which they loved. One of the major benefits of digital cameras is that you can show them their pictures, and it invariably sends everyone into fits of giggles.

We stayed in the same hotel as last time, in a brilliant position overlooking the ghats, and ate in another favourite place, unfortunately up five steep flights of steps. And by pure chance we happened upon another restaurant, at street-level, which not only sold beer, just about uniquely in Varanasi, but also had an Indian orchestra

Today we went round the Khajuraho temples, which are famous for their erotic carvings. Basically it is the Kama Sutra carved in stone, quite eye-opening, not to say eye-watering in some cases. There are three separate sites; we went to two of them; the largest has nine different temples, all with incredibly intricate and detailed carvings. No detail spared, in fact. A very impressive place; but heavily dominated by large numbers of lads being, well, laddish.



Only mildly erotic at Khajuraho.

Walking through the town, everyone was coming up to us and shaking hands and wishing us Happy New Year. It makes a change from “Where are you from?” When we say England they think either London or Manchester, and Nottingham means nothing to them. Until, that is, Tony hit upon the bright idea of telling them that we live near Trent Bridge, and being universally cricket-mad they are mightily impressed and regard us with awed envy. Or maybe pity, since India no doubt have beaten England there on any number of occasions.

Tomorrow we leave here and are off to Jabalpur, hopefully, involving a short bus ride and then a longer train journey. Fingers crossed.

Hello from Gwalior, January 7

This is the third port of call since we last wrote, and it has been an unusually interesting week. First stop was Jabalpur, which I think has not seen another Westerner probably for ever, and the next stop, Bhopal, was similar. But although we were a bit of a curiosity, everyone has been very polite, meaning not openly staring from six inches in front of your face, and being as helpful as possible, given little intelligible English.

One good thing about non-tourist towns is that they don't inflate prices astronomically at the sight of a white face. The down side is that the hotels are not designed for Westerners, which means beds of varying degrees of hardness, one was about as comfortable as a concrete slab, and you have to grovel and beg for a top sheet as well as a bottom one. Towels are in varying shades of grey, and there is totally unpredictable plumbing. In one, the bathroom appeared to have a very nice bath when viewed from the doorway. But on closer inspection it had a huge hole in it, as if a large block of concrete had been dropped into it. Which no doubt it had (perhaps when they were making the bed?). But immaterial anyway, as there was no water in the taps, and one tap came away in my hand when I tried to turn it on. Always something to laugh about.... but otherwise it was a perfectly good room.

Jabalpur was where we walked down to the river to take a boat up the Marble Gorge. We didn't want a boat to ourselves, we wanted to share with Indian trippers, but very few around. We waited about an hour, and finally a family of eight came up and suggested we went halves with them, so we did. And they were great fun to be with. The gorge was quite pretty, a lot of white marble on either side, but hardly of Grand Canyon proportions, as the boatman suggested in a fit of over-excitement.

Possibly the most memorable event at Jabalpur was the religious parade that began and ended right outside our room window. We had gone to bed early, for an early start next morning, and were asleep when it started, at about 10.30pm. It went up and down the road, passing us seven times at roughly half-hour intervals. Just long enough to get back to sleep before the next time, in other words. The grand finale was at 1.30am, but of course by then we were so nervous, not knowing for sure if that *was* the last one, so we couldn't sleep anyway. When we got up to look out there were only a dozen or so paraders, but they made enough noise for a hundred.

The highlight in Bhopal was a bus trip, always a fun event in itself, to the Bhimbetka Painted Caves. Really only a series of rock shelters formed naturally in the sandstone, but with a great many ancient paintings and etchings on the walls and roofs, of cows, buffalo, elephants, stick men etc. It was actually a lovely site and we spent a couple of hours there. Mostly we had it to ourselves, but towards the end a great party of schoolchildren arrived, aged about seven to fifteen, with three teachers, and they were all delightful. Totally uninterested in the rock paintings but fascinated by us, and some of them spoke quite good English, which was convenient. Lots of photos of them went down well, and then we had an impromptu photo-call with one of the teachers taking pictures of us on the children's cameras and mobile phones. When we finally waved goodbye to them in the car park there was a big chorus of "Please Come Back Soon", which they had evidently been rehearsing.

Now we are in Gwalior, which is famed for its walled fort up on the hill. Misty to the point of foggy in the morning, and there was not a lot to be seen up on the fort (got up there in a tuk tuk), but had an excellent walk back down through back-streets and then the markets, all with really good people-watching.

Hello from Delhi, January 12

Took a morning train from Gwalior for just a couple of hours to Agra, and then found a good hotel at a reasonable rate on the Fatehabad Road hotel strip. Walked to the Taj Mahal to see it again – twelve years after our first visit. Massive security to get in, but well worth the repeat, when we took in all the classic views, and had to



Always room for one more.

*School group
at Bhimbetka.*



laugh at locals and tourists queuing up for family photographs on the Diana Seat (as it is described by all the guides). All right, I admit it, I was photographed on it too! The building really is so symmetrically perfect, the inlays are so beautiful..... no matter how many pictures you've seen of it, it's the one 'wonder of the world' that never fails to take your breath away, and it was difficult to tear ourselves away from it. We also took a walk round the side of the grounds, down through some open country to the bank of the Yamuna River, where the view of the Taj is different but just as spectacular. And very colourful, to see the local women washing clothes in the river – even though the water is incredibly polluted.

Next day we took a local bus to Fatehpur Sikri for what turned out to be a really fun day. The bus dropped us by the chaotic market in the modern town, so we had to walk along the main street, which was packed with people and really photogenic; then up the hill to the ancient mosque all built in red sandstone and white marble. Fantastic lattice screens on some windows were the highlight. The ruins of the old town are a bit stark, not helped by the tourist buses whose passengers come in that way and totally miss the modern town, which was the best bit of the day for us; so much better than the historical bits that seem to be obligatory on the tourist-trail.

Next morning we caught a (delayed) train to Delhi and had most of two days in our favourite parts of Old Delhi. Stayed in a small hotel in Paharganj, and just enjoyed wandering around the back streets of the old city. One of the best bits was a riotous, women-only, pre-wedding party in the courtyard of a nearby hotel, where I was almost swept into the crowd, while Tony stood back taking photos. We also went across to Chandni Chouk to take in the lively markets and the lovely temples.

It was quite sad to leave Paharganj, when we took a taxi out to New Delhi, to stay for our last night with friends that we had previously met in Darjeeling. Interesting to see how the other half, namely the ex-pats, live, in their gated communities and embassy compounds, but was also a chance to see some of the sights of New Delhi for a change, notably the magnificent brickwork on the Qutab Minar tower.

Late that evening, went by car to the airport for predictably miserable night flights on Etihad, including a long connection in the decidedly grotty soon-to-be-replaced Abu Dhabi airport. Then home at last, after yet another wonderful trip in India.

Postcards from Korea and Japan 2009

Hello from Seoul, September 26

We are very much enjoying being back in Korea. South Korea of course. The unbelievable difference between here and North Korea never ceases to amaze us. We arrived in Seoul last Saturday afternoon, and stayed two nights in the University Residence, reserved for visiting dignitaries. And us! Park, the professor in the Civil Engineering Department who invited Tony over, was away for the weekend, so Tony and I spent a day on our own in the city, and had a good time just sight-seeing, in lovely weather, including an excellent street antiques market, very busy, and also did a great deal of people-watching. And we chanced on the last hour or so of an open-air music festival, which was good for the traditional costumes if nothing else.

Monday morning we met Park, in pouring rain, but no matter as we were inside for Tony to give two lectures to Park's students. Then we had a very smart lunch in the university restaurant, before we set off – Tony, Park and me, plus three post-grad students who were there to help host us, and whose names I still have not quite got the hang of after four days, all in a big people-carrier. To the central mountains of Korea and some collapses of old mines for everyone's entertainment.

Park warned us before we set off that he had never been to the area himself, and he thought the accommodation might be a bit basic, so we resigned ourselves to our fate and put on brave faces, but we needn't have worried. The first night we were in a very smart country hotel in the middle of nowhere, virtually the only guests and were treated like royalty. Second night was in a touristy town split into two parts with the Old Town and the castle one side of the river, and the new town on the other. We were in the new bit, which was end-to-end garish motels, including ours, Motel Q, which looked spectacular to start with, but turned out to be the hotel equivalent of 'All Fur Coat and No Knickers'. Every amenity you can think of from twin computers, a cinema-sized TV and DVD, and a massive Jacuzzi, to cans of hair spray and no less than seven jumbo boxes of tissues. **But**, lights too dim to see across the room, a loo door that failed to close, and only single sheets and duvet for the king-size bed. Park thinks it must have been a Love Hotel, where people check in for two or three hours, and they don't expect people to actually stay the night. I'm sure he's right!



A traditional, and excellent, drum-band, all-girls, at the Seoul festival.

Meanwhile, the days driving through the country were spent visiting various sites where disused mines had collapsed, some more or less overnight, into gaping holes, some many metres across and many metres deep, all part of the fieldwork for the Thursday conference. Oh, and time out for eating of course. Huge, elaborate meals for lunch and dinner every day, and a massive variety of food,

some good, some not so good; Korean food is a constant learning curve. A lot of beef fried on a hot-plate, which is delicious, and dozens of side dishes of varying degrees of edibility, the worst being kimchi, as they call their cabbage and fish, fermented over 10 years in big jars buried in the ground. Say no more. And while we are beginning to cope with the heavy metal chopsticks, we shall never get used to sitting on the floor, and certainly not cross-legged, as they do.

Thursday was the International Symposium on Mine Reclamation, to give it the full title. Actually, more fun than it sounds. It went on all day, with talks by people from all over, Russia, Vietnam, Mongolia and two from England, Tony and an ex-student of his, by chance. It was held away from Seoul in the eastern mountains at their prime winter skiing area and we stayed in the amazing resort of Kangwon Land, a mega-luxury hotel; each evening after dark there was a fantastic display of lights and dancing fountains set to music, a sort of watery *son et lumière*, very impressive.

Yesterday we drove back to Seoul, back to the university residence and said goodbye to the lads who had worked very hard doing all the driving and looking after us. Hosting foreign visitors is all part of their training along with the civil engineering. Tony and I went out to dinner with Park and his wife Song Hae and 10-year-old Jimmy, who we knew already from when they stayed with us in Nottingham a few years ago. Now it's our last day in Seoul, on our own, so we had a final look at the city, and hit lucky with catching the annual drum-band festival in a city park – which was fantastic. And then tomorrow we are on an early morning flight to Japan.



Traditional Korean dining: not comfortable!



Just a tree, but ancient and beautiful.

Hello from Hokkaido, October 4

We are now one week into our trip to Japan, having a great time, but after being cushioned in Korea with everything catered for us, we are finding it fairly expensive, more so than five years ago. Though still a fascinating country to visit. Breaking the language barrier is still well-nigh impossible, even with our handy pocket Japanese phrase-book, but we are getting by.

Our car is serving us well, and we have travelled a good part of Hokkaido, the northern island, to a variety of volcanic areas, with hot sulphur and steam vents, beautiful caldera lakes and boiling pools in the Akan National Park. We are a bit early for the autumn colours in the trees, and they apparently are late this year anyway, but there have been the odd bright red and yellow patches which have naturally had our undivided attention. We also came through the Kushiro wetland and did some crane-spotting of the feathered variety, and clocked up a total of eight, which we were very proud of.

Driving in Japan is fairly frustrating. The traffic is not as heavy as it was in Seoul by a long way, but the speed limits are very tedious, 60 kph on open roads, 70 on dual carriageways and the single-lane expressways. That's about 38 and 45 mph, and jolly irritating when you find yourself behind one of the majority of regimented, law-abiding Japanese. There are also endless pointless traffic lights in every town, and road works *everywhere*, either road-widening, bridge-building or tunnel-burrowing. Actually the road works are quite a source of amusement, as each one entails at least six traffic controllers, operating like so many robots at either end, and sometimes in the middle too. They clearly do courses for construction workers in precision whistling (for blind drivers, we can only assume), co-ordinated flag-waving and synchronized slow-down signalling.



There has been some spectacular coastal scenery that we have driven along, some of it hidden behind some very heavy-duty coastal defences, and loads of signs saying 'Be Careful Of Tsunami'. Irrefutably sound advice, but you cannot help thinking that in the event it would seem rather an ineffective understatement.

Saturday night we stayed in the resort spa town of Noboribetsu (in the Lake Toya volcanic area) where the main feature, apart from the hot springs and geysers (including a geyser in the

back garden of our hotel), was the onsen. This is the set of hot baths where people strip off and soak for an hour. After which, they wander around in dressing-gowns, including going to dinner, shopping along the main street, and even walking up to the geothermal area on the edge of town where there was a pageant and firework display. A Saturday-night-special, and more pageant than firework, but fun.

The food is excellent, including the raw fish and noodles. The weather has been very mixed, some hot blue sky and sun, some cold, cloudy, rain and fog, but plenty of hot blue, so not getting despondent.

Now we are in Sapporo, having dropped the car off, and tomorrow morning we are due to catch a train down to Honshu, the next island south.

Hello from Honshu, October 12

We have had an excellent week in northern Honshu one way and another, starting with a good train journey from Sapporo, with good seats, although wasted on Tony, who prefers standing at the doorway taking pictures; except when we came through the Seikan Tunnel (which is longer than the Channel Tunnel).

Morioka, where we stayed for two nights, was a lovely old town, where we rented a car and drove to a spectacular craggy coast in the Rikuchu National Park, calling at a pair of excellent show caves along the way. We then went to Yamagata, another good central point to travel around from, and on the way to the Bandai volcano, which had geological appeal for some even though it was not erupting.

This is very much rice-growing country, and with the harvest in full swing it is all very picturesque, and interesting to see the various methods of gathering and drying it. The other major crops are apples, which are enormous, with the trees really laden with them, and also the bright orange persimmon fruit on its trees.

Weather-wise, Thursday was a highly entertaining day. That was typhoon day. We were expecting it, having been warned by the weather forecast on Japanese TV the previous evening, and they were not kidding. Everything was well battered down, shops and schools were closed, and the only people on the roads were police, fire engines and sandbag squads. And us of course. All very exciting, with really strong winds and a **lot** of rain. At the height of it, all the streets in the coastal town of Onagawa were completely flooded, over the tops of wellies, and washing right over the bonnet of our car as we drove through. Luckily the car kept on going. The typhoon died down eventually, of course, but there were some good pictures of the effects on TV that night. I think they had it worse further south.



Dressing gowns to go shopping.



Typhoon flooding in Onigawa.

The idea was that once the typhoon had passed we would be left with clear blue skies in its wake, but it has not quite worked out like that, and we are still having rather mixed weather. But it made it all the more fun when we went in the pouring rain to Yudonosan, a mountain that is a pilgrimage site for Buddhists. We drove as far as we could, and were setting off to trudge up-hill the rest of the way, when a bus-load of Japanese tourists arrived and decanted into shuttle buses, so we stowed away

with them and joined their party. The pilgrimage involved taking off shoes and socks, having a priest mumble incantations over us, then everyone under umbrellas traipsing round a stone path that encircled a hot spring atop a massive tufa bank, and finally emerging through a hot-water foot-bath, or another variety of onsen as they are known, which was a great relief to our frozen feet. We and our new Japanese friends all thought it was highly amusing.

We have also done some temple-hopping; not too many, but picking and choosing some of the best ones, which are good to visit without getting all templated out.

Yesterday we visited the fine, old, traditional town of Kakunodate. It was a bit of a tourist attraction, with museums, samurai houses and so on, but lovely, with some of the beautiful wooden and tiled houses with the carefully nurtured ornamental trees in the gardens of which we have seen so much. And we also went to the coast and crossed a huge area of flatland that has been reclaimed from what was once a lagoon, and is now very productive farmland.

Today it was to the beautiful Towada lake in its volcano caldera, and for once good sunshine and some very good autumn colours in the woods. You could tell it was a scenic spot by the unbelievable queues of traffic, chaos at every parking spot and proliferation of keen photographers.

Now we are back in Morioko, and have returned the car. Tomorrow we catch a series of trains south to Nikko and then Tokyo two days later, a new area altogether, before we fly home. Trains I hope will be more relaxing than roads.

Hello from Tokyo, October 17

Well, we are now in Tokyo, after a good couple of days in Nikko. Getting to Nikko was an epic, involving six trains and five changes, stopping at virtually every station. The first and last trains were shoulder-to-shoulder with school-children and commuters (some of them must be accustomed to three or four hours' travelling every day), but the in-between trains were relatively peaceful. Excellent

for people watching, and the connections were no problem, even the four-minute change which would normally have me shrieking with stress, but the Japanese trains run absolutely to schedule. Just so much as a ten-second delay or early arrival warrants a public apology!

We had a brilliant hotel in Nikko, with a Japanese-style room, which meant tatami matting and futon mattresses on the floor; very comfortable, and otherwise every mod con with separate rooms for bath, washbasin and loo, and a little annexe with comfy chairs and a table overlooking the main street. Bizarrely, the restaurant we had chosen to eat at (good plastic models of its food in the window), elected to close at 5.30pm, so we ended up with a curry provided by an enterprising Bangladeshi.

Nikko is famous for its beautiful Chuzen Lake and Kegon waterfall, but even more so for its massive temple complex. So we took a bus for a spectacular ride of about 15 km of hairpins and then a cable car, up to good viewpoints, and then back down to the temple complex, which was really good. It was absolutely heaving with school parties, all in distinctive coloured caps and hats in yellow, red, blue or whatever, so that their teachers had some hope of keeping track of them. One of the temples had a carving of the three wise monkeys, *see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil*, I'm not sure if it is the original one or not; might be Chinese but I could be wrong.

The sun was a bit in-and-out all day, so the following morning we went up to the waterfalls and the best of the temples again, making the most of our two-day bus pass, and had it all much more successful for pictures in the sunlight.

Then we caught the train to Tokyo, less than three hours this time, and took the metro across town to the hotel that we had booked on-line. Tokyo of course is teeming with people, all of them in a frantic hurry, and all a bit daunting when we first got here after the relative peace of the country areas. It is a highly sophisticated city and extremely fashion-conscious, although we have been quite amazed by the fads and fashions throughout. The lads have some extraordinarily styled and sculpted hair creations that I am fascinated by, Tony is more diverted by the girlie taste in thigh boots and sky-high skirts, and we both are constantly amused by the number of people who insist on wearing face masks. Not so much in Tokyo oddly enough, but a goodly proportion everywhere else. They also for some reason like to be seen with small dogs, usually dressed in dinky little jumpers or coats, on twinkly leads, or carried either in arms or baskets. One shop even had a pair of identical dogs in matching outfits as part of the shop fittings.



Zenpo Buddhist Temple.

Today has been brilliant, we followed the Japanese tourist-trail to and around the Hakone National Park with an all-inclusive travel ticket. This involved a two-hour train journey starting from the gigantic Shinjuku Station near our hotel, then a series of interconnecting modes of transport starting with a bus, then after an absolutely beautiful walkway lined with 150-year-old cedar trees, a trip across the lake on a mock-up pirate ship (just what the Japanese love), then two cable cars up the mountain



Tea Ceremony.

side, a funicular train down the other side, and then a train home. We did actually get off the transport from time to time, you will be pleased to hear, the highlights being a beautiful traditional moss garden (at the Hakone Art Museum), a fine early morning view across the lake of Mount Fuji rising out of the clouds, and, the best bit of the day for the Japanese, a steaming geothermal hillside where the major event is eating eggs that are cooked in great wire cages in a near-boiling pool of water, and come out with shells that are totally black due to the sulphur. Judging by the number of people buying them, a bag of five for £3.50, they obviously tasted all right.

Now we're back in busy-busy-busy Tokyo, and had an excellent last day, starting with a morning call at the Tsukiji fish market. That was an experience. It is absolutely massive, with porters whizzing round on versions of fast-moving milk floats (stand in their way at your peril!) and heaving with people, bikes, vans, trolleys..... and of course fish. Every variety you can think of, and most of it still alive, and not being treated very humanely, it has to be said. It makes me think that 'humane-thinking' vegetarians who 'only eat fish' could do well to think again. It also makes you wonder how many fish are in the sea, when they are bringing this number out on a daily basis.

Later in the day we went to a traditional Tea Ceremony in the Imperial Palace Gardens, we happened upon it purely by chance, but it was fascinating, if extremely time-consuming. Preparing the tea is a ritual that has to be closely observed, and served very ceremoniously by kimono-clad ladies. A far cry from dunking a tea bag in a mug as we do at home! From there we caught metros across town, and indulged in some great people-watching at Shinjuku in the centre of Tokyo, which is renowned as the world's busiest pedestrian crossing.

Tomorrow morning we have an early start for the flight back to Seoul, and thence to England. It has been a wonderful trip.

Postcards from Philippines and Palau 2010

Hello from Palawan, February 27

I am writing this sitting on the verandah of our beachside bungalow, palm trees waving over white sand and blue sea, and yes, the Philippines **are** paradise islands, all very idyllic. But if it's any consolation, the sun is ridiculously strong, and my legs, unaccustomed as they are to public exposure, have turned the sort of pillar-box red that causes anxious strangers to stop in the street to offer their sympathy. We are in Port Barton, a dusty and lovely little village, the hotel bungalow is absolutely on the beach, and this morning a charming man called Jupiter turned up at 7am to take us on a magical boat-ride through mangrove swamps. Two hours of total peace as he paddled through narrow waterways, with just the songs of the birds, and a rather excited viewing of a mangrove snake resting in the trees. We saw a big sea snake the previous day in the middle of the sea, swimming along with his head out of the water, beautiful but deadly. Or at least pretty damn venomous.

Before we arrived in Port Barton we had three nights and two days of super-luxury, not exactly typical for us, but jolly good all the same, and we could get used to it. We were on the island resort of Miniloc, crouching at the foot of a huge limestone tower coming straight up out of the sea, and surrounded by dozens of other limestone towers and pinnacles, altogether incredibly spectacular scenery. We went on several all-inclusive trips around the islands during the two days, including a picnic lunch on one island. The picnic was a freshly cooked buffet, served on bamboo tables and chairs under palm leaf umbrellas. We weren't exactly roughing it.

We took a kayak out before lunch, and paddled around the bay quite happily, and then went round a small headland, where the water suddenly got unexpectedly choppy. Within just a few minutes we decided to turn back, but as we turned a wave caught us and flipped us completely over. We emerged from beneath the kayak, Tony incredibly with his hat and spectacles still in situ! Just as remarkably he managed to right the kayak, and then, with me hanging on the other side, to get back on board. There was no way I could get back up without tipping us over again, so he paddled back against the tide, with me holding on to the back, trying as best I could to swim, but even so it made it much harder work for Tony. It took half an hour,





The limestone islands of Bacuit Bay, explored by kayak on a boat trip out from the Miniloc resort.

and a large quantity of sea water swallowed by me, before we made it back to the shelter of our bay, and the beach. We were more than ready for lunch.

In the afternoon we sailed into two lagoons, both highly-regarded beauty spots and rightly so, surrounded by towering limestone cliffs, and totally stunning. One lagoon could only be seen by getting off the boat and into a..... kayak. We didn't chicken out, and the water was smooth, so confidence in kayaking skills is restored.

We arrived in Port Barton by banka, the traditional boat in the Philippines, with immensely long outriggers on either side to keep the hull stable (they should attach them to kayaks). And we left by jeepney, a local bus which is almost literally a stretch jeep, highly decorated, and adapted to create a bus for 26, or in our case 45, passengers, plus an unbelievable amount of luggage. We arrived at Sabang, after changing at a road junction (by the name of Salvation) on to a tricycle, another mode of transport that is basically a motor bike with an integral side car.

Sabang is a small resort, as it's the site of a famous underground river, 8 km long, but we could only go in for about a kilometre, the standard tourist trip. We did manage to get a boat to ourselves, critical for photos, instead of the usual ten passengers they cram in. A good trip therefore, and loads of huge monitor lizards creeping around through the undergrowth when we came out. Much more fun than the cockroaches in the bedroom the previous night.....

Now we are in Puerto Princesa, the chief town of this island of Palawan, and Very Big City compared with what we've been used to. Next stop Bohol, another of the islands. The Filipino people are just as lovely as everyone says, they are so friendly and genuinely happy; it really is a delightful place to be.



Port Barton

Update from Palawan. A quick note in case you heard about the possible tsunami threat to the Philippines. We read about the Chile earthquake last night, and kept checking on the tsunami. It began to look like we chose the wrong day to go island-hopping. But then risk-rating for our side of the Philippines was almost zero. So we went to the islands, had a great time, and not a wave in sight. To the great disappointment of Tony.

Hello from Bohol, March 5

After all the excitement of the tsunami-that-never-was, we flew to Tagbilaran, the main town on the island of Bohol, and after four nights we are just about to move on again. It always surprises me how much islands differ from each other within the same country. Bohol seems very much poorer than Palawan. There are beggars on the streets, and dozens of pawn-shops in every town, but it's still populated by delightful people. It's a very heavily Catholic country and all the motor-bike-powered three-wheelers (Filipino version of tuk-tuks) have religious texts on the back. And churches and chapels dominate every town, most of them with very simple architecture, but lovely.



Bohol tarsier.

We have rented a car on Bohol, which has been, as always, a mixed blessing. We really did need it to get around to the places we wanted to see, but the roads are a bit of a challenge. They are all being concreted, but very gradually, and the bits in between are horrendously rough. Also the car has a cracked radiator, which requires topping up every hour or so, with whatever water we can find. The village pump, for instance, or on more than one occasion kind house-holders from among the crowds of people who inevitably congregate from all points of the compass as soon as they see the bonnet of the car up, with two westerners looking despondently at the engine.

The two main highlights of Bohol have been the tarsiers and the Chocolate Hills. Tarsiers are tiny monkey-like creatures, 10 cm tall fully-grown, with very sweet faces and huge round eyes. They are only found here and on two other islands, and are an officially endangered species. We went to a tarsier sanctuary, and later met a man who has seven of his own, and breeds them.

The Chocolate Hills on the other hand are an amazing geological feature, with hundreds of limestone cones shoulder-to-shoulder, each of them no more than 200 feet high, and for most of the year covered in brown vegetation. Hence the name, as with a bit of imagination (or rather, quite a lot of imagination) they look like a giant-size scattering of chocolate drops. (I am writing this from a hotel bedroom overlooking them, prime position for sunset and sunrise pictures.)



The Chocolate Hills of Bohol, limestone cone karst at its best.

We also spent a night at the improbably named Nuts Huts, a semi-camp of palm-leaf huts a boat ride away from civilisation up a river through an area of tropical forest. Sitting listening to the jungly noises after dark was wonderful, it was one of those extraordinary places that is quite unlike any other.

We ate one night at a government-sponsored restaurant that is almost entirely staffed by deaf people. The menu is printed with a few relevant hand signs, but they give you a pencil and paper to be on the safe side. All very light-hearted and fun. Even more so when a group of eight nuns piled in, giggling uproariously and ordering knickerbocker glories all round.

Tomorrow we look forward to a flight to Manila, then a long stint at Manila airport, about as exciting as any other large airport, before our flight to Palau, in Micronesia.

Hello from Palau, March 12

So here is the news from Palau. It was a bit of a whistle-stop tour, although whistle-stop is hardly the right way to describe such a mega-laid-back, casual country. Palau, which is a totally separate country from the Philippines, is just a tiny dot in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, part of Micronesia, which is just a series of tiny dots in the middle of..... ditto, ditto. Its main claim to fame is that it is a centre of excellence for diving. Sam's Tours, just down the road from our hotel, and where we have spent a considerable amount of time in the bar, is a haven for the worldwide diving community. Courtesy of Sam's we did snorkelling, the next best thing to diving, and had a fabulous day, over such shallow coral that it would have been impossible to dive anyway. Fantastic fish of all colours and varieties, beautiful coral and enormous giant clams.

The highlight was a swim in Jellyfish Lake; it lived up to its name. The lake is teeming with thousands of totally harmless jellyfish, and it was quite surreal to swim among them. They are there because: the lake is only linked to the sea by narrow fissures in the limestone, so the jellyfish are protected from any outside predators, therefore they have no need to be aggressive, so they have no stings. It makes some sense, but it still takes a bit of nerve to launch yourself into a lakeful of them!



A Rock Island just for us.

Next day we took a kayak tour round the Rock Islands, and through a maze of lagoons and sea caves. We were with a group of six other people, but in the middle of the afternoon they dropped the two of us off on the beach of a tiny island, where we camped for the night. It was totally isolated, and absolutely lovely. It did pour with rain in the middle of the night,



The western Rock Islands, a totally protected bio-reserve that can only be seen from the air.

but by next morning everything was dry and sun-soaked yet again, and we had a brilliant day, gently kayaking on our own and exploring more lagoons and caves, before we were picked up again to go back to base. (By the way, our snorkelling guide was a lovely lady called Emerald, and the kayak man was Jefferson. They have such brilliant names!)

The very first day, we had a flight over Palau and the main island and then out over all the tiny limestone islands dotted around, which was brilliant, and between us we took hundreds of photos to be weeded out in due course; as you do with digital.

The last Palau day was with a hire car, and we went to explore the big island of Babeldaub, connected by a causeway to Koror, where we were staying. It was very hot, without the sea breeze to cool things down, and really not a great deal to see, apart from some stone monoliths, an ancient traditional house or two, and a huge, brand-new, barely-occupied government building, courtesy of American military dollars in return for friendly relationships. But we needed to have a car to see them at all, as incredibly, there is absolutely no public transport whatsoever on Palau. Due to the American influence, which is huge, simply everybody has his or her own car.

Now we are on our way back to the Philippines, with a slight change to the schedule, visiting southern Luzon for a first week, then going to North Luzon for next week, before home. I am under some stress emailing this, surrounded by small children shrieking with laughter and jostling to look over my shoulder and nudging me incessantly, so I shall stop before I do one or all of them a possibly fatal injury.

Hello from Luzon, March 19

We had a brief stop in Manila when we reached Luzon, staying at the same hotel we started out at, which is very comfortable, and lots of “Welcome Back Mr Tony”, which was very gratifying. The one curiosity was the room service menu, which listed all the usual beers, wines, spirits and cocktails, and then under the heading ‘Others’ it offered ‘Bucket of Ice, Bag of Ice and..... Mashed Potato’. Really?

And now we have visited all the main sights on the main island of the Philippines; most of what we intended to do anyway. We went south from Manila at first in our rent car, stayed in a fun town called Lucena for one night, then carried on south through major volcano country to Legaspi which is at the foot of Mayon, the most active

volcano in the Philippines. Tony had had high hopes of it erupting while we were here, but sadly it went off at Christmas, so it had all gone quiet by the time we arrived, and the top of the volcano was in cloud the whole two days we were nearby.

So in the end the highlight of our visit to Legaspi, which in itself was not a particularly special town, was a trip to the nearby coastal village of Donsol, where we donned snorkels once more, and went swimming with whale sharks. It involved going out in a boat that we shared with a Swiss-Austrian couple, and when one of the crew's lookouts spotted a shark we all had to leap over the side and hope we saw it before it swam too deep. In the end we saw three of them, magnificent creatures more than 30 feet long, with huge flat heads and wide, wide mouths through which they suck plankton. We were incredibly close to them, they swam directly beneath us, and they were literally the size of a bus. One came so near I could easily have sat on its back; I was scared to move in case I flapped it with my flipper, and it retaliated with a swift swipe from its tail!

Then we returned to Lucena, on a Sunday, and seemed to spend a great deal of the day in church. The churches and cathedrals here are very beautiful, and even on weekdays generally have services going on, but on Sundays they go into overdrive and services are virtually non-stop. Lucena Cathedral featured sung mass every two hours, and each one was *packed*, upwards of 2000 people, and more standing outside, and it was wonderful to listen to. In fact I suspect Tony could well be Born Again if we stay here much longer. We also struck lucky, if that is the right phrase for it, by having an open-air political meeting right outside our bedroom window, with a lot of cheer-leading and singing, and then a presumably heartfelt and impassioned speech from Senator Joey D. Venezia III that went on until late in the evening.

From there we headed back through Manila, among horrendous traffic; two hours of stop-start, mostly stop, on the ring road; and then onwards to North Luzon, where the chief attraction is acre upon acre of rice terraces. We were two days in a town called Sagada, where the terraces stretched over the hills as far as you could see, and were stunning in varying shades of green, all defined between gleaming white rock walls. We also had a walk to a river cave in a deep valley that is a sacred

area with ancient hanging coffins, each one perched on two horizontal poles set into holes bored in the vertical cliff walls. It was also a very up-and-down area, and quite a tiring walk. In fact most of Luzon appears to be built on near-vertical hillsides, with some of the towns built as hill stations to give some relief from the heat in the valleys in the summer.



Jeepney – local transport on Luzon.

Now we are in Banaue, which is supposed to have the best terraces of all. We are in two minds about which area is the better, but certainly these are more extensive, and some are claimed to be more than 2000 years old. They are also lined with mud walls as opposed to stone, which may seem a detail, but is hugely significant to any true connoisseur and fully-paid-up subscriber to Rice Terrace Enthusiast Weekly!



Terraces of Batad.

Tony is now back from a three-hour walk into the hills at Batad. I declined to go, saying I had a letter to write! He says although it was a long, hot slog coming back uphill it was well worth it, and he saw lots of, erm, rice terraces. And now he thinks this area has the best of the rice terraces. This discussion could run and run.

Hello from Manila, March 23

We headed westwards away from Banaue, into lovely hill country completely devoid of the visitors who target the rice terraces. A village wedding was marked by free food (really good chicken stew) that was being served up for hundreds of neighbours and for anyone passing by, all to show the new couple's grand hospitality.

We reached the coast and stayed in a wonderful bungalow right on the beach. Then had a lovely boat trip out around the Hundred Islands National Park. Also along the way we visited a great many churches and cathedrals, one memorable for the very jolly balloon-seller outside, one other for the surly woman on the doorstep telling people's fortunes in sawdust. We especially liked the one that had the Lord's Prayer written out on a board outside, starting with '*Our Father who art in heaven, hollowed be thy name*'.

After some difficulty we found the road to Santa Juliana, where we paid large amounts of pesos for a 4WD to take us up the side of Pinatubo volcano. It wasn't that scenic a drive, as a lot of vegetation has grown up on top of the volcanic ash in the 18 years since its massive eruption. At the top we had a 20-minute walk each way to the crater with its new lake (Tony went ahead, and a kindly guide helped me over the rough bits!).

And then it was a case of hot-footing it back into Manila, where we got slightly lost in the town, but after an interesting diversion round the dock area, Tony resorted to navigating by the sun in order to find our hotel, from where we walked to the harbour, chose one of the many pavement cafes to eat at, and stayed for a beautiful sunset. Our last night, before an uneventful flight home, via Singapore.

Postcards from Northern Australia 2010

Hello from Alice Springs, October 14

So here we are at Alice Springs, which is just an ordinary city, but it's exciting to be here. I meant to bring *A Town Like Alice* to read, but forgot, so I shall have to read it when I get home! Amazing weather: it has poured with rain non-stop all day, the Todd River, which normally is dry, is flowing fast and due to get faster, and the road to Uluru (Ayers Rock) is flooded and impassable for the first time within memory. So we chose our time! But the forecast is good for the next week, and the water will go down quickly, so we are not depressed. Yet.

We had a good journey to Singapore en route, and an excellent day there. We spent the morning in Chinatown, which is fascinating, and went to one outstanding temple with a scale model of the wharves two centuries ago when the Chinese established the town as a trading post on the river. The model has dozens of tiny figures going about their daily business, down to hanging out the washing and having their hair cut in the street.

Later we went down to the actual wharves, which these days are lined with bars, cafes and restaurants, had a coke and a beer, then to the Chinese and Japanese gardens, lovely, very serene and some beautiful bonsai. Then back to the hotel for our bag, and we took a bus all the way to the airport. A great ride through the city and suburbs, and cost peanuts compared with a taxi or even the metro.

The flight to Australia left at 11.30pm, arrived 5.30 the next morning, so we had a fairly bleak two hours in the airport lounge before our campervan office opened at 7.30am. We duly picked the van up, did a bit of shopping for supplies in Darwin, and headed south to the Litchfield National Park.

This park has some fine waterfalls, a Tabletop Swamp, which is basically a beautiful lake full of reeds and water-lilies, encircled by ancient eucalyptus trees up to the edge of the water, with a great selection of water-birds. And then there were the



Magnetic Termite Mounds; unbelievable. Termite hills as far as you could see, the oddity being that they are all rectangular and incredibly thin, the shape of a credit card, and aligned in the same direction, north-south. It is a bit of a complicated story. Basically the shape and orientation are so that they warm up in the early morning and catch a little late afternoon sun; but in the scorching heat of the day only the merest sliver of their nests suffers the full sun. So not magnetic, but pretty clever, heh? As

always, we are obsessed with termites and their mounds, so many different varieties of termites, and a bewildering array of shapes, sizes and colours of their mounds.

After Litchfield we headed east to Kakadu, chief tourist area of Top End as they call the far north, and run solely by the Aborigines, who incidentally are pleasant enough to be with, but must be among the ugliest people on Earth (better not tell them I said so). Anyway the park was good, highlights being an excellent wetland with a long communal hide along one side where we sat and watched hundreds of birds of dozens of varieties, and also two sites with some really outstanding Aboriginal paintings. Even I was impressed, and cave paintings don't generally do a great deal for me.

We also had a boat trip up the Yellow River, to see loads more birds and a fair few crocodiles. We are now nearly as much bird-freaks as termite-obsessives, it will be sandals and yoghurt-knitting before you know it. But honestly, the spoonbills, sea eagles, kingfishers, jabirus (big storks), Little Lily Hoppers..... I could go on.... but you hope not, I know.

We had another boat ride up through two gorges a bit further south (at Katherine), and then went off along a dirt road for 50 km to look at a couple of very impressive sinkholes. They were even worth the fact that it will take us at least a day to get the van clean. And after that we spent a night at Devils Marbles (Australians don't like possessive apostrophes), some brilliant, eroded granite boulders (now officially called Karlu Karlu).

Kangaroo-spotting has not been huge, although we've seen a few, and the other day managed to photograph a wallaby with a baby joey peeking out of her pouch; very sweet. And a Big Bird bustard, and a wonderful lizard which was like a prima donna, acting up for the camera while Tony was taking pictures.

We have now had five nights in the campervan, which has predictably become home-from-home. Very comfortable, apart from the first two nights. First we were inundated by swarms of moths, a bit fluttery but not too bad really. The second evening we were sitting outside when we had a plague of tiny flies, quite different from the daytime flies that are everywhere and get everywhere. These tiny ones stayed for about an hour and then disappeared, to be replaced by a positive storm of thousands of bugs, which on closer inspection turned out to be mini cockroaches. They settled all over us, not biting fortunately, and when we could stand it no longer we decided to go to bed to discover the inside of the van was black with them, on the ceiling, walls, everywhere. Tony did a sterling job with a sweeping brush, not necessarily



Home from home

sweeping them all out, but he discovered that jabbing them repeatedly with the stiff bristles was remarkably effective, while I squished as many as I could get at. Of course a lot of them magically disappeared down crevices and nooks and crannies, and since then, fingers crossed, we have been virtually insect-free, apart from the occasional resident cockroach poking its head above the parapet. I cannot get out of my head that silly kids' rhyme 'Flies are a nuisance, bugs are worse, and that is the end of my little verse'. And on that profoundly moving, poetic note, we shall leave you till next time.

Hello from Uluru, October 22

We had a fun day after I last wrote, negotiating flooded roads after the mega-heavy rain. Apparently they have not known rain like it in 104 years. The weather came good the next day, though, and we had and are still having mostly clear blue skies, but with a cool wind for much of the time, which has been good for us. The water is gradually going down everywhere, but that first day was quite exciting. There were just two places where we had to turn back, as water was just too deep over the road, and the currents were too strong, but everywhere else we managed to drive across, and more than once we inspired others, who had been dithering on the brink, to follow us. We were able to get to Ochre Gorge, steep cliffs of bright red, green and yellow, the pigments of which were used in the past for cave paintings; the site is now sacred to the Aborigines.

There were some lovely budgerigars in a tree there, and we spent ages watching a pair feeding a chick in a hole in a branch, although later there were whole flocks of budgies flying around. So, common as muck then..... There was another walk to a narrow canyon, Standley Chasm, along what is usually a path, but this time was a stream, so we paddled along in our shoes, rather than trying to balance on rocks and stones. The shoes eventually dried out.

And of course we have had the benefit of hundreds of wild flowers that have appeared as from nowhere after the rain. They are lovely, both individually and in great swathes of colour over the meadows, which themselves have burst into colour more or less overnight. The locals are delirious with excitement, and even The Geologist is impressed, although secretly he would really much rather have bare red rock, and is actually quite frustrated that we have come at the tail end of such unusual rain. There have been a lot of salmon gums along the way as well. Salmon gums?? They are eucalyptus, or gum trees, that have bright pink trunks behind the peeling bark, instead of the usual pure white trunks. I actually prefer the white ones, and we walked to a Ghost Tree Overlook; the trail ends at a really big old eucalyptus, which was magnificent.

Next stop Ayers Rock, or Uluru as we are all supposed to call it. It really is an incredibly impressive hunk of rock; not just that it sticks up in the desert in the middle of nowhere, but when you get up close and see the caves and arches

and weathering formations you can realise how extraordinary it really is. We had a good walk around part of the perimeter, until we were diverted back out on to the road because we were getting close to a variety of sacred Aboriginal sites, so no chance of approaching, absolutely no photographing, and even looking seemed to be at a bit of a premium! We saw no need to climb it, although lots did, mainly Japanese (surprise surprise), but we did the sunset thing and Tony got some good photos of the different colours in the changing light.



The Warayuki exfoliation arch on Ayers Rock, a supposedly sacred site that lacks info or access.

The next day we went to the Olga Mountains, or Kata Tjuta, just 26 km away and equally spectacular in their own way. They consist of nine different domes, higher than Ayers Rock, and a completely different structure, with lots of walks through gorges and chasms to overlooks. Then to Kings Canyon, nearly three hours' drive away, yet another brilliant chunk of sandstone to walk through and around. We arrived just in time for a lovely evening walk in the late sun, and next morning Tony set off on the canyon rim walk. Six kilometres, and reckoned to take three-and-a-half hours, and instructions to take lots of water, sun protection, hats, stout shoes, emergency provisions etc etc. Not the walk for me, I thought, and settled down to a morning of writing postcards and reading a good book. However, exactly one hour 40 minutes later he was back having overtaken about 200 people on the way, taken lots of photos and having thoroughly enjoyed himself. And scarcely out of breath!

The campervan is still doing us proud, although it is a bit heavy on fuel, and we tend to lurch from one petrol station to the next with our fingers crossed. Not that you can even get unleaded petrol in the Aboriginal areas. They have something called Opal fuel, which is OK, it works just as well, but the reason they have that instead of ordinary petrol is that you cannot sniff Opal fuel..... There are also long stretches of road with miles of land on either side called Prescribed Areas, where alcohol is prohibited, as is pornography. Big signs on the road tell you that fines are up to 22,500 Australian dollars, depending on the quantity of the alcohol and the quality of the porn. That largely sums up the Aboriginal culture, I'm afraid, although there are many delightful people that don't fit the general preconception of Aborigines.

We crossed the border into South Australia for a day and a night, having to relinquish our pack of supermarket tomatoes at the crossing, as fruit and veg cannot be taken from state to state because of fruit fly and various diseases. We went to



Underground church at Coober Pedy.

Coober Pedy. I wonder if you have heard of Coober Pedy. The Geologist thinks *everybody* has heard of Coober Pedy, but not me. However, I now know it is an opal-mining community, still supplying a large chunk of the world's opal market. There are literally hundreds of individual shafts and little spoil heaps in a 40 km radius around the town, rather than one huge corporate mine. We did go round one small working mine, and it seems like a bit of a thankless task to us, but a lot of people make money out of it.

The town's other claim to fame is that at least half the population eats, sleeps and works underground. The temperature outside is so stupendously hot for much of the year that they have carved out houses, shops, motels, churches etc into the sandstone, for everyday living. On the same principle as the sandstone caves of Nottingham, really, only on a rather more elaborate scale. One chap found a vein of opal while he was burrowing into the cliff for his home, and now has a 13-bedroom house, with all mod cons, entirely funded by his opal deposits. One of the lucky ones, then..... But like a lot of mining communities, it is slightly weird. The population of 3500 comprises 45 different nationalities, which is a bit odd in itself, and we only stayed until the evening before heading back up north and camping off-road, and then carrying on back to Alice Springs next morning. Along the way we passed the Dog Fence, an amazing feature in itself. It's a wire netting fence that stretches 5300 km across country, from south coast to east coast, to keep the dingoes out of the southeastern grazing lands where they could worry (or kill) the sheep.

Now we are heading north again, we had breakfast at a picnic stop on the Tropic of Capricorn, and then we are turning eastward towards the coast.

Hello from the Great Barrier Reef, October 30

We have now crossed over into Queensland from Northern Territories, and it seems a quite different atmosphere. Still long, long stretches of nearly empty open roads, endless flatland with grass and scrub to either side, but a good deal more traffic on the whole, and somehow less traveller-friendly. No more of the big picnic-table turnouts that we had become accustomed to, and a rather more cosmopolitan feel altogether. Also rather too much cloud around, but it is cooler, which is a benefit.

There has been a lot of driving, which sometimes gets a bit relentless, so we spent two whole nights at a Proper Camp Site at a seaside town called Karumba. Most people go there for the fishing, but we were there for the proper loos, showers,

sinks for washing up and clothes washing, and swimming pool to relax in the middle of the day..... bliss. We spent a day there doing not much more than rest and recreation, which we were both ready for.

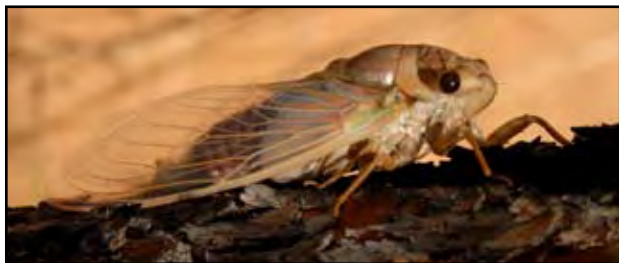
Then on the road again, via various sinkholes, craters and volcanic features; we had a tour along a couple of lava tubes in the Undara National Park, which pleased the Inner Caver no end. Then we fetched up at Charters Towers, a town with lovely buildings dating from the days of gold mining in the 1800s.



Undara lava tube.

Major excitement on the road just into Queensland when the three-truck, two-tier cattle transporter in front of us blew a tyre. We followed it into the nearby turn-off in case we could help, but no sooner had it stopped than the bogey, or dolly, or whatever they call the bit with the wheels on, joining two of the trucks, burst into flames. A bearing had gone, and the red hot metal ignited the oil, which then set fire to the tyres. Luckily the driver's mate, following along with another cattle transporter, stopped to help, because it was quite a critical few minutes. They couldn't put the fire out, or pull the dolly away because it had welded itself on, and the cattle above the flames were getting decidedly warm hooves on the metal floor, not to mention being enveloped in thick black smoke. The driver opened the gates between the second and third trucks, so the cattle could all budge up and the cows in the hot seat, or rather the Hot-Standing-Room-Only section, could escape to the cool end. Eventually they got the trucks separated, and the drivers sat and watched the fire burn itself out in safety while they waited for a replacement to arrive from the nearest town, 80 km away. All in a day's work, apparently.

Oh, and we went cicada spotting the other night. We were driving through an area of thin woodland, and the cicadas were incredibly loud, so we stopped and said "right, we are not moving until we have seen one in the trees". You know how difficult they are to spot, but eventually Tony saw one, and then I did, and once we had our eye in we saw loads. Then Tony saw what we thought was a brown stag beetle, took pix of it, and again, suddenly we could see dozens of stag beetles. Or so we thought..... Can you tell, I wonder, that we have moved on from termites to cicadas in our DIY Biology for Beginners, or Insects for Idiots, course. Anyway, it turns out on further investigation that cicadas live for 10, 15, 20 years even, underground, where they look like fat termites, munching on tree roots, getting about, socialising, having fun, until one day, incomprehensibly, they feel the need



This (above) emerges from this (on the right); a cicada and the carapace it leaves behind before flying off.



to go above the surface. Quite why the urge suddenly comes upon them is not explained, but up they come, looking for all the world like stag beetles, and climb up a nearby tree trunk. Then they inhale lots of oxygen, which expands their bodies and pop, they literally jump out of their skins, and emerge with beautifully decorated shimmery wings, leaving their beetle-like carapaces behind. From that moment on they have just three days to go before they drop dead. They have to fly into the top branches of the trees, make a monumental noise, find a friend and mate, lay eggs in a bit of tree trunk, and then kaput. Game over. All a bit short and sweet, and I bet they wish they had stayed underground, but that's just the way of it.

At the moment we are at Airlie Beach on the eastern coast, a fair way south of Cairns. Yesterday we had a boat trip out to the Whitsunday Islands which are really part of the Great Barrier Reef, and had a good hour of snorkelling off the coast of one island, where we saw some really fabulous coral and excellent varieties of fish. I was a bit wimpy and said we needed the thin wet suits, which were provided as optional because of jelly fish. The dreaded box jelly fish are around from November-ish to March-ish, and it is October 30, after all, so I thought take no chances. And in fact we were quite glad of the wet suits, as the water was quite cool, and we would have had to come out sooner otherwise. Then we had a very good lunch on board before we went to Whitehaven Beach, on another beautiful island, and had a couple of hours there. Fantastic white sand and turquoise seas, very brochure-like. It was a good day, and now we are heading south for a day or two, before coming back up north to Cairns.

Hello from Cairns, November 6

Well here we are in Cairns, about to take our trusty campervan back to its rightful owners, and get ready for umpteen hours of flights tomorrow. Meanwhile we are in an excellent motel, balcony overlooking swimming pool, all mod cons..... wow.

Up till now, though, we have been doing some good wildlife spotting. We were camped one night by a wood, eating our supermarket-roast-chicken supper, when we heard a lot of rustling in the undergrowth, and a sweet little creature came stumping up, not at all fazed by the flash when Tony took pictures of him. We are fairly sure it was a bandicoot. That was the night we were at Wallaman Falls,

the highest sheer-drop waterfall in Australia, and very impressive. It was in the shade when we saw it in the evening, and the next morning in cloud first thing, so we took our chairs to the viewing platform and read books for an hour or so while we waited for the sun to be on the entire falls, which was very successful. Gosh, all work, being married to a photographer....

As we went through the Atherton Tablelands we stayed at a town with a couple of duck-billed platypus viewing-platforms overlooking a creek, and both in the evening and the next morning we saw..... well, it was probably one several times over, but did see a lot of it, swimming with its beaky nose out of the water. Smaller than we thought, but exciting to see. As we were going for a walk along the creek a local jogger stopped us to show us a tree kangaroo, high in the branches. We could just spot him, took pix as best we could, then an hour later he was still there when we got back from our walk.... they make sloths look hyper active.... and we were admiring him again when another local, a woman walking her dog, came along and said **not** a tree kangaroo, but a green-ringtail possum. Unfortunately we are sure she is right, and even though she told us that G-R possums are very special, it simply does not have the same kudos as a tree kangaroo somehow.

We were en route to Chillagoe, which is in the back of beyond, but a well-known limestone area full of caves. We went down and through a couple of caves, one on our own and another with a ranger; both were good, the big one with the ranger was really brilliant, and The Geologist was well pleased.

The real star of the show has been the cassowary. Like a brightly coloured emu, it is very rare, significantly endangered, and a sighting is highly sought after. We gathered that Mission Creek was **the** place, if anywhere, to see them, so we duly went on the Cassowary Loop Trail for a couple of hours. Not a single cassowary, nor any of the turtles we were promised on the information boards. Just three small brown fishes and a million mosquitoes. So we drove off..... and a couple of miles down the road, lo and behold there was a cassowary. Success. We stopped at a nearby park for a cheese and biscuit lunch, and asked an elderly



Lorikeets.



Cassowary.

couple in deckchairs how often they saw cassowaries. “Oh, they are local, seen everywhere, saw a cassowary only..... when was it now, Matilda.... must have been only three or four years ago”. Ha, we thought. How good are we.

Then a couple of days ago we crossed the Daintree River on a ferry into the Daintree National Park, and hardly had we got there when we saw another cassowary walking beside the road. We



Daintree mangrove swamp.

stopped the car of course, and within minutes there were at least a dozen cars slewed all over, and a mighty clicking of cameras. We stayed that night and the next in the Daintree, and the first morning as we drove away from the campsite, another cassowary, with a fairly large chick. More pictures, obviously, and **then**, blow me down, on the way back in the late afternoon, **two** more with a tiny chick in tow. No doubt by now you are thinking that this whole idea of them being rare is complete cobbles, but I promise you they do rate very highly on the I-Spy register.

Apart from seeing flocks of cassowaries, we had a brilliant day in the Daintree. We have recently driven through acres and acres of mango orchards, sugar cane plantations, bananas, tea and coffee, but Daintree is pure rainforest, and we took four brilliant short walks through the forest and mangrove swamps that were really lovely. I had a bit of a fungus fest as well; there is a wonderful variety of fungi and toadstools in the forest, all part of the decay and regeneration cycle.

The other local claim to fame is the Four Mile Beach, near Port Douglas, a rather upmarket seaside resort which we drove through just outside Cairns. The beach is beautiful, pure white sand and sparkly sea. The only problem is that only a small portion of the sea, about 30 metres square, is swimmable in, enclosed by a box jellyfish net, and therefore crowded with people. And even then half of them were in wet suits. A woman got stung last year in the so-called safe area, by a piece of a tentacle that had been washed through the netting. She was OK, but in severe pain for several days, so the lifeguard told us. And jellyfish, tentacles, and bits of tentacles get washed up on the sand, so you keep your shoes on at all times, and no way could you let children play on the beach.

Bearing that in mind, we shall be quite glad to escape alive from Australia! Not really; not at all in fact; we have had a great time here.

Postcards from Southern Mexico 2011

Hello from Campeche, December 6

Well, here we are, beside the seaside, in Campeche. Of course, we were at the seaside in Cancun when we landed, but after a very long and tedious flight, interminable queues at immigration and customs, and ridiculously laborious paperwork to be filled in at the car hire, we were only fit to find somewhere to stay the night and fall into bed. Next morning we set off immediately down the road towards Chichen Itza, stopping on the way at three cenotes. Er, yes; I can tell you are impressed; or you would be, if you knew what I was talking about! For your information, a cenote is an underground lake with varying sizes of holes in the roof, from tiny to an entire roof collapse, to let the light in. A geological rarity, and a speciality of the Yucatan, so obviously of much excitement for Tony, and I was equally impressed, although rather too many steps down to the water for my liking for the obligatory photos. The main attraction for most people is to swim in them, which I can well understand.

Then on to Chichen Itza, where we spent a couple of hours at the ancient Mayan site, dating back to the 6th century. There are dozens of similar sites in Yucatan, but this is the most famous, with various remains of building and local attractions like the Ball Park, where they used to play a sort of basketball and the losers were killed and their heads used as the balls for the next game. Nice. And then another cenote, that consists of a massive great pit with water at the bottom, where they used to sacrifice gold, silver, jewels and, apparently, virgins. Or so the stories go.....

We also went to Uxmal, another Mayan site, which we actually thought was a good deal better, and we really enjoyed that one. Oh, at Chichen Itza we went back in the evening for the *son et lumière* session. Neither of us had ever been to a *son et lumière* before, and now we know there is no need to go to another one. It was dire, three-quarters of an hour of the Mayan story told in Spanish, with none of the evocative *son* music that we expected, and also the *lumière* lighting was feeble to say the least, so we were not impressed.

On Monday we went to a brilliant town, Izamal, where there is a huge convent, parts of which you can go into, although come to think of it all we saw were a few monks. Perhaps the rules have been relaxed these days..... There was also a big market with lots of razzmatazz. And by chance a visiting dignitary from Mexico City being presented with flowers and gifts by three girls beautifully dressed in traditional costume, so drawing quite a big crowd. We know not who the dignitary was, but the place was crawling with police vehicles including, would you believe, a fully armoured tank.





Campeche.

In the afternoon three more cenotes, but with a difference. We were taken to them on a horse-drawn wagon along four miles of tram track through the forest. Most entertaining. And the cenotes were beautiful, despite more steps down and up. Although I must say, after the four miles back again looking at a horse's bottom, the novelty was beginning to wear off.

Driving around has been fine, the roads are good and very little traffic outside the major cities. However

going through towns and villages is exciting as they all have multiple, acutely aggressive road humps that you have to really creep over. They certainly slow the traffic down. And we are improving our Spanish no end by interpreting the road signs as we go along. So we now know some really useful phrases such as 'Keep to the Right' and 'Respect and Obey the Signs'. Not completely perfect though. '*Disminuya su Velocidad*', which I quite understandably interpreted as 'Dismount Your Bicycle', as in velocipede, turned out to be 'Diminish Your Speed'. An easy mistake to make.

Up to now we have had brilliant hotels. The unimaginatively named Chichen Itza Lodge was superb, and the manager threw in complimentary breakfast and a free car-park ticket to the actual site. The Flycatcher the next night was the best yet, another great breakfast, and the owner and his wife were very helpful and could not do enough for us. Now we are in Campeche we have a lovely art deco hotel right in the middle of town, so we can walk everywhere.

Campeche is a lovely town, has all the buildings painted in pastel colours, is incredibly picturesque, centres on one of the most beautiful cathedrals we have ever seen, and the whole city is pristine clean.

All told we are very impressed with Mexico, a really enjoyable country, what we have seen of it so far, and the people are delightful. Even if almost nobody speaks any English. We shall have to improve on 'Dismount Your Bicycle'.

Hello from Tapachula, December 10

From Campeche we set off along the coast road southwards, passing hundreds of pelicans, which I think have got to be my favourite birds, and then turned inland. A major source of excitement this week has been the Festival of Our Lady of Guadalupe. You may not have heard of it, but it's very big in Mexico, I can assure you. What it has involved, for the past week and more, is flocks of cyclists and pedestrians clogging up the roads, all carrying icons or religious pictures, and each

individual convoy having a support truck festooned with hundreds of balloons. And the main feature has been teams of runners carrying flaming torches, Olympics-style, in relays all over the country. On Sunday they were joined by herds of motor cyclists, and the whole thing reached a crescendo on Monday, when the roads practically came to a standstill, and horseback riders joined in the general melee. There was even a procession of decorated tuk tuks, which was fun, but somewhat road-blocking. One team, headed by a ballooned police car, looked suspiciously like a collection of convicts. I expect they were.

Two days across the mountains and into Chiapas were a total contrast from the flatlands of the Yucatan. Some lovely villages, some spectacular bits of limestone and a few giant sinkholes (which *coincidentally* we just happened to pass by!). Then along the Pacific coast, with views of the huge, perfectly conical mountain of Volcan Tacana. We stopped in the town of Tapachula, in a brilliant hotel where the rooms opened on to a central courtyard that was stuffed with beautiful fan-palms among an excess of greenery. And their restaurant came up with perhaps the best dinners of the trip.

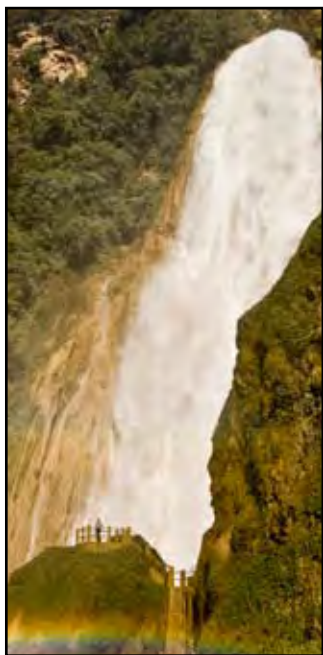
Hello from San Cristobal, December 13

We are currently in a very smart hotel in the town of San Cristobal, still in Chiapas, specially chosen to be extra comfortable as we are here for two nights. It's the first time we have had two nights on the trot, so a great treat. And a chance to do some washing. Like all the hotels in Mexico there is no plug in the wash basin, but luckily I have my trusty ball of Blu-Tac with me, which makes a remarkably efficient plug-hole stopper-upper. The town has at least four beautiful churches, four that we have seen, anyway, and some good markets. Not to mention a great outdoor bar with a live band, including two xylophonists, who are brilliant; excellent value.

We had assumed all the Our Lady festivities would culminate on Monday evening (12th) in all the town squares, but there was no sign of that happening. The previous night, mind you, the square in the town we were staying in, Comitan, was seething with what we presumed were uniformed Mexican bandsmen (there was no other excuse for them wearing such ridiculous trousers) and we thought we were in for an evening of brass band music, so dined at a restaurant in the square to be ready for it. It was too cold to sit outside – we were up in the hills, where evenings are decidedly sweater weather – and had to listen to very loud Mexican football on the



On the road for Our Lady of Guadalupe.



Soaked at El Chiflon.

telly instead. And when we came out half an hour later the bandmen had completely vanished into thin air, heaven knows where they went, we never did find out. Perhaps they just liked dressing up.... The fireworks and fire crackers were much in evidence however, that night. **All** that night. I think they were at their loudest around 3am, right outside our bedroom window.

Yesterday we went to the Lagos de Montebello national park with a series of lakes, right up against the Guatamalan border. The path to the first cave was down an extremely slithery and long series of trails and steps, through mud and over wet boulders, which did not agree with me at all, as you can imagine. But fortunately an extremely kind farmer, carrying a bundle of firewood on his back, directed us to a short cut back, which was much easier, so I am eternally grateful to him. Then on to a spectacular waterfall, Cascadas El Chiflon, that required walking up a great many steps, but even I had to agree it was worthwhile; The Geologist says it is the highest tufa cascade that

he has seen or even heard about. At the top of the path I was sent up to the platform right up against the 120-metre-high waterfall, for scale of course, and got absolutely soaked. It was impossible to see Tony, somewhere down below taking pictures, so I did all my best modelling poses, looking this way and that, in the process of getting drenched. When I told Tony, hoping for condolences and much praise, all he said was that I was so small in the pictures that it was impossible to tell which way I was facing anyway. Ho hum.

We are still up in the hills now, and have come through some spectacular scenery. This morning we went into the fairly stupendous Canyon del Sumidero. We were supposed to go there last week but when we got near, the road was closed for resurfacing. Just our luck, we thought, but we were told it would be open again this week, and as we were in the area again today we had another go, and managed to get in. And it turned out for the best as it happened, because last week it was full of cloud, and today it was in brilliant sunshine. The weather is really variable, it changes from one day to the next, if not from one hour to the next, but we have been quite lucky with mostly blue skies, and sun when and where it mattered most.

The roads through the hills have been relatively uneventful apart from endless police and army check points. They mostly wave us through, as we look fairly unlike the average Guatamalan drug dealer or cattle rustler, and when they do stop us we just act daft, look blank, smile winningly, and say “We No Understand, We Inglese”. At that point they generally give up. There has been some good scenery,

though, and at one point we were driving through miles and miles of banana plantations. Then it was miles and miles of sugar cane, all in flower. We've never seen sugar cane flowers before, and they really are lovely *en masse*, like very tall grass with shimmery white flowers at the top. Today, miles and miles of corn-on-the-cob. And actually up here there is a lot of more local cultivation as well, various vegetables and stuff, much more so than further down towards the coast, where much of the drier land seems to go to waste.

Hello from Playa del Carmen, December 20

Monday, and we are now back on the Yucatan coast, in Playa del Carmen, just south of Cancun, which is the ultimate resort sort of town, with a main street thronged with westerners, most of them sun-seekers dipping in and out of the tackiest of tacky souvenir shops, bars, restaurants and cafes, and ubiquitous McDonalds, Burger Kings and Dairy Queens. The roads approaching are lined with massive spas, hotels, apartments and golf courses, all with hugely elaborate and ostentatious gateways to the various edifices behind them. We are in a very good, but somewhat smaller, town-centre hotel, and I am writing this sitting on a balcony overlooking a very colourful Mexican blanket and rug shop, and a most unappealing-looking massage parlour apparently run by a scruffy old man and his son who sit outside on the pavement, and don't exactly seem to be enticing the customers in.

Another day, another cenote..... and earlier today we went to one not far from here, Aktun Chen, but this one was really a cave that we could, and did, swim into, and with some very attractive stalactites. Lots of good pictures as a result.

Yesterday and the day before we were in Tulum, where there is a very fine Mayan site, high on a cliff top, overlooking a beautiful white beach and archetypal turquoise sea. I was there on a press trip about 20 years ago, and remembered it quite vividly, so it clearly made an impression of me then, and it really is quite splendid. Later in the day we went to yet another site, at Coba, different again, in the middle of jungle, and from the top of the main pyramid, the highest in Yucatan, all you could see were tree tops in every direction.

In between getting our fixes of Mayan archaeology we drove up to Cancun, just for the experience and to have a look. It's a mega tourist hot-spot, like Playa del Carmen but much bigger, with hardly a Mexican to be seen, just hundreds of Europeans and even more hundreds of Americans, with a town centre full of dubious nightclubs surrounded by stretch after stretch of not very attractive



Cave swim at Aktun Chen.

high-rise hotels and apartments. So many of them that I simply cannot believe they are ever all full, and yet even more are in the process of being built. It is a hugely popular resort, and most visitors to Mexico never get beyond Cancun.

The hotel in Tulum was rather grand. Another two-night stop, where we had a thatched cabin with a private verandah right on the beach. Very romantic if you like beaches, the trouble with them is they are all full of sand. (I'm very anti-sand, it gets *everywhere*!!!) It was a lovely place to stay, however, with beds heavily mosquito-netted, but there are no mosquitoes around at the moment, so we could discard those. But like so many Mexican hotels, hotels all over the world for that matter, they just do not *get* lighting. Even when we take the lamp shades off, which we do automatically as soon as we walk in, the light they give out tends to be fairly minimal. And in our grand Tulum hotel the verandah light was made out of thick dark brown pottery and clearly designed to keep all the illumination *in*. Perhaps they think it conserves electricity. It was only with some clever hitching up of this heavily ethnic construction by Tony with our handy pack of dental floss that we were able to see each other, let alone read or write. Dental floss, by the way, is second only to BluTak in the list of travelling essentials.

For us, though, it has been quite a culture shock coming down from the mountains, and the state of Chiapas, where we have been for most of our time here. That seems to us to be the *real* Mexico, and we like it very much. The people are courteous and kind, even though we can hardly speak to each other without lots of arm-waving and pantomime performances. Everywhere is spotlessly clean and litter-free, and everyone is very genuine – including the women in their beautiful traditional costumes, although unfortunately some are a bit paranoid about having the photographs taken, so it means a fair amount of shooting from the hip, picture-wise.



Crowd-free at Palenque.

Before we left Chiapas we went to look at two more sets of waterfalls. I know we seem to be doing nothing but visiting waterfalls, cenotes and Mayan archaeological sites, but each one is different from the next, and all well worth visiting, and is largely what this part of Mexico is all about. One of the waterfalls, Misol Ha, we could walk behind, which is always fun, and the other, Cascadas de Agua Azul, was a series of cascades over tufa barriers

into clear blue pools, absolutely beautiful, and one of the best tufa sites we have ever seen. Then on the way north we stopped off at the Mayan ruins of Palenque, which were truly spectacular and without the tourist crowds of Chichen Itza. We also stopped at an amazing shop, near Oxchuc, selling the beautiful amber that is mined in the surrounding hills.

On our last day at Playa del Carmen, we took the passenger ferry out to Cozumel Island, just to see what it was like. But it was just one big resort for sun-seekers and tat-buyers, though we did watch a brilliant street artist who specialised in using a blow-torch to instantly dry each layer of paint.

Hello from Mexico City, December 26

An easy internal flight, two metros and a bus, and we reached our hotel close to the city centre, and were given a room near the top floor with views all across Mexico City to the volcano of Popocatepetl that was gently smoking on the horizon. How exciting to actually **see** Popocatepetl, the name of which even I can remember from my school geography lessons!

We then walked around town to see some of the classic subsidence sites that were eagerly anticipated by The Geologist. The whole city centre area has gone down about 30 feet (due to the soft clay beneath), and the Palacio de Bellas Artes has gone down another 10 feet, so that the entrance is now on what was originally the first floor. Leaning churches, sunken museums and wavy pavements were all part of the entertainment.

Next day we eventually found the enormous Poniente bus station (one of four in Mexico City) and caught a bus for a long ride through lovely highland scenery to the old mining town of Angangueo. We checked into a small hotel, and then met Herman on the street outside. He seemed OK, so we joined him in his taxi to go up a nearby mountain to Rosario. There I resorted to a beer in the conveniently located bar, while Tony walked up 600 steps through a pine forest, and then even higher to a particular grove of trees, which were absolutely covered with millions of Monarch butterflies.

This was the purpose of the entire excursion from Mexico City. The butterflies swarm to spend the winter here, roosting in the trees, and it's a very dramatic sight. They start life in Canada but then fly all the way down to Mexico to escape the cold weather of winter, before returning north in springtime to breed and lay their eggs back in Canada. Then the new generation repeats the theme and flies to Mexico in this



Lots of Monarch butterflies.



The 'pole'.

huge annual migration. It's a strange phenomenon, and you wonder how fragile little butterflies can survive the non-stop flight south, but they do, and it's truly spectacular to see them en masse. And it's still a mystery how the young butterflies find their way back to the same grove of trees that their parents came from. But they do.

The evening entertainment was a wonderfully amateurish sort of nativity pantomime in the town square, before a rather cold night in our hotel (it was winter in the mountains). First thing in the morning, we escaped on a series of bus-rides to a lovely old city called Morelia, with so many beautiful buildings. We found a very comfortable but ridiculously cheap hotel right on the main plaza, and had a string band playing Christmas carols just outside our balcony.

On Christmas Eve we took a luxury bus for the four-hour trip back to Mexico City, and our same hotel. Then walked to Independence Square and found the 'pole' (as I disparagingly call it). Twenty feet tall, and actually not a pole, but a steel well-casing, which sticks up out of the ground because the ground has subsided while the bottom of the deep well has not (ground subsidence in the centre of Mexico City is on a world-record scale). Tony had known about it of course, and was so excited to see it, but I did get ever so slightly bored posing beside it for every variation of photograph.

Then it was Christmas Day, and we loved the delightful and friendly holiday atmosphere in both the Alameda park and the Zocalo square. In the afternoon we took various buses to get out to the Plaza Mexico – to see the bullfight. All very spectacular and ritualised, but a bit sad with the demise of the bulls. All except the sixth bull..... who won! He did this by surviving the permitted number of swords stuck into him, to huge chanting of “toro, toro, toro” from the crowd, and much to the embarrassment of the key matador who ran out of time; after which the bull was returned to a green field far away to live the rest of his life free from those pesky matadors.

Boxing Day was different again, with a trip out to Xochimilco, for a cruise (in our own private boat) round the lakes and canals that are remnants of the larger lake before Mexico City spread across it. And Tony paid a small number of pesos for a xylophone boat to come alongside to serenade us with a short recital – magical. But then it was out to the airport and the long flight home.

Mexico was brilliant; we'll go again. And a Mexican Christmas was an extra delight.

Postcards from Indonesia 2012

Hello from Great Barrier Reef, February 14

Well, we got going eventually. After a very lengthy overnight flight to Singapore, we transferred to a second overnight flight to Sydney. An hour into that flight the captain announced there was a ‘medical emergency’ on board, and we were returning to Singapore. So it was another hour back to where we started, and then a further two hours on the tarmac while they off-loaded the ‘medical emergency’ and checked the plane over again to make sure it was OK after a fairly heavy landing, what with all the fuel on board.

Finally we arrived in Sydney and the hotel where we were staying overnight until the ship came in the next morning. It was lunchtime by then, rather than the 6am landing we were expecting, so we just walked into town, and down to the port and took a ferry out past the Opera House and under Sydney Harbour Bridge. Exciting to see them in the flesh, as it were, and Sydney is a very impressive city altogether, with some spectacular high-rises, and an amazing harbour.

The next day we took a train up the Blue Mountains. An excellent journey, an hour through suburbs, then another hour up into the hills to Katoomba, where we caught a bus to the scenic bits – waterfalls and cliffs and gorges, including the Three Sisters, that are three pinnacles of rock. Not that we could see them at first, mind you, as they were completely in cloud. There has been a tremendous amount of rain and bad weather in the last few weeks, with towns flooded and some actually evacuated. Anyway, we walked from Scenic Point to Echo Point, through a beautiful forest, and while were at Echo Point the cloud suddenly cleared completely, which was brilliant.

Back down to Sydney and on to the ship, so everything good. We sailed at 7.30pm and blow me, at 10pm the captain announced there was a ‘medical emergency’ aboard, and he was returning to Sydney! So back we went again, close enough to Sydney for the rescue helicopter to come out, but the sea was too rough and the ‘medical emergency’ too distressed to be winched up at the first attempt. So the helicopter had to go back to refuel and change crews because they were out of time..... and finally Mr ‘Medevac’ was sent on his way to hospital at 2.30am. In consequence we were six hours late into Brisbane, which threw a lot of people’s



Not Indonesia, but Australia, where we started.

plans out, and left us with a very short afternoon there, but we took a water taxi along the river into town, which was a lovely 50-minute journey in itself, walked through the Botanical Gardens, had a drink in a pavement cafe, and then water-taxed back. Since then we've been all at sea, so to speak.

There are four other lecturers on board with their wives, and all of them good company. Tony's done two of his eight lectures so far, one on Australian mining, and today contrasting South and North Korea, both of which have gone down really well, needless to say. We shall be in Townsville tomorrow, then Cairns for a couple of days, and then another two days at sea, so more lectures. The weather is brilliant, very hot and sunny, but I don't suppose you want to hear that. Hope you're not too frozen.

Hello from Darwin, February 22

This is actually 'Hello from the Sea Beyond Darwin', on the way to Komodo in Indonesia. After we last wrote we were in Cairns for a couple of days. A splendid town. There was an excursion from the ship up to a little touristy village called Kuranda, about 20 miles up the hillside from town, involving a train up and a Sky Rail cable car down. We did it independently for about a quarter of the price of the ship's trip! We went up on a bus rather than the train, a lovely drive with an excellently humorous and helpful driver, went to a fantastic rock-and-fossil shop and museum (and actually bought a small piece of opal and a garnet crystal), and then to a butterfly farm/sanctuary/whatever. Thank goodness for digital cameras, trying to take photos of butterflies fluttering by at speed is of course virtually impossible, but you can't help yourself from trying, and we must have taken hundreds between us. Hopefully we might have got the odd one or two that actually featured more than the tip of a butterfly wing!

Then we took the cable car down, over a huge canopy of rain forest, for about 8 km down to the road, with two stop-offs along the way, with shortish boardwalks through the forest. It was raining hard when we started – well, it is *rain* forest after all – then we went through a bit of cloud, and then sun, so we got the whole climatic experience in one trip. It was very spectacular, and really worthwhile.

Next day we caught the town bus to the Cairns' Botanic Gardens, and like all tropical gardens it was quite awe-inspiring with the size and variety of the plants. It included a boardwalk through another bit of rain forest and past a series of lovely



Brisbane skyline.

water-lilied lakes. A lot of people were horribly bitten by mosquitoes apparently, but we were OK, and luckily didn't know about them beforehand, so didn't have to worry about them! And a lot of other people went on a ship's trip to the Barrier Reef for either snorkelling or glass-bottom-boat-viewing, which was good when they got there, but on the way the sea was quite rough, and loads of them were unpleasantly seasick by all accounts, and it was all rather nasty, we gather! Well out of that one, then.....

From Cairns we had three days at sea (two lectures from Tony) and sailed into Darwin early Tuesday morning. We were in Darwin 18 months ago when we had our camper-van, so we knew already that there isn't a great deal to the town, but we caught the bus to a place called Crocodylus, where they have a great many rescue crocodiles as well as a breeding programme. The highlight is feeding time, when the keeper dangles lumps of buffalo and bits of mutton bones above the water, and the crocs jump up to grab the food. Sometimes. They seemed a mite *laissez faire* about the whole thing when we were there, some obviously thinking 'oh, can't be bothered, we'll wait till the next meal', but Tony did get some pix. And the next day, having missed the bus to where we'd thought of going, we reverted to Plan B and went back to Crocodylus. Even though it was pouring with rain a lot of the time (and when I say pouring I mean really pouring) the feeding was better, so over the two days we have some quite passable photos.



Jumping crocodile.

On our overnight stop in Darwin we had to move off our berth on the quayside and anchor out in the middle of the ocean, to make way for her majesty the QM2. Talk about pulling rank! When we humble Discovery people crept past in our little lifeboat tenders to take us ashore there was a big sign on the side of the QM2 saying 'Do Not Approach Within 50 Metres', and there was a patrol boat offshore manned by armed guards. Honestly, anyone would think we were Somali pirates!

Everything on our much cosier and altogether more fun ship is still going well however. Two couples, passengers, invited us up to the Yacht Club for dinner the other night – a smart restaurant on the top deck, with a different menu from the hoi polloi downstairs! – I had kangaroo steak and Tony had crocodile curry; just because we thought we ought to. Mine was like a rather tough beef steak, and Tony's tasted, not surprisingly, of curry, but now we can tick those off our list of 'Ethnic Foods We Have Eaten', along with the whale and the ostrich and the guinea pig. Not to mention the fried grasshoppers and the steamed bees. All very non-PC, I'm afraid, but you sort of feel you have to try them once.

We are now on our way to Indonesia, and will send further dispatches from there.

Hello from Java, March 1

One day and counting, and then we shall be off the ship. We are currently full steam ahead for Singapore, where our bit of the cruise ends. It seems to have gone very quickly. We've met some delightful people, both among the other lecturers and partners (14 of us to dinner each evening!) and passengers. And as ever, Tony has really enjoyed giving his lectures and talking to people off-stage about rocks! He is *enjoying*, rather than *enjoyed*, in fact, as he is still working; he had his seventh lecture this morning, and has another tomorrow, a couple of hours before we actually tie up in Singapore docks!

Our first port of call after the last email was Komodo Island, home of the Komodo dragons. They are massive creatures, overgrown monitor lizards about the size of a pony (only with shorter legs and a longer, fairly lethal, tail) and they reckon to have been around since the time of the dinosaurs. There are supposed to be a few hundred of them on the island, although only three of them bothered to show up for us, and they seemed pretty docile. Although significantly no-one volunteered to actually go up and stroke them – they do have a seriously aggressive reputation, and are known to swallow a wild boar or a deer in but a single gulp. The first two we saw were big males who came plodding into a clearing in the jungle, swinging their heads from side to side and flashing their reptilian forked tongues at all and sundry. They can't hear or smell or see very well, which seems to be a bit of a design failure, so they use their tongues to detect potential dinners. Then a bit later we saw a smaller one, therefore a female we were told, going through the undergrowth, so we managed to get some good photos. The most fearsome part of the trip was running the gauntlet of dozens of market-stall holders, rugby-tackling us to buy T-shirts with pictures of dragons, carved wooden dragons, dragon tea towels etc etc. To support the local economy, we bought a dragon claw for two Singapore dollars, and they seemed happy enough with that! It was incredibly hot and steamy on the island, though; the most humid place we've been to yet. On the other hand, the sail into the island was stunningly beautiful, weaving in and out between other islands all with thick, lush forest, and for many people that was the best bit by far.

Bali was our next port of call, and we had an afternoon in the town of Kuta on our own, which we enjoyed. Even though it's huge compared with when we were there 29 years ago (while Tony was mapping caves in Java), and is now very touristy and back-packery, it still has a great atmosphere, and the people are all



lovely and so friendly. We went to a local tour agency to sort out what we're doing when we go back to Bali independently on Friday, and have to start fending for ourselves! We went to an ATM to get some Indonesian money, and have come away with three million rupiyahs, give or take a couple of thousand that we spent on a coke and a beer!

The next day, still docked in Bali, we went on a ship's trip by bus to various sites on the island. Tony was an official escort, a job that hopefully involves little more than counting people on and off the bus, provided no-one falls ill or gets lost, which can be a little more inconvenient, but the good side is that he doesn't have to pay. It was a good day out, with fairly predictable visits to a silversmith works, making very detailed and intricate jewellery; a spice garden with coffee and cacao beans along with the nutmeg, lemon grass, ginger and so on; a wood carvers' commune; and an art gallery and art school. There was some incredibly talented work, particularly the carvings and the art. We were very impressed. We also went to a temple, of course, and halfway through the day had a very good buffet lunch, which is of course obligatory on all cruise excursions. Oh, and the restaurant was overlooking the caldera lake of Batur volcano, which last erupted in the 1960s, and was actually the highlight of our day, needless to say!



Komodo dragon.

Yesterday's tour, after we docked at Semarang on Java, was to Borobudur temple, a massive edifice, I think it's supposed to be the largest in the world, and rated as one of the seven modern wonders of the world. I'm not sure who by, but fair to say it is an impressive structure, and we're glad to have seen it. Although it was a long journey – three hours there and three hours back, in a bus made for Indonesians. In other words, very small seats!

Hello from Bali, March 8

Well here we are, back in Bali, and I am writing this on the verandah of our bungalow at the Kuta Puri Hotel, while Tony is in the bath which, like the loo, opens on to the, fortunately private, garden. A little oasis in the middle of what is admittedly a bit of a tacky tourist resort, and a far cry from the Kuta we remember, but that was 29 years ago, after all. And if you pretend not to look at the extraordinarily rude T-shirts and car stickers that abound, it is still good fun.

As planned, we jumped ship in Singapore, and not a moment too soon, apparently. We disembarked very soon after docking, but next morning we bumped into someone off the ship at the airport, and he said that after we left there had been some sort of Red Alert Emergency, and the whole ship had to be evacuated and all luggage taken off and individually checked, which took hours of course. So



It rained at Bromo.

we were well out of that, and have yet to get to the bottom of what and why it was all about. I suppose it didn't make your newspapers. Unlike the second Costa ship to get into hot water, so to speak, after three days adrift recently in the Caribbean with almost no electricity, therefore no cooker, fridge, lights, loos..... Whoops.

Anyway, we flew into Bali on Saturday and immediately departed again on a tourist mini bus, and by ferry to Java, for some serious volcano-bagging. Geological note: there are 106 volcanoes along the plate boundary through Indonesia, with a great many along a dotted line through Java. First stop was Ijen, after an eight-hour journey to a weird hotel miles up a barely-made road, the last two hours in the dark. The plan was for Tony to be driven up more miles of rough road, at 4.30 next morning, and then

walk up for two hours in the morning cool to see the spectacular sulphur mining in the crater. Bad plan, as it turned out, because the walk up, and indeed the whole mining operation, was closed, due to a temporary excess of dangerous volcanic gases; only discovered too late, after the 4.30am drive up to the end of the road.

Nevertheless, the next volcanoes were more successful. Another long, long drive – the traffic in both Java and Bali is horrendous, and slow, nose-to-tail queues are par for the course – to Bromo volcano. Most people drive then walk to the viewpoint at 4am for the sunrise, but, as there is precious little chance of a colourful sunrise in this rainy season, we had a sensibly more leisurely 6am start, by which time the light was much better for pictures, and there were some good views of Bromo and its very impressive caldera, and across to Semeru, another volcano, gently smoking, beyond. Bromo erupted only last year, hence some very fresh volcanic features, and the roads around have great drifts of volcanic ash on either side. We then did a fairly steep climb up to the crater rim, which was worth it when we got there. Mind you, once at the top I refused to go any further, but Tony walked quite a way around the rim for different views.

The vegetation around Bromo is amazing. Some really steep slopes, clearly hugely fertile, and planted with amazingly geometrical rows of vegetables, with not a terrace to be seen, just growing on precipitous hills. Cabbages and onions seem to be the produce of the day, with plenty of other crops coming along nicely, not sure what they all are, but there are definitely a lot of them.

We spent another day driving to the new and infamous mud volcano, now known as Lusi. A huge area of mud has been spewing out of the ground, propelled by geothermal gases for the last six years, since a company drilling for gas disturbed some deep-down equilibrium. The result is 16 villages buried with barely a trace, tens of thousands of people re-housed, and still the mud keeps on coming. We could see it fountaining up from two kilometres away (which is as near as you can get across the sea of liquid mud).

This morning was a visit to a temple built into a bat cave. Rather lovely, actually, with all the trappings of a Hindu temple being visited by scores of worshippers burning incense and having holy water chucked at them, and in the meantime thousands of bats clinging on with toe-tips where they hang from the roof, and with even a cave snake putting in an appearance while looking for bats to eat.

Just getting there and back was the makings of another day's outing, and since it was raining first thing we carted the hotel's big umbrellas round with us the whole time. Obviously, it was therefore brilliant sunshine. But luckily, as we walked from the bus stop down the road to the hotel, the heavens opened, and yet again it poured, so the brollies came into their own after all.

Tomorrow we fly from Bali to another island, Flores, for a bit of a wander.

Hello from Flores, March 12

So – to Flores. Which was different again from the all-singing, all-dancing, all-night-clubbing Kuta on Bali. We flew into Maumere, the 'capital', if that's not too presumptuous a word to describe the town, and we discovered it to be quite..... well, scruffy is the only word to describe it. I could think of other words, but scruffy will do! The streets are full of litter and rubbish, and generally there's not a lot going for it. We stopped off at a seriously unattractive market on the way into town, lots of dried fish, a few vegetables, old Coke bottles full of motor bike fuel and very little else, so we didn't stay long. The taxi driver we hired from the airport to the market was stalking us up and down the street the whole time, which was quite annoying at first, but in the end we were quite glad to take him up on a lift into Maumere itself, and to the hotel which the Lonely Planet described as the Best in Town. I would hate to see the worst; or even the second-best; it gave a whole new perspective to the word 'basic'. Still, we dumped our bag and walked up the main street – the one with most of the shops, the single restaurant and a great deal of the rubbish – to the river bridge, intending to sit by the river with a cold drink (it was very hot). Sadly, no drinks available, and no water in the river, only..... rubbish. So Plan B: eat in the restaurant. Surprise, surprise: a very good meal; also lovely friendly people. After which, we set off back to our spartan hotel bedroom, only to be overtaken by one of the most mega rainstorms we've ever seen, so had to take shelter for half an hour until it eased off enough to venture out again! (Good pictures of rain pouring off roofs, gushing waterspouts, vehicles up to their axles in puddles, etc!).

Next morning, by which time it was dry, we walked a couple of kilometres to the bus station, and caught the local bus to Moni, three-and-a-half hours up the road.

It was a brilliant bus journey, through beautiful hill country. And much more fun than a taxi or a private bus, enlivened by: **A:** the conductor getting left behind on the road on one occasion when we stopped to pick up a passenger; a minute or two later we saw the driver pick up his mobile phone – it was a call from the conductor to say “I’m **not** on the bus” and we duly rolled back down the hill to pick him up again! And **B:** the driver having some sort of feud with the bus following us, with both drivers determined to be first into the next village along the route, so it turned into a manic race, doing what seemed like a hundred miles an hour and roaring past potential passengers waiting in vain on the side of the road, in order not to be the first to stop.

We lost in the end, having finally stopped to take a little old lady on board virtually without pausing, but then it transpired that she had several bundles of firewood stacked on the other side of the road to load on as well, so despite three blokes sprinting back and forth with armloads of sticks and hurling them on to the roof (alongside the pig and three hens that were already up there), the other bus overtook us at the last moment and we all heaved a sigh of relief as we carried on at a rather more sedate pace!

We stopped at the *en-route* village in question, and had time to go round a much more colourful market than the one the previous day, full of really friendly people who were all begging to have their photographs taken, and we bought a huge bunch of bananas to sustain us until we got to Moni. Which I must say was a lovely, lovely village, which quite put Maumere in the shade. The bus driver dropped us off at the ‘homestay’ (*ie* guesthouse) that he thought we would want to stay at, and he was right. We had an ideal self-contained bungalow, with verandah and all mod-cons, which you got to via stepping stones over a stream populated by at least one couple of frogs who spent both nights that we were there croaking amorously to each other.

The main purpose of going to Moni was to go to the top of Kelimutu volcano, where there are three crater lakes, notable for the fact that they are all highly coloured, and *change* colours, depending on the level of mineral content and the weather. We



Village market on Flores.

got up there riding pillion on motor bikes, and walked the last kilometre or so to the lake viewpoints, and they were all three quite beautiful. The first one was red until a month ago, now it’s brilliant turquoise. The second one was also turquoise, but a greener turquoise; and the third was a deep dark green. A bit of a shame that the first one wasn’t still red, but we were lucky to see them at all; it was a clear day, and very often they are lost in cloud.

*Two of the lakes
in the craters at
the summit of the
Kelimutu volcano.*



Next day we walked up the road to the next village, and did a loop back to Moni via a short-cut through the hills. Easier said than done, as it was quite a steep path, very muddy and slithery and narrow and fairly challenging to negotiate. The best bit was fording the river at the bottom, which involved wading across water that came right up to *here* (use your imagination as to where ‘here’ is!), but since it was relatively warm water, fed by various hot springs, it was good fun.

Oh – since by then it was Sunday, we went down to the church in the morning, following streams of people all dressed up to the nines, and it was packed; at least 600 or 700 people inside, we reckon, and another 100 or so standing and sitting outside. Although they have Hindus and Buddhists and Moslems as well, Flores is predominantly Catholic, and all quite devout, if that church was anything to go by.

Next day we took another public bus back to Maumere, and by chance noticed another hotel right next to the bus station which was a thousand times better than our previous Maumere effort, at almost exactly the same price, so we have had an unexpected night of luxury before we fly off tomorrow morning.

Hello from back-home-again, March 17

We are now back home, so this is a last-minute catch-up on our last week away.

From Flores, we took a short flight back to Bali, and then another to Singapore, briefly, because we then had another flight on to Krabi in Thailand, to have dinner with niece Claire, who works there as a diving instructor. We literally went there for just one night, met Claire and had an excellent cook-it-yourself, table-top-hotpot meal at one of her local restaurants, and then went back to her bungalow for a drink before we took a tuk tuk back to the very superior hotel down the road that she’d booked for us. Next morning we walked down to the beach to see her before she went to work at 8am, and waved her off as she waded into the sea to catch a boat to take her and her clients out to the reef for a day’s diving. Nice work....!

After she’d gone we also clambered on to a boat, to go out to Railay, 15 minutes away, and which, like the whole Krabi area, is quite spectacular, with limestone pinnacles all around; it must rate as one of the best scenic spots in the world. We’ve been there before, but it’s very much worth going back to, and, even though it’s gradually getting more and more restaurants and hotels, it doesn’t lose its appeal.

And that was really the end of our Indonesian Experience! Bus to Krabi airport (one of the bleakest in the world, surely), and thence to Singapore again, to repack the bags and catch the 9am flight the next morning back to England.

Postcards from Northern India 2012

Hello from Varanasi, December 12

And it all started off so well... We arrived at Heathrow on Thursday afternoon to be told we had been upgraded to business class, hurrah. The fact that the airport security people then chose to tip our bag out and go through it item by item rather took the edge off our joy. An irate Tony thinks it was the sachets of Gaviscon I had in my sponge bag. I prefer to think it was his bag of electrical stuff, all wires, cables, plugs, chargers etc. However, an overnight flight with flat beds to lie on did much to restore good humour. A very satisfactory flight to Delhi, and then another onwards to Calcutta.

Then a succession of buses and bit of a walk to find the hotel that Tony had booked and paid for in the summer, with the paperwork to prove it, for two nights. Not good enough, it turned out. The agent dealing with the hotel had double booked, and the later customers, who had been booked in only that week, were already in situ, and for us there was No Room at the Inn. Very Christmassy. That's what booking through an agency results in, so never again! The manager did ultimately find us another hotel round the corner, who rather grudgingly took us in, but then it was a question of getting the money back from the agent, who kept saying yes yes yes but the result was no no no. Spitting tacks, we were resigned to losing the money, but literally five minutes before we checked out after the second night, and would have had to have paid the second hotel, a phone call came through to say the bank order to return the initial payment had come through. Phew, talk about 11th hour.

On the Saturday in Calcutta we walked past the Eden Gardens cricket ground where England were playing India, and the pavements were thronged with people going in to the various stands, and hordes more trying to sell us Indian flags and wanting to paint our faces orange, white and green. Luckily they had no colours to do the Union Jack. There were a few Barmy Army representatives, and thousands and thousands of Indians, of course, all in great good humour, and seemed delighted to make our acquaintance, particularly when we told them we lived within cheering distance of



Trent Bridge cricket ground. We left them to it, and went on to find a brilliant Saturday market, and visited a botanic garden, a bit overgrown and faded these days, but with a magnificent banyan tree in the centre, the largest in Asia apparently.

Next day we went to Howrah Bridge and spent a long time taking pictures of the fantastic flower market next to the Hooghly River, brilliant marigold

garlands in particular. Then we just wandered, round the beautiful old colonial buildings, crumbling a bit but still lovely, till we went to the Howrah train station to catch the overnight train to Varanasi. Perhaps because we had the fold-away side berths, it was an exceedingly uncomfortable night; unusual for us on an overnight train, where normally we sleep like babies. (What a ridiculous expression that is, the parents of our small grandchildren would have a different take on it, no doubt.)

Anyway, here we are, and Varanasi is as good as ever. Watching people immerse themselves in a filthy river, negotiating myriad messy cow pats in the streets and passing gold-and-scarlet-wrapped bodies being paraded through the town and then chucked on a bonfire may not sound very appealing, but it really is a mesmerising city. Actually there are fewer bathers than usual in the Ganges, health and safety has presumably even reached India. On the other hand we have been well entertained by loads of wedding parties being launched out on the river in boats, many with brides about twelve years old and looking extremely miserable. The wedding guests, though, were exuberant and the women were beautifully dressed, made up and bejewelled, absolutely gorgeous.

The guest house we stay in (this is our third time there) is a bit like Alcatraz, with the courtyard and outdoor corridors entirely caged in, to keep the monkeys out, although there were plenty on the balcony yesterday afternoon. In the evening we went to the nightly festival of Ganga Aarti, all very colourful, with lots of light, fire, chanting, blowing of conch shells and many candles in banana leaves launched on to the river to drift downstream. Then supper at our favourite restaurant. Well, a mediocre curry, but particular points of interest included a sitar player, and Special Tea. That's a discreet way of describing beer, served disguised in either a teapot or a tin mug, as alcohol of any description rather goes against the grain with devout Hindus.

Tonight we have another overnight train, to Haridraw, which will be a good deal cooler than it has been here and in Calcutta, but it's a new place for us, so looking forward to it.



Flower market below Howrah Bridge.



Ritual washing in the Ganges.

Hello from Haridwar, December 20

Here we are back in Haridwar for the second time. We came here direct from Varanasi a week or so ago, and had three nights in the strangely named but nice enough Hotel Teerth, then four days on the road in jeeps and buses up into the hills, and now two more nights here before we set off on the next stage, to the Raj hill station of Mussoorie for Christmas.

From our balcony in Hotel Teerth we have a wonderful view of the Ganges and the many bridges that criss-cross it and of course the vegetable and fruit and bangle stalls, and hundreds of people milling up and down beneath us. This is the first town that the Ganges flows through after it emerges from the Himalayas, so is course another Very Holy City. Every evening they hold a Ganga Aarti beside the river, which is the same sort of fire and light festival that we saw in Varanasi, but that was more of a stage performance, while this one is altogether better and more genuine. It starts at 5pm with monks chanting, and pouring ceremonial buckets of milk and casting handfuls of coloured powder into the river, followed by waving huge flaming torches, dozens of them up and down the ghat, and a choir singing beautifully with the crowd all joining in the chorus.

So far we have been to three evening ceremonies, and will no doubt notch up a fourth tonight. Then we shall stop off and eat at what has become our favourite restaurant. On the strength of being a Very Holy City, there is no meat, no eggs, no cheese, certainly no beer, and the whole town and close vicinity is totally vegan. It was a bit shock-horror to begin with, but not having seen so much as a boiled egg or a chicken leg in nearly 10 days we have become quite partial to our new healthy option. We have oranges and bananas and sultanas during the day, and our main meal consists of lots of spiced potato, some cauliflower or peas, and daal makrani, a curried lentil stew with extra beans that is the current favourite. All washed down



Ganga Aarti at Haridwar.

with loads of tap water, I drink as much as I can when the hotel room is within easy reach, but nothing during the day in other towns as finding public loos is usually impossible, and probably inadvisable and indescribable!

Our four days in the hills were quite different. We stayed in the town of Devprayag on the first and third nights, in the

Raghunath Palace Hotel. What image that conjures up I do not know, but I expect pretty far from the reality. Suffice it to say it had two beds, two chairs, a sit-down loo that flushed and a fabulous view from the balcony; at a fiver a night, cheap at the price. It also had thick, furry, woolly-bear duvets which were wonderfully warm and cosy. Although it can be very warm during the day, the nights are very cold, and obviously there is no heating.

Devprayag is yet another holy site. Geography lesson coming up. Two rivers converge below



Hotel balcony at Devprayag.

the town, one all milky and cloudy from Gangotri glacier in the Himalayas. The other clear water from high-level valleys at Badrinath. Where the two combine, a spectacular sight in itself with the two colours flowing side by side before they mix, the resulting single river becomes the Ganges. Cue another Very Holy Site.

Next day we went up further up-river, to Guptkashi, another couple of hours away. The roads we were travelling on, incidentally, were fairly death-defying, precipitous and incredibly rough, and the vehicles were mostly crowded beyond all reason. Eighteen of us crammed into one jeep for some of the way. True, a journey of fifty miles costs less than the fare into Nottingham, but at least the bus from West Bridgford has suspension, something singularly lacking on the Indian buses, and they try not to cram five people on to a single seat before you get to the Victoria Centre.

Anyway, Tony walked the length of the town and beyond to find somewhere to stay; he found dozens of hotels, all closed because it was not pilgrim season. Just one was open, very similar to the 'palace' of the previous night, so that of course is where we ended up. The next hurdle was when we were told there was no food in town. We did finally track down one rather dubious looking place, but there were no potatoes, so my aloo gobhi was just a bowl of cauliflower, and Tony's daal was off-menu as well, so he had a rather good Indian roti bread and a sliced tomato. Mmm, delicious.

The next day we went up, up and up again, as high as we could before the roads became impassable with snow. That was to a settlement that had about half a dozen buildings in total, so we set off down again, walking part of the way. But there has been some wonderful scenery all around, excellent for photos, and



Rural freight transport.

one particularly lovely evening with the snow-capped mountains going from pink to orange to red reflecting the sunset behind us.

Needless to say, we have been the only westerners around, ever since one or two in Varanasi and the few Barmy Army in Calcutta. Oh, except for quite a number in a town an hour from here called Rishikesh, which has dozens of ashrams for meditation, yoga and Ayurvedic massage. It's where the Beatles came to see their Maharishi guru, and is where Europeans of a certain type flock in their dozens. All dreadlocks, baggy trousers, sandals and knitted muesli.

Hello from Amritsar, December 28

We decided not to write on Christmas day, because chances of you picking it up were about as likely as Santa Claus coming down the chimney.... hope he did, by the way.... so we shall catch up on Mussoorie, the Raj hill station where we spent Christmas.

After the last email we had one more day in Haridwar, which is a really fun town. One notable thing about Haridwar, as in Varanasi and as in any holy city, is the presence of sadhus. These are the holy-men who renounce all worldly goods, grow their hair and beards, put on orange robes and wander the country living on alms. All well and good, but a great many of them seem to be blokes having a mid-life crisis who dress up in orange and make off into the middle distance, frequently leaving behind a wife and children. And since the wife cannot marry again, because she technically has a husband, she and the children inevitably end up on the streets themselves, through no fault of their own. As for the sadhus, it would appear that life is not so ascetic as it might seem. We have seen several exceedingly rotund specimens, a few with mobile phones clamped to their ears, and one with a transistor radio perched on his shoulder, listening to the Test Match. Cynical maybe, but we feel there are many more deserving cases on the streets.

Anyway, gripe over, we took a bus to Dehradun for one night, chiefly for Tony to visit the national geology museum, although when we got there we discovered it was 'Under Construction', ie renovation, and so closed. No matter, we had a luxurious hotel and a meal at an excellent non-veg restaurant, which meant chicken for supper, so we went to bed happy.

Next morning we took another bus up to Mussoorie. A spectacular road, one hairpin after another, and the bus driver fairly went for them to keep up his momentum, which resulted in about eight passengers leaning out of the windows and throwing up for most of the way. Nice.

Like all hill stations it clings to the side of a mountain, the driveway up to our hotel was incredibly steep for instance, practically a hands-and-knees job, but fortunately after our first assault on the summit we discovered the hotel had a courtesy car. Although somehow it contrived to be at the top of the drive whenever we wanted to go up. Thanks to the Victorian ladies who liked to promenade, however, there are a couple of level roads in town. The Mall is nowadays the chief shopping area (great for ice cream and people-watching), and there is a cable car up to Gun Hill, so-called because soldiers there used to fire a canon at noon every day. Now it is home to lots of fun-fair rides, but also with excellent views of snowy mountains (yes, the Himalayas) about 50 miles away. The hills were clear the first day when we went up the cable car, but became increasingly hazy each day after that.

The other easy road to walk along is Camel Back road, which takes its name from two adjacent rocks that are said to look like the humps on a camel. Hmmm, maybe, but it takes a great deal of imagination. It was, however, a really enjoyable walk contouring round the mountain for great views in all directions, and then back through the market at the far end of The Mall.

The hotel we were in at Mussoorie was fine, including a bed so high that we had steps to get up into it, and a brilliant view from the windows, but it was very, very cold at night. We had one meagre heater in our bedroom, and there was a rather grudging heater in the dining room for dinner, otherwise it was a question of wearing everything we had. No roaring fires and hot water bottles in the bed like we had in Darjeeling. In fact the Mussoorie hotel paid no lip service whatsoever to Christmas, and in the town there was just one rather sad Christmas tree. But our favourite ice-cream-seller wore a Santa hat on Christmas Day, so at least he made a gesture.

On Boxing Day, we left Mussoorie via two buses and a train, all very pleasant and comfortable travelling, to arrive in Amritsar. Our second time here, the Golden Temple is the famous tourist bit, but we had a brilliant evening at Wagah, where a ceremony takes place every evening at the border between India and Pakistan. We had a car from the hotel for the 35-km journey, and on the way passed a queue that was at least



Sikh hospitality.



Border performance at Wagah.

were dressed up in full ceremonial uniform, complete with ostentatious scarlet head dresses, and did a huge amount of posturing up and down, with hugely exaggerated goose-steppy marching, which put John Cleese and his silly walks quite in the shade. Meanwhile the Pakistani side were doing exactly the same, the only difference being that their green uniforms stood out not nearly as well as the Indian scarlet. Altogether a fantastic spectacle and, it cannot be emphasized enough, all so good-humoured, on both sides. It makes you think, hey.

Now we are about to go to the Golden Temple, after finding what appears to be the only internet café remaining in Amritsar. There used to be loads, now they are all closed because everyone is on wifi with their iPads and smart phones and techno stuff. Ho hum. We are very much looking forward to seeing the Golden Temple again. I described it last time we visited, with the gold leaf covering the temple, courtesy of the Sikh community in Birmingham. But the best part is the series of vast dining rooms and kitchens where they feed 30,000 visitors every lunch-time. in the Sikh tradition of offering food and drink to all-comers. On this scale it is a truly amazing feat of preparation, cooking, serving and washing up, and it's all done by relays of volunteers!

From Amritsar, we will take a daytime train to Delhi, have another night in our favourite Pharganj hotel and restaurant, and then fly home in time for New Year.

five kilometres long of stationary trucks carrying consignments of rice, all waiting up at the side of the road, in order to pass through customs. It must take them days.

Anyway, once at the border the whole affair was extraordinary. We had a good place in the Foreign Visitors stand, quite close to the VIP stand. Tony reckons there must have been 5000 people on either side. Much flag-waving and chanting and cheering from our side, and an equal amount from Pakistan, virtually amounting to mass hysteria, but all very good-humoured. All the Indian soldiers

Postcards from The Caribbean 2013

Hello from the Atlantic, January 31

Well, after a somewhat mad-panic rush to get here – two days’ notice for a month-long cruise really is a bit short notice! – we are safely on board the Saga Sapphire, somewhere in the Atlantic (sorry, **on** the Atlantic would be a better way of putting it) en route for Antigua, the first of our 10 ports of call.

We thought our late call was a bit chaotic, but really and truly, there is a whole Saga saga unfolding, the more we talk to other passengers. It started back at the beginning of January, when a three-months world tour on Saga Ruby was called off at literally the last minute (broken crankshaft) with all the passengers being sent back home from Southampton and told to await a phone call from Saga head office for further instructions, or at least alternative offers and negotiations. Eventually they were offered the opportunity to join this cruise on Sapphire as part-compensation, and about 50 of them took the offer up – the Ruby Refugees, as we have christened them – with the result that the ship is absolutely packed to the gunnels (what *is* a gunnel?), with barely a bunk bed to spare!

The cruise – this cruise to the Caribbean that we’re on now – was due to leave Southampton on Monday January 21. But..... sailing back from the previous cruise round the Bay of Biscay they encountered what they say was the worst storm in 100 years. Everyone was confined to their cabin and people were having to sleep on their floors. The shop and one of the bars were completely trashed, every glass and bottle smashed and the clothes etc in the shop destroyed, and all the balcony windows smashed. The noise of the waves crashing against the ship was horrendous and truly frightening, by all accounts, and they then needed some time in port for the clean-up operation, so Sapphire was a day late leaving (groans all round from the Ruby Refugees). However not before the lecturer who was due to be on board had duly tipped up at Southampton, taken one look at his allocated cabin, and walked off the ship and high-tailed it back to Scotland whence he’d come. He simply refused to stay. I mean, really and truly, how unprofessional is that? Anyway, that accounted for the last-minute panic plea to Tony to take his place, so here we are!

We had to fly out from Gatwick to Madeira to pick up the ship at its first port of call in Funchal, so all the passengers who’d been systematically shedding garments since leaving England were a bit bemused by us arriving on board at lunchtime in Madeira clad in Nottingham weather-wise coats, scarves and woolly jumpers, but we’re suitably clad in shirt sleeves now!



There was just enough time to have a quick look round Funchal before we sailed for Gran Canaria. After that it was a six-day 'At Sea' stint before Antigua and nine more consecutive Caribbean days, to: St Kitts, Dominica, Martinique, St Lucia, St Vincent, Trinidad, Grenada, Barbados and Guadeloupe.

There are two people on board who we've met before: a lecturer who is ex-BBC and therefore thinks he is God's gift, and Simon, a gay choirmaster who is excellent company as well as being a brilliant musician and a very good speaker. And the passengers we've met so far are on the whole really friendly as well. A few rather odd ones, of course, but they probably think that about us. Needless to say Tony's lectures have gone down very well, so far on Atlantic and Caribbean volcanoes, with a gratuitous one on Cuba thrown in for good measure, and then there'll be more on the sea days back home from Guadeloupe. Providing people are still upright, that is; the Atlantic is decidedly wobbly at the moment, not Bay of Biscay-ish rough, but just a bit up-and-downy. I sometimes wonder if cruising is the right thing for people to be doing at this advanced Saga age, when most need two hands for their sticks, and a third to hang on to the furniture.

Anyway, everybody seems happy, even the Ruby Refugees have cheered up, and ten days of shore excursions should have them all thoroughly tired out for the trip home. We shall let you know how we're doing, at some point during our island-hopping. Oh, and incidentally, we are in the cabin that the original lecturer apparently deemed unfit for human habitation. Yes, it's smaller than the one we had last year when we were on this ship, but it's more than adequate, and certainly not worth throwing the entire Saga cruise organisation into confusion over. We are more than happy with the deal!

Hello from St Lucia, February 7

We finally hit land on Sunday, and not before time. Tony was getting decidedly stir-crazy after six days at sea; thank goodness he has his lap-top with him so he can actually do some work during all the enforced idleness! First stop was Antigua, which I visited years ago on a press trip, but I couldn't remember very much about it, although I did recognise some places, like Shirley Heights, the English Harbour (very picturesque) and Nelson's Dockyard – a quaint little area full of preserved



*The bays
of Nelson's
Dockyard,
on St Lucia.*

Georgian buildings, and very much a tourist zone these days, but nevertheless fun to visit. We went on a ship's tour round the island, because that seemed the best way of doing it, and as Tony was a Tour Escort he got the trip for nothing, and I had a good discount! Being an escort is not terribly onerous, mainly making sure you don't leave anyone behind, and pointing confused old ladies in the right direction, although there are always some who ask awkward questions, or complain about their seat on the bus, or something or other! Everywhere we went tended to be a bit crowded, as the P&O Ventura was in dock at the same time as us – that's the huge 3000-passenger ship that we went on to Norway two years ago; never again! – but it's very often the case that there are at least two ships in port at the same time.

Oh, and on our trip round Antigua we passed the Vivian Richards cricket ground. Needless to say cricket is king, and names such as Viv Richards, Richie Richardson and Andy Roberts are spoken of in hushed tones. And, I now discover too late, one of the ship's excursions was to the Vivian Richards Stadium, where the group met Curtly Ambrose. Now, I'm not really a West Indian cricketing groupie, but I've always loved that wonderful name! To think I could have shaken his hand, and be one of those sad people who say they'll never wash their hands again.....!

The next day on St Kitts we went on a train-ride half-way round the island, and a coach trip back again round the other half, which was an excellent way to see the place, and we really enjoyed it. It was an old sugar-cane train that had definitely seen better days, it went wobbling along very precariously, and broke down altogether going up a hill when the fuel pipe to the engine split open. They patched it up with duct tape, and we returned to base eventually, only half an hour behind time (to the general annoyance of the people waiting to get on for the next trip!). Tony was on escort duty again, and even he couldn't be blamed for the temporary lack of forward propulsion, although the querulous old ladies tried! The only rather sad aspect of the trip was the fact that it was on a disused sugar train, and the countryside was littered with abandoned and derelict sugar mills and the cane had been left to rot in the fields. Apparently cheap sugar beet from Europe, plus Brussels regulations, have devastated their sugar economy; there were some very real sob stories, and the industry was largely closed in the '90s – on the islands we've seen so far, anyway. Bananas have taken over as one of their chief industries now, after tourism.

We also had a walk round the town of Basseterre on St Kitts on our own, which was rather fun, quiet and interesting once you got beyond the enormous 'duty-free shopping plaza' which is purely for the benefit of cruise passengers. There's one in every port, full of overpriced souvenir shops, ticket and taxi touts, and blokes charging people to have their photos taken with unhappy monkeys wearing tiny nappies. The general West Indian public is far more interesting: frighteningly large ladies wearing voluminous and hugely colourful dresses, younger extremely well-proportioned women in unfeasibly tight T-shirts, and men of all ages wearing those massive knitted Rasta hats in all stripey colours of the rainbow.



Safe house for Antoine Cyparis in 1902.

On Dominica (Island 3) we went on a rowing boat down the Indian River through a stretch of rain forest (one iguana, two crabs, and some indeterminate brown birds).

Then on Martinique (Island 4) we had a day to ourselves, which was a treat after all the escorting responsibilities. We walked into the port town of Fort de France, and took a local bus to the town of St Pierre at the other end of the island, which was devastated

by a volcanic eruption when Mount Pelée went off in 1902. Quite a good lecture story, particularly the bit about how all 30,000 inhabitants were killed – apart from one man who was locked up in a dungeon, fortuitously as it turned out, and was one of only two survivors. He was rescued after four days (which must have been something of an anxious time for him) and subsequently went on to travel with Barnum and Bailey's circus. (His name was Antoine Cyparis, if ever you need it in a game of trivial pursuits!!!)

Martinique seemed a bigger and much more affluent island than the previous ones, particularly Dominica, which is at the poorer end of the scale – but still beautiful, and the people delightful.

This morning we went on a trip to the Pitons, volcanic rocks sticking way up into the sky, and an area of steaming sulphur pools, and as it's Thursday that means it must be St Lucia! We also did a tour of a cacao and coconut plantation and processing plant, which was fascinating. I won't dwell on the weather. I know you've had, or are having, or are about to have snow and ice and very cold. It's hot and sunny here. Enough said.

Hello from the Atlantic again, February 14

Goodbye Caribbean, hello Atlantic, then! We've clocked up five more islands since I last wrote, and now we won't see land again until..... Tuesday I think, when we hit (not literally, we hope) the Azores. It's not exactly rough, but there's a fair old swell on, and people are wobbling about the decks quite well. Last night T and I walked past the swimming pool on the upper deck and the water was splashing spectacularly, huge waves going all over the decks and the sun loungers (tee hee! but nobody on them because it was after dark, so no real fun!) and by this morning they'd emptied the water out of the pool altogether. Very boring.

The next island after we last wrote was St Vincent, and another whistle-stop tour of the island on escort duty again. A fairly hilly island and we spent quite a long time on the bus, over some (not unusually) rough roads, so some passengers were (not unusually) not happy. But we did see a breadfruit tree in the Botanical Gardens that is said to be descended from one that Captain Bligh brought over in 1793 (yes, that Captain Bligh, but on HMS Providence, some years after his little Bounty problem with Fletcher Christian). Again, not a totally unusual claim to fame, around here!

On Saturday we docked in Trinidad, and escaped on our own once again, to catch a local bus to the other end of the island, then a small shared-taxi minibus to a little town called La Brea, and the Tar Lake. One of only three such lakes in the world (there's another in California and one in Venezuela). It is literally a lake of tar that is still being supplied with thick gooey stuff seeping up from oilfields in the ground beneath. You can walk over most of it, where it's just a bit soft and spongy. But in other places it's thick, viscous liquid that you do **not** put your feet on – once in you'd be very lucky to come out again – and we spent an hour exploring it, just the two of us with a guide, which was excellent, and Tony was mega-excited about it, as it's somewhere he's always wanted to see. It was discovered in 1595 by Walter Raleigh, who used the tar as a type of pitch to caulk his leaking ships (another piece of useless trivia information!). Then in the 1800s the Trinidad Lake Asphalt Company was formed, to surface roads the world over. It was a great day out, and we even found buses to get back to the ship on time.

On our way to the bus station in the morning we walked through the Carnival area. It's Carnival season in the Caribbean, and on Saturday in Trinidad it was their Children's Carnival. They were just getting ready for it as we went past: loads and loads of littlies in a high old state of excitement, in some really elaborate costumes, getting their faces painted and having dozens of beads plaited and woven into their hair. The loudspeakers were also being cranked up to maximum decibel volume, it really was bone-shakingly loud – and that was only the rehearsal! A great many of the passengers went to watch the actual Carnival parade, and a lot had to come away early because they couldn't take the noise any longer – and I must say, after an hour or so I would have had some sympathy!



*A walk on
Trinidad's
Tar Lake.*



It could be any Caribbean island, but it's Dominica.

Sunday was spent on Grenada. A lake-filled volcanic crater from an eruption 200 years ago was the highlight for Tony, and other than that, a lot of hills covered with bamboo, cacao, bananas, avocado, nutmeg and various other spices, so all quite lush and green.

Then Barbados, on Monday, was quite different again. Much flatter, and much more affluent, very noticeably the richest island of the ones we've seen – they're still growing sugar big-time, unlike most of the others – and of course it's where all the super-rich come to put their feet up in the sun! Our bus driver pointed out various hotels and apartment buildings along what he called 'The Gold Coast', going for silly money – £2000 or £3000 per person per night, for a two-week minimum stay! – and of course he did the predictable name-dropping thing: Cilla Black, Cliff Richard, Simon Cowell, Tiger Woods' golf course I think he ran out after that, or else I can't remember, but a lot of 'famous people' anyway. It was a good trip across the island, we went over to the Atlantic coast and had a short break on Bathsheba beach, which was lovely, could have stayed there longer, before we were dropped back at the ship.

Tony and I walked into Bridgetown for the afternoon, and did some useful shopping: superglue for my broken reading glasses (Tony's glasses that broke are irreparable) and a spare pair to replace another of Tony's that he lost! Those three mishaps are just a follow-on from the two pairs we lost and replaced (one pair each) in India in December. We really haven't got a very good track record when it comes to spectacles at the moment! We also bought a dozen bottles of Coca Cola (Tony had taken a rucksack in for the specific purpose!). They only have Pepsi on the ship, and it was a case of filling up before we had another spell of enforced confinement at sea! Then we had a drink in The Marina, a lovely little bar looking over the harbour and across the water to the Parliament building; this looks exactly like a church from the outside, but you tend to get waylaid by strong-arm men if you try to wander in!

The final Caribbean stop was at Guadeloupe (Island 10) yesterday, which was Mardi Gras, so the big Carnival Day. It wasn't held in the town where we docked, but way across the island at the administrative capital of Basseterre. Our plan was to get a local bus over to see it, to the concern of some doubters who thought

we'd never make it back again because of the traffic. However they needn't have worried, because the bus station was totally deserted when we got there; they'd **all** left already! So no carnival for us that day, but we wandered around the town instead, though not an especially attractive one, a bit shanty townish, all corrugated iron and boarded up windows, and many of the shops closed and shuttered up as well. Also, we had our first real rainy afternoon, a succession of short sharp showers, which didn't really last long, but put a bit of a dampener on things for the sun-worshippers.

We have three new speakers who came on board at Barbados: Bob Champion (the jockey who recovered from cancer and went on to win the Grand National), Mike Cowan (Yorkshire cricketer) and Peter Sissons (TV newsreader, the one with the baggy eyes). Don't know how long they're staying on for, some maybe getting off in the Azores. But everyone is looking forward to Tony's upcoming lectures (on North Korea, Iran, Kailas and the Philippines). He's had loads of compliments and good comments after his volcano ones earlier, and lots of people saying that his are the only lectures they don't fall asleep in!

Hello from the Azores, February 20

Well, that's the Azores ticked off the list of "people to see, places to go"! We tied up on the island of Sao Miguel, part of Portugal and halfway between America and Europe. Lots of volcanic cones, hot springs, crater lakes that change colour from blue to green, and a wonderful variety of trees and vegetation. All very beautiful and scenically spectacular. Or so we are led to believe.....

All we saw on the drive round in the bus was dense low cloud, real hand-in-front-of-the-face conditions, and not a crater or a lake to be seen! It was a bit disappointing for everybody, particularly when the guide said brightly "oh, it was lovely yesterday" – which is not what you want to hear when you're shrouded in fog! But apparently it's far from unusual in the Azores, and at least it wasn't raining. We did see a pineapple farm which was good, and a very impressive botanical garden. Well, we thought it was impressive, although one or two keen horticulturalists were a bit sniffy and said they'd seen better....! The excursion was in the morning, Tony on duty again, and he and I walked into town in the afternoon and just had a wander. It's actually a lovely town, full of rather distinctive white buildings with black window and door frames, some lovely stone colonnades paved with patterned cobbles, an elegant square with three 18th-century arched city gates (all in black and white) flanked by a (black and white) cathedral, very ornate inside. All in all, a good place to perhaps come back to sometime, in good weather!

Now we're on our way to our last port of call, Lisbon, which we reach on Friday afternoon and then it's back to England on Monday morning. During our sea days Tony's lectures have all been exceedingly well received, even the one on North and South Korea. I say 'even' that lecture, because although the people who watched it

were absolutely knocked out by it, and he's had more comments and questions and interest and feedback on it than I think any other, it had an unusually low attendance level, due to a general cock-up on the part of A, the captain, and B, the chef! The captain was to blame because he decided in his wisdom that the clocks would go forward one hour, not in the middle of the night, as is and always has been the custom, but at 1pm lunchtime. That meant that Tony's 2.30pm lecture was suddenly at 1.30pm, when half the passengers (who regard every meal as sacrosanct) were still in the middle of their roast-beef Sunday-lunch. And then the chef compounded the issue by somehow mislaying the Yorkshire puddings (thinks: how can you *lose* 600 Yorkshire puddings?) so that the whole dining room was sitting around, knives and forks at the ready, until he found them! Anyway, in the end enough people made it to the lecture on time! The Philippines lecture also went down really well, and has inspired a lot of people to want to go there, and also of course people are especially interested because practically all the crew – cabin stewards, waiters and waitresses, bar staff etc – are Filipino. Everyone always comments on what delightful, smiley people they are, and they're fascinated to know that Filipinos really are like that all the time, at home as well as when they're working on ships and being paid to smile!

The other lectures have been a bit of a mixed bag. I went to two of Bob Champion's, which were OK, lots of clips of horses jumping over various fences and hedges, story of his career, contracted and recovered from cancer, won Grand National, got Sports Personality of the Year, had film made about him, set up charity and has made millions for hospital that treated him. Good track record, can't fault it.

Mike Cowan the ex-cricketer is a bit ancient – after years of fast bowling for Yorkshire and the MCC he has hardly a hip, knee or ankle to stand on, and has to be helped on stage and into a chair – but is an entertaining-enough after-dinner speaker with a fund of funny stories and anecdotes, many of which are about as old as he is. Peter Sissons is not as entertaining, rather too much of 'I was there, I did that, aren't I important and let's see how many names I can drop'.

The real surprise – and bonus – has been Tim Orchard, a former Concorde pilot, who is in the process of a series of lectures on board, on Concorde and air travel generally, including a very damning (although carefully not slanderous) account of the whys and wherefores of the French Concorde crash in 2000 that finally put paid to the whole Concorde exercise with a huge cover-up of French incompetence. We've talked to him since and he's very good value. Turns out he comes from Nottingham and his father had a butcher's shop on Central Avenue in West Bridgford. Small world.

So that's it for now. One day in Lisbon (PS: that was great fun, getting around on the rickety old trams), one more lecture (from Tony), and then we're virtually home again. Hope all is well with you, and not too cold for us to come home to.

Postcards from Spain and Portugal 2013

Hello from Spain, May 29

After a very good ferry crossing – the Bay of Biscay was like a millpond and it was a really comfortable ferry, better than some cruise ships – we got to Bilbao early Tuesday morning (May 21). We didn't go into the town, as the port was some way away in the wrong direction, and set off in particularly dismal weather, rain and cloud, for Matienzo. A bit of a nostalgia trip for both of us, as it's where Tony has caved in the past, and in fact was where we first went on holiday together. Something of a culture shock for me at the time, dropped into a pile of cavers! It was pouring with rain then as well, but the weather picked up after a couple of days, as indeed it did for us this time. We have had virtually cloudless skies for several days, although it's gone a bit mixed now.

Most of our time has been on the move, with various objectives in view. There has of course been lots of scenery, with spectacular crags and canyons to either gawp at or walk to. One walk was about a mile to a remote hermitage (Ermita de San Frutas, near Segovia), which had a wonderful overlook on to a gooseneck section of river below in a deep, steep-sided canyon. Tony of course has been beside himself with joy at the geology, and even I, normally more circumspect about these matters, have to agree that it's very impressive stuff.

There has also been a lot of spotting of small towns and villages. Northern Spain has an amazing variety of historic towns, many of them medieval, and each different from the next. Some are completely walled in with just a narrow, usually ornate, entrance archway, others are built clinging to the hillside with water coursing through them on aqueducts down every street. One particularly memorable village, called Mogarraz, had each of its houses' walls adorned with larger-than-life portraits of the people living inside. It was noticeable though that all the towns seemed deserted, nobody about at all (apart from the bus tours, of course, who invade in an alarming tide of humanity, and possibly explain why the locals shut themselves away indoors). One exception was when we met an old man who we talked to – well, he jabbered away, we said “No comprendo, Inglés”, and his face lit up and he beamed: “Ah, Inglés, Margaret Thatcher, si si!”. We bumped into him again a bit later, and he gave us a big thumbs-up and a “Margaret Thatcher, si, bueno” with another big grin!





Roman viaduct at Segovia.

As well as the small towns we've been to a couple of big cities. Segovia was very impressive with its massive Roman aqueduct (no longer in use) which is its chief claim to fame, and a huge, ornately carved and very beautiful cathedral, with cloisters enclosing a *par terre* garden.

Next day we were in Salamanca, where we spent the afternoon and stayed the night. The focal point is the Grand Square, which is really massive, surrounded by lovely buildings and lined with bars, restaurants, ice-cream parlours and shops, all very 'tastefully appointed'! It's busy

enough during the day, but at night it absolutely teems with people, and when the lights come on at dusk, about 10pm, a great cheer goes up! We bought ice creams and went to sit on one of the benches in the middle of the square to wait for the lights, on the only two seats available, and found ourselves next to two friends who we've cruised with three or four times before, photographers from Loughborough. Sheer coincidence – and we met them again two days later, again purely by chance.

As well as the square, Salamanca has just so many historic old buildings, like the library and the university, all open to view, and of course another immense cathedral. It's difficult to comprehend the enormity of the churches and cathedrals over here, and the amount of money that must have been thrown at them during the Middle Ages is breath-taking.

Things we don't like about Spain

1. *Traffic lights in towns (terrible) and the lack of proper road signs in the towns.*
2. *The amount of road and bridge building still going on, when existing roads are more than adequate, and there's hardly a car on them anyway: EU money going to waste.*
3. *The number of derelict farms and buildings, and abandoned housing projects that have clearly just run out of money.*

Things we like about Spain

1. *Wild flowers, gorse, poppies, purple undergrowth..... the hills and fields and roadside verges are just beautiful at the moment.*
2. *Storks' nests. I am completely hooked on them, huge nests at the top of church towers, tall chimneys, telegraph poles..... with the storks taking it in turns to sit on the eggs or feed the babies. Am I right in thinking that storks keep the same nest year after year, and just do them up a bit each time? I hope so; starting them from scratch must be a nightmare.*
3. *Cuckoos. While I am not in favour of cuckoos' nesting habits, we so seldom hear them in England and they are everywhere here. One flew right past us cuckooing, the first time either of us had actually seen one.*
4. *Snow on the hills. Surprising how much there is, but it's a good backdrop for photos!*
5. *Light, bright evenings, and sunshine!*

Hello from Portugal, June 5

We're now going back into Spain, after spending longer than we intended in Portugal, but we stayed on because we just liked it so much! We had a very good few days with Rich and Nicky and the children in their apartment in Sao Martinho de Porto. It's a lovely little seaside town, with a huge semi-circular bay and wide, wide beach. Just a narrow inlet into the bay between two headlands, so the water is very calm and safe, and brilliant for the children. The apartment is wonderfully located as well, five minutes walk from the beach, and shops and bars and restaurants, couldn't be better. They have a balcony at the back for morning sun, balcony at the front for afternoon sun, and a very good pool in the middle of a big lawn – shared with other apartments, but not busy, at this time of year anyway.

We went through a tunnel beneath one of the headlands through to the rocks on the other side – Georgie and Jake's 'Spooky Tunnel' – where the Atlantic has much more spectacular waves. It's a big surfing area, and at Nazare, just a few miles north of Sao Martinho, someone's just got into the Guinness Book of Records apparently for surfing the biggest wave ever – a hundred feet (or so they say!). Pretty high and rather scary, anyway. We also went up in the lift in the Tourism Centre. A bit like something out of Dr. Who. You think it's going up to the modern art galleries on the first and second floors, but it keeps on going up and up and up, and eventually tips you out in the middle of the old town high on the hill. Surprising, but it is a very pleasant walk back down again!

We all went to the nearby town of Obidos one day, a lovely, old, walled town with a good castle. Tony and I have been to quite a lot of old towns on this trip with castles, cathedrals and churches, but Obidos was especially good, a lot more fun because, perhaps being a seaside town, it was buzzing with people and full of busy shops, bars and restaurants. Touristy, but tasteful tourist, if you know what I mean.

Tony and I took ourselves off one day and caught the train to Lisbon (the train station is two minutes' walk from the flat). As excursions go, it wasn't exactly an unmitigated success, due to a large extent to having to get off the train at the wrong station, and then discovering that the Metro was having a one-day strike. That threw our timings hopelessly out of kilter, of course, as buses were only running every half-hour or so instead of every few minutes, and needless to say when we

*Narrow entrance
to the wide bay
that contains the
big sand beach
of Sao Martinho
de Porto.*





Lisbon tram.

did get a bus it was seriously jam-packed with all the people who weren't on the Metro! It made the average sardine tin look roomy. Still, we 'did' the big monastery (Mosteiro dos Jeronimos) inside and out, took a tram through the old town, and caught the train back to Sao Martinho in time for tea.

After we left the family, we carried on trundling through Portugal, through some more very good scenery – rivers, canyons, reservoirs, massive great granite boulders, all spectacular stuff. Also

two more really impressive churches, at Alcobaca and Batalha. One of the best days was when we arrived in Lamego, just in time for an evening parade into the cathedral, led by Scouts with drums, and consisting of army, police, clergy of varying degrees of hierarchy, a brass band, and then hundreds of congregation. All in honour of Whitsuntide, we gather, and the cathedral was standing room only by the time the Mass began. We also caught the tail end of a two-day cherry festival in the town, just in time to buy a big boxful of cherries that we're still eating our way through.

Lamego's chief claim to fame is its church, rather than cathedral, up 600-odd steps from the main square, with flat platforms at intervals, and walls decorated with painted tiles (known as *azulejos*, and very Portuguese). We drove to about two thirds of the way up and walked to the top, and Tony got up early the next morning to catch the sun first thing, and walked up the lower section, so he did in fact walk the whole lot, albeit in two stages! An excellent place to stay, though, and we had a brilliant hotel right next to the cathedral, and cheap! Just 30 euros. That's one of the things we like about Portugal: food, drink and lodging are considerably less expensive than Spain, and even that country is cheap compared with Britain.

One thing we have noticed is a surprising lack of wild life of the small, furry variety. Apart from one young rabbit scampering along, and a lovely dark brown, almost black, squirrel, there has been nothing, not even road kill! Perhaps they've all been eaten..... We were talking to a kind English-speaking lady who was showing us the way to an electric kettle shop (don't ask: long story) and she told us that she was a missionary in Portugal, and that the country is in a terrible state, and that there are children starving in the streets. I must say we have seen nothing to so much as hint at that, even in the most remote areas, and she seemed to be being a bit melodramatic, but on the other hand we can hardly claim to be experts. Anyway, we loved Portugal, and now have another week of Spain to look forward to.

One of the Roman gold mines at Las Medulas.



Hello from Spain again, June 12

Once out of Portugal we soon arrived at Santiago de Compostela, which is a big pilgrimage place. People walk literally hundreds of miles over many months to reach the monastery here, all carrying scallop shells, which are jolly symbolic of something, but I'm not sure what! The pilgrimage was very big in the 11th century, we gather, and then faded into obscurity until the 1980s, when it suddenly became **the** place to walk to. We suspect EU grants and tourism promo may have had something to do with it!

We are still bowled over by the wild flowers, particularly the massed banks of gorse. And now great swathes of purple heather. Lovely. But we ran into bad weather along the north coast. Luear in the rain was an absolutely lovely little town crammed inside river meanders just upstream from the harbour. We walked up to a good viewpoint, and then found an excellent place to eat. It wasn't so much notable for its 'restaurant' – a tent-like extension to the bar, with plastic windows like a caravan awning – but for the 'menu del dia' which is **the** economical way to eat in Spain. It's actually a legal obligation for food places to offer, for a fixed price, the 'menu of the day': soup or salad, a main course, dessert, plus wine, beer or soft drink. You just get what you're given, of course, but it's almost always good value.

Next day we drove inland, over the mountains in thick mist and/or pouring rain, to find it clear beyond. Las Medulas is an area of Roman gold-mining that created a legacy of dramatic hills and mine-caverns in red sandstone, best seen from the



Cloisters of Leon cathedral.



Cares Gorge.

viewpoint up a 'no-entry'-signed track, which we drove up of course. The next day we were in Leon, which has the most magnificent cathedral, massively impressive (it's reputed to be the best in Spain) and well worth the four euros to go in, and to visit the cloisters.

Onward and upward.... to Covadonga, in the Picos mountains, with a waterfall from a cave resurgence (the mountains of the Picos de Europa are riddled with caves). And to Cangas de Onis, a pretty little town with a five-arched Roman bridge over the River Sella; we walked over it, but the big cobbles were hard to negotiate.

And to Ribadesella, where we visited, unwisely in retrospect, the Cueva de Tito Bustillo, which is allegedly famous for its not-very-impressive cave paintings.

Then the weather cleared up to give us a lovely day walking through the spectacular gorge known as the Garganta del Cares. A footpath was built along an aqueduct through the gorge, as part of a hydro-electric scheme, so it was an easy walk beneath the huge limestone cliffs. And we had it almost to ourselves, with the usual hordes scared away by the weather. After a night in Potes, the next day was even better, so we took the cable-car up to Fuente De, for a lovely walk across the high limestone plateau – except for the snow-drifts that rather overcame my sandals. But we did see a family of super-elegant chamois antelopes.

Away from the big mountains, we stopped overnight in Santillana del Mar, after having visited the Cueva de Altamira. That one was well worth it; fabulous coloured paintings of bulls and other animals, all across the roof of a low wide cavern; even though it was a concrete copy made for visitors, while the adjacent real cave is sealed off to prevent plant spores destroying the artwork. And best bit in the town square that evening was a young lad 'playing' an upturned wok – well, it looked like that, but he told us that it had been very professionally engineered and tuned by his grandfather, and the music from it was beautiful: percussion at its very best.

Our last day was a second loop through Matienzo, to take some photos in the now-perfect weather, and then to Santander to catch the ferry back to Plymouth.

Postcards from Australia 2013

Hello from the Kimberley, September 16

Our two-night, one-day stopover in Singapore on the way to Australia was a great success. We had a special package deal with Singapore Airlines that included a moderately priced hotel, transport to and from the airport, free hop-on-hop-off bus in town, and loads of free vouchers, and it was well worth it. We spent a lot of the day in the Botanic Gardens, which are beautiful, especially the orchid garden (quite spectacular) and Tony loved the evolution garden.

In the evening we went to the Night Safari, which everyone says is a ‘must-do’. We got there about 7pm, as it was getting dark, just in time for ‘the show’. This took place in a huge arena containing about 1000 people, and three or four trainers who took it in turns to show off their selection of nocturnal creatures, mostly of the smallish and furry variety (apart from the python!) such as meerkats, lemurs, otters..... oh, and one hyena. It was all very pantomime-like in the staging, ‘It’s behind you!’ type of thing, but it was good fun and the animals were unbelievably well trained. Then it was on to a tram, which trundled round past various animals that were supposed to be awake: lions, tigers, hippo, elephant, tapirs – ok, it was a zoo, but all the different species had big reserves to themselves and I believe they do have a good breeding programme. And it’s a novel way they’ve thought up of getting the customers in, great for kids, although we wouldn’t go back again. We had a walkabout on our own before we caught the bus back, but we didn’t bother with the kangaroo section; there would be plenty of those in Australia, which is where we now are.

First stop was Darwin, which is a comparatively small town, but seething with lads and ladettes in any number of bars, pubs and clubs, all incredibly noisy! Heaven knows where they all come from, but luckily we found a hotel just out of earshot.

We picked up our campervan the next day, which is a very smart 4WD (Toyota Landcruiser), with a push-up roof to make a quite roomy sleeping space, although it takes a bit of athleticism to get up there. As for the rest of it, being a 4WD it has rather less living accommodation than the campervans we’ve had in the past, so not a lot of cupboard space. Lucky we travel light, hey? Tony is self-appointed quarter-master, in charge of stowing and allocating rations at breakfast and supper. We’re actually eating very well, as we had a major shop at the supermarket in the last town before we turned on to the Gibb River Road.





Gibb River Road.

That's really the chief focus of our two weeks in the north of Western Australia. The 500-km road is an old cattle ranchers' track, all unsurfaced rough road, with no shops, occasional fuel, but otherwise nothing. We took six days over it, as we included nearly the entire Kalumburu Road up north to see the Mitchell Falls, so, because internet cafes were clearly at a premium (!), what follows is a *precis* of daily events as went along:

Day One: Camped last night off the road in a lovely secluded spot among the trees. Stars and Milky Way brilliant, and lovely sunrise to wake up to. Lots of fat baobob trees along the way, herds of white cattle looming out of the twilight, and plenty of ghostly white eucalyptus trees. And this evening, another lovely off-road spot for the night. Wallabies: 4

Day Two: 5.30am wake-up call by incredibly raucous dawn chorus, sounded like jackals fighting, but they were birds. Thought we saw an emu out of our 'bedroom window' but it turned out to be a tree! Drove over roughish roads most of the day, with various breaks along the way, and stopped off-the-road again. Vehicles on road: 21. Dingos: 2

Day Three: Some **very** off-road driving today, involving low-ratio 4WD, rocks and gullies and vehicle lurching and tipping every which way, Tony in his element. It's what we had the rather expensive Landcruiser for! On a campsite tonight.



Camp by the Gibb River.

Day Four: Tony off at 5.30am for a 'strenuous' six-hour walk to Mitchell Falls; I was granted leave of absence. But in the event he was back before 9am and said it was easy and I could quite easily have done it. Ah well, hindsight..... As it was, ho hum, I just had to sit and read my book. Had lovely swim in a wide open part of the river, way off the road.

Day Five: Two more brilliant pools to swim in, each about a kilometre away from the road in river gorges. Planned third swim was cancelled, as the road was closed because of bush fires. Later

we passed a quite substantial bush fire, and stopped for the night several miles away in the middle of an empty gravel river-bed, so well away from anything flammable, but we could still see the fires blazing in the distance when it was dark.

Day Six: To Tunnel Creek, a kilometre-long cave, much of it involving wading through thigh-high water. Two French girls came with us as they were a bit nervous on their own, and they were the first to spot the freshwater crocodile on the bank! “We saw its eyes in the torchlight,” they said. We just saw it slide into the water. Luckily, ‘freshies’ don’t eat people! We did, however, see a King Brown snake at the entrance. Well, we saw its tail, it was pointed out by an Aborigine who happened to be there as well, and had seen it slither under a rock. Twenty seconds to live after it bites you, apparently. So we didn’t poke it with a stick, but carried swiftly on our way. Later in the day, a beautiful flock of green budgerigars swooped in front of us. Snake 1. Crocodile 1. Dingo 1. Budgies 40. Bats 200 (heard in cave!)



Fire in the Outback.

Now we’re into Day Seven, and are at Hall Creek, a quite large mainly-Abo community. We have stocked up on supplies, and are about to go off-road again, to the Bungle Bungles, a geological wonder of the world. It’s very hot, but not unbearably so, everything is continually covered in red dust, but we’ve given up caring, and although the flies are a menace, there are very few other insects to worry about. I have done a bit of driving, and enjoyed it, but not the Boys’ Own stuff!

Hello from Darwin, September 22

Well, I have to say that the Bungle Bungles were fantastic. Genuinely world-wonder material. Dome after dome after dome after dome of beautifully weathered, brown, red and black banded sandstone. Think liquorice all-sorts and you’re almost there.



Bungle Bungles.

We did several walks through and around them, to various creeks, caverns, gorges and chasms, some more than once to get them in different light, morning and afternoon. Although the road into and away from them was 85 km of pretty dismal, rough, very badly corrugated road, it was definitely worth it.

Away from the Bungles (known as Purnululu to the Aborigines) we spent a night in Wyndham, quite a decent little town overlooking an estuary where they were loading iron ore, and which was filled with fog when we looked down on it in the morning, although that very quickly dispersed.

Next stop Gregory National Park, which had little to recommend it really, apart from a few very attractive limestone features – fluted karren, tufa dams, stromatolite fossils..... here I go again, trying to be a geologist! – but otherwise it was an extremely remote and barren place, very fly-besieged, but with interesting stories about the pioneers who settled in the place originally, and more recently a couple who lived at the homestead there until a totally catastrophic flood drove them out.

More miles of road behind us, towards Darwin, and next stop Litchfield National Park. That was a lovely day. Excellent rough roads, not *too* rough, although with some excitingly deep river crossings here and there, which were fun. We had one shortish walk to two wonderful swimming holes, one cooler one, with a fairly tricky waterfall, feeding into the other, warmer, pool. The cool one was actually the better of the two, perfect temperature, and just so nice to be in the water. Then some miles further along, still in the Park, a mile or so walk along a good forest path to another brilliant pool, with a bigger waterfall. We actually had half a dozen drops of rain, the first cloud we've seen since we've been here, but nothing to get excited about.



Bungles gorge.



Swimming hole in Litchfield Park.

This morning we set off back to Darwin, stopping only for a major clean-up of the van before we drop it off this afternoon. We have checked into a good motel on the seafront that has showers *and* a launderette. Yippee yippee. Tomorrow we catch a plane to Adelaide, and will pick up an ordinary, 2WD, small campervan for another ten days or so in the South.

Hello from Adelaide, October 3

Flying south to Adelaide was like coming to another country. So different from the North (Top End, as they call it) where everything and everywhere is parched for water at the end of The Dry. The Wet starts in early November. (They don't waste words in Australia; to call it The Rainy Season would be unnecessarily verbose!) By contrast, the South is a very green-and-pleasant land, and you get the impression that red dust simply wouldn't be allowed to settle! Around Adelaide it actually seems very English (apart from miles and miles of rigidly regimented vineyards and flourishing orange groves) with neat little villages boasting duck ponds and cricket clubs and bowls clubs, and well-kept farms with wheat fields and cattle and sheep pastures – although a huge pipeline alongside the road, carrying the city's water supply from the Murray River does have a distinctly **un**-English feel to it

For the first few days it was very much cooler than in the north, which in a way was a relief, after the temperatures approached 40°C up there, but slightly less cool (as opposed to downright cold) would have been welcome. We kept saying wimpy things like "I'm glad we've got jumpers" and "It's a good job we brought the coats", not to mention "Thank goodness we bought those umbrellas in Singapore, having forgotten to pack our own coming from home"...!!!

Mind you, umbrellas were pretty useless along the South Australia coast road. We hit the tail end of a storm with (cold) winds up to 100 kph off the sea. Tony could barely hold his camera, the lens was covered with sea spray anyway, and I had to hold on to the railings at every viewpoint to keep from being blown backwards. And of viewpoints there were plenty. Their Great Ocean Road follows a fantastic coastline, with sea stacks and sea caves and rock arches and bridges, including the Twelve Apostles (famous sea stacks, of which there are now only eight still standing), and the wind made the crashing waves and surf especially spectacular.

The day before the storm we spent in a town called Mount Gambier, site of one of many dormant volcanoes in a limestone area, with some big lake-filled volcanic craters and old steam vents, and also some large sinkholes. There was one particularly lovely sinkhole that was turned into a terraced garden in Victorian times. It's made a lovely little sunken park, filled with lots of arum lilies at this time of year.



Seen from the Great Ocean Road.

We parked the van in Geelong and took the local train into Melbourne for one day, just to see it. Looks like a grand city, splendid old buildings, and a very impressive Millennium Bridge with panels displaying countries of the world (stupidly, I didn't count how many) who have had migrants to Australia for various reasons – convicts, gold rush, refugees, etc – fascinating stories to read. As it happened, we were there on the day of the Grand Final parade – the Australian-Rules-Football final, between Melbourne (orange and brown) and Perth (purple), so the whole town was seething with people all dressed in their appropriate colours, lining the road for the parade, and much excitement all round. The actual match was next day. Melbourne won. Apparently.



Koala bears are so cute.

We then came inland, where it is mercifully warmer, through Ballarat and Bendigo, which were the main gold-rush towns in the 1850s. Both have plenty of museum stuff and historic monuments, and we talked to one very knowledgeable gold expert who showed us a replica of a large gold nugget (that's £150,000 large), which was found in January this year. He also had a replica of the giant Welcome nugget, found in 1858 and would now be worth £2,000,000. Made me want to rush out and buy a shovel immediately, or a metal detector at least.

Beyond the gold fields we spent a few days in the Flinders mountain range, lots of good and interesting geology – although strong winds again. At least warm wind this time, but blowing up an amazing dust storm, so yet again we were knee deep in dust.

Coming back south from the Flinders we called in to the evocatively-named town of Iron Knob, with a tremendous iron-ore-mining history. The main mine has been closed for more than ten years, but it's in the throes of opening up again, so we couldn't get near it to see much. Instead we carried on to Whyalla, not far away, to where they receive the ore from Iron Knob on huge long trains, and we went round the steel works there. Major source of employment in the area of course, and we thought that the trip round the works was great.

Wild life has been spasmodic, some wallabies and/or kangaroos, including one I just heard in the middle of the night when I got up, very near the van and then hopping away. Lots of emus, usually walking swiftly in the opposite direction. And, best of all, two koala bears. One in a low tree that we could get really quite close to, and another higher up in a different tree. Most exciting, to see them in the wild.

Now we're back in Adelaide, have delivered the campervan back to its rightful owners, and have a hotel for the night, before we fly to Singapore in the morning. Two nights there, similar to when we came, on the same Singapore Airlines deal, and then we shall be home on Sunday evening, all being well. Right now, we're going to take a walk around Adelaide city centre.

Postcards from Patagonia 2013

Hello from Tierra del Fuego, December 11

Well here we are in Patagonia, after a good stopover between flights in Buenos Aires. It was very hot there, so we were somewhat over-dressed, but we survived. In the afternoon, after our overnight flight, we went to Caminito in La Boca, a highly colourful arty-markety area by the harbour. Literally colourful, with streets lined with brightly painted corrugated-iron buildings, market stalls full of paintings, crafts and jewellery, and also colourful in atmosphere. It was buzzing with life, bars and restaurants galore of course, wandering street bands – with their caps out for money, obviously – and various professional couples putting on the style with street performances of the tango. Tony was rather impressed with the ladies' thigh-high split skirts!

Back in town, we walked to one of the two main plazas, where there was a protest march going round and round the square – if you can go *round* a square – in connection with the many people who 'disappeared' during political in-fighting during the 1980s. Protests would seem to be a regular thing; that evening there was a demonstration outside our restaurant, all to do with Che Guevara and the Spanish Civil War, and next morning in the other plaza there was a sit-in demo, not sure what that was about, but there were loads of tents there, and it looked fairly permanent. It seems Argentinians are only happy when they're protesting.

Altogether we liked Buenos Aires, although it is very crowded and noticeably dirty, with litter and graffiti everywhere, which is a shame, because the graffiti defaces some very fine old buildings.

Then it was on to another plane, for an internal flight to El Calafate in the far south. Coats and jumpers were much more suitable there. It's a very busy tourist town that we liked a lot, full of holidaymakers about our age, which is always comforting. We hired a car in the town, and went off early next morning to the Perito Moreno Glacier in the Los Glaciares National Park. This is one of the world's great tourist glaciers, because you can actually drive to it. There is an absolute maze of boardwalks leading to various viewpoints right down to about a hundred yards from the glacier face. Absolutely mesmerising, and we sat at one spot for about three hours just gazing, and taking about a million photos as well, then walked round to some of the other view points. It is a very impressive glacier indeed, and also very noisy. The ice is cracking all the time with roars and rumbles and what sound like pistol shots. We saw





Perito Moreno Glacier.

El Calafate. This one is populated by very earnest and dedicated trekkers aged 25 and under, and the shops only sell heavy-duty hiking boots, all-weather rucksacks and walking poles. Hardly my idea of retail therapy. However, Tony has joined in their fun, and as I write this (in the hotel lounge, with a book and a drink in front of me) he is on a six or seven hour walk to Cerre Torre, a glaciated needle of rock overlooking a superb lake surrounded by more mountains; somewhere that he had always wanted to see.

Later..... He is back from his walk, somewhat tired, but it was successful photograph-wise, and he enjoyed it. Then we had the long drive back to El Calafate. Actually only three hours or so, but it seemed long because there is absolutely nothing across a rather monotonous plain, which is the rather barren, upper end of Argentina's Pampas. Well, scenery and photo stops of course, but nothing in the way of towns, villages, cafes, not so much as a petrol station. Although having said that, it was good for animals along the way. Lots of hares bounding along, but more excitingly two groups of guanacos, which are sort of the last in line in the llama family, after llamas, alpacas and vicuñas. We saw all of those others last time we were in South America, but this was a first for guanacos. Very sweet, but inevitably very shy.

Moving on..... We are now in Ushuaia, the most southerly town in the world. We flew in yesterday lunchtime, and an hour later we were on a two-hour trip by bus and boat to a penguin colony. We spent an hour walking round, past hundreds of penguins who were not at all fazed by us, and were very **very** sweet. Nesting at the moment, so there were some babies to be seen, although they don't fully emerge until they're about three or four weeks old, by which time they seem to be about the same size as their parents. It was a brilliant afternoon, again in beautiful sunshine, luckily, and we were back in Ushuaia about 9.30pm. Now we shall soon embark on our cruise ship which will take us round Cape Horn and deposit us in Punta Arenas in three days' time in Chile.

a lot of calvings, where ice cascades off the glacier into the water with a huge splash and another great burst of sound. None of those we saw was particularly big, but they were exciting all the same. And we were lucky that it was in bright sunshine all the time.

Next morning we drove 180 miles or so to El Chaltén, another tourist town, but completely unlike

Hello from Puerto Natales, December 19

Here we are in the Torres del Paine – Blue Towers – during a spell of unaccustomed luxury. We have just completed a three-day cruise on the *Stella Australis* around the fjords, from Ushuaia in Argentina to Punta Arenas in Chile. It was an alright enough ship, although rather unnerving to be on the paying end for once, and Tony would far rather have been actually working. We were on set tables for all meals, which were allocated according to language, so we didn't have to mix with Spanish, German or French *hoi polloi* (!) and we ended up with a couple from Leeds, and another couple from Australia.

We went round Cape Horn to begin with, which was disappointingly un-rough, although it did mean that we were able to land. The previous week's landing had apparently been impossible, because of the wind and the rough seas. The wind was fairly incredible for our visit; we walked up a steep flight of steps to the lighthouse and along a boardwalk to the Albatross monument, with the wind coming in gusts, and several people were literally blown over. Including me! Other than the wind it was good weather, so some good pictures in sunshine. We had three more expeditions from the ship, all in those little inflatable rubber zodiac dinghies, not the easiest to get in and out of, especially when the sea is not particularly calm, but nobody managed to fall in. Not even me.....

The first expedition was to an island for a fairly long walk, which I know little about, as it was pouring with rain, so along with a lot of other people I stayed on board. Tony went, and said it was all right, although a bit tedious following a guide who stopped at frequent intervals for long discourses on fairly irrelevant subjects.

The following day we went off to a glacier that ended on a rock shelf, having recently retreated from its terminal lake. We landed on shore, walked round to the glacier and then went quite close to it, despite the guide having a panic attack about health and safety. The walk back to the zodiac was via a forest that was extremely muddy, hardly surprising with all the rain, but it was still rather lovely, with lots of moss and lichen, berries and spring flowers. And on the last day we were off to another penguin colony. Since it was raining most of the time it was hard to appreciate it as much as the first one we went to last week, but this one was very much bigger, thousands rather than hundreds of penguins, side by side with a lot of gulls nesting on the open ground, unlike the penguins that nest in quite deep burrows.



Magellanic penguins on Tierra del Fuego.

Quite funny to see them digging their burrows, with soil being hurled up into the air behind them, and in one burrow we could see a newly-born fluffy chick; very cute.

We finally docked on Saturday at Punta Arenas in Chile; another tedious process, as we had to wait till all the luggage had been put ashore, despite not having any ourselves, and then sit on a bus outside the customs shed for quarter of an hour for no apparent reason, before we could walk into town to pick up our hire car. The spare wheel was flat when Tony checked, so we managed to get that changed, and just as well we did, as next day we were on a dirt road miles from anywhere and had the inevitable puncture!

Before that we had driven up to the town of Puerto Natales, just outside Torres del Paine National Park, and stayed the night in a very adequate small hotel. Next day, we drove into and across the Park, stopping at various viewpoints, and for a change the weather was good with a lot of sunshine between the clouds. Again, though, the unbelievably strong winds for which Patagonia is famous (or infamous). We also saw dozens and dozens of guanaco, and a couple of rheas. Oh, and in the morning we had an almost continuous display of fantastic rainbows; have never seen such intensely strong colours.

As I write, Tony is on another of his epic hikes, up to the Torres themselves, so I hope the weather is good for him. It absolutely poured with rain during the night, but looked a lot better, lots of blue sky and sunshine, first thing this morning, so fingers crossed. (PS: he got back in just under eight hours and said it was very hard work. Some people have the strangest ways of enjoying themselves....)



Torres del Paine.

We moved from the luxurious Torres hotel to another smart place, with a magnificent view of a different set of hills, the Cuernos (or Horns) del Paine, very impressive again, and beautiful in the late afternoon and evening sun. We watched them right to the end of the sunset, about 10pm, and were up at 5.30 the next morning for the sunrise.

We spent a few hours that day on a boat trip to the Glacier Grey, which flows from the same ice field as the Perito Moreno Glacier that we had seen earlier, and was if anything even more spectacular. A beautiful deep blue colour; not calving while we there, though there were some lovely icebergs drifting away from it. We were served with *pisco sours*, a traditional cocktail, with thousand-year-old glacier ice in it. Tony had thousand-year-old ice in his Coca Cola!

Today we came out of the National Park into the real world, with real towns, real shops and restaurants, and a realistically priced hotel again. The same one as last time in Puerto Natales, and the same pizzeria for dinner. *En route* we visited a cave, where the remains of a milodon were found in the 19th century. It was a sort of prehistoric giant sloth, and from the life-size model in the cave it looks quite cuddly, in a dinosauric sort of way.

Tomorrow we have another boat trip booked, two glaciers for the price of one this time and then we drive back to Punto Arenas, and hop on another plane for the Chilean Lakes District.

Hello from Chilean Lakes District, December 26

After a final boat trip to two more glaciers, both in glorious sunshine, we dumped the car, flew north to Puerto Montt, hired yet another car, and drove up to a lovely little town, Puerto Varas, on the shores of a huge lake (Lago Llanquihue). This is a real holiday resort, and the whole area is what they call the Chilean Lakes District. Dozens of lakes, many of them holiday resortish, with sandy beaches, inflatables, beach umbrellas, pedaloes, the lot, and without the salt and the tides that you get at the seaside (which is too cold in Chile because of the current up from the Antarctic). Some of the lakes, on the other hand, are really remote and quiet, and it was very tempting to have a swim in one or two, but we thought that the Chileans might not fully appreciate the Australian free-and-easy Rip All Your Clothes Off And Just Jump In culture. And besides, we had no towel....

But the thing is, it is really hot here, Mediterranean temperatures and in the main, cloudless deep-blue skies all day long. I still cannot get my head round the fact that it gets warmer the further north you go.

As well as lakes there is a complete rash of volcanoes in this region. We drove further north from Puerto Varas to Villarrica, which is right in the centre of things, on the shore of Lake Villarrica, and overshadowed by Vulkan, er, Villarrica. Like one or two others, it is a total picture-book volcano, a perfect cone with a snowy cap, all it lacks is a plume of smoke coming out of the top. Having said that, it is active, it last erupted in 2009, and is one of 50 or so active volcanoes among the 500-odd in the country. Many of the towns have big signs showing green, amber or red volcano-alerts, sadly all



Balmaceda Glacier.

green at the moment, and other notices telling you where to evacuate to in the event of an eruption. Basically, arrows pointing in the opposite direction.

The other night about 1am there were sirens like air-raid warnings, followed by police sirens, Tony got dressed and went down to the lake to see what was going on, but there was nothing. We still have no idea what it was all about, but it certainly was not an imminent volcano eruption. It may have been to do with forest fires in the region, which were featured in the papers a couple of days later.

After quite a lot of driving around, interspersed with some easy walks, we came back to Puerto Varas, where we had three nights over Christmas in a totally brilliant hotel (Hotel Licarayén, if ever you are here). Our balcony looked over the lake to one of the best volcanoes, Osorno, a perfect cone with a dazzling snow cap. One of the good things, no, two of the good things about being here at this time of year is, first, the nativity scenes, in the town squares and in the churches. Some of them are quite simple, others really elaborate, and the best so far was in the cathedral at Punta Arenas, complete with sheep, cattle, donkeys, camels and..... an elephant. An elephant in Bethlehem? Not absolutely sure about that. But as Tony says, if you can have an immaculate conception, you can have elephants anywhere you damn well please.

The other good thing is the style of Christmas trees here. Nothing like we have, they are all unashamedly artificial cones, made up of anything you like, flowers, big red ribbon bows, giant playing cards, plastic bottles..... the bottle tree was especially effective, and my favourite so far.

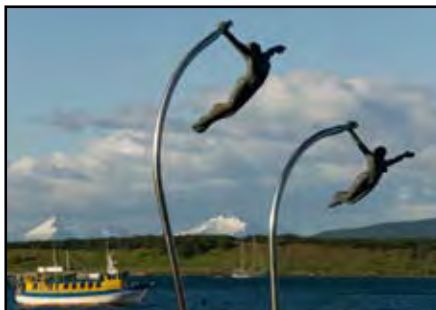
Christmas Eve in Puerto Varas was lovely, after we finally found the one and only place that was open in town to eat. We had reckoned on Christmas Day being a bit thin on the open-door front, but we hadn't bargained for everyone shutting up shop on Christmas Eve. Still, we only needed one place, and we found it, so that was all right. And then..... we went to church. They had a 9pm service in the church, and of course it was packed to the rafters, people spilling out of the door and down the steps. We stayed for part of the service, including three of our favourite carols, but thought we could manage without standing through a sermon in Spanish. Another first for Tony: going to church, **and** ice in his Coke.



Osorno and lake on the Andes Crossing.

Christmas morning we woke up to blue skies again, apart from a very curious band of low cloud, barely visible but which completely obscured the volcano that we were supposed to be rapturously gazing at from our balcony. Breakfast was celebrated with a huge slab of blueberry cream pie, along with the obligatory cheese and ham and bread and jam, and then we walked round the town before coming back to the car to

discover.... another flat tyre. *Feliz Navidad*, indeed not! So we changed the tyre (when I say we, I mean Tony changed the tyre, needless to say) and set off for a drive round the lake, calling at various towns and villages *en route*. Everyone was in great holiday spirit, picnics and barbecues on the beaches, kayaking and swimming, although later in the afternoon the weather really clagged in, loads of grey clouds and no sun. Did I say it was all Mediterranean blue skies from dawn to dusk? Got that wrong, then. And wherever we went all the shops, restaurants, cafes, boutiques, were doing a roaring trade. Christmas Eve, closed; Christmas Day, open. Got that wrong, too.



Lovers of the Wind, modern art in steel and bronze at Puerto Natales.

Oh, I forgot to say earlier, we have seen loads of monkey puzzle trees (*Aurucaria* to be correct), which I think are the national tree of Chile. Or at least, a National Treasure. A bit like Judy Dench, only spikier. When I was a child I was led to believe that they are so-called because they are so spiky that they're the only trees that monkeys can't climb. Am I right or not, I wonder.

Hello from Buenos Aires, December 30

We finally left the idyllic Puerto Varas, by way of the Cruce Andino. This is a justifiably famous way of crossing the Andes on a succession of four bus rides and three intervening boat rides across beautiful lakes, all in a single spectacular day, with the Argentinian passport-control in a hut at the top of a mountain pass.

The last bus dropped us in the lake-resort town of Bariloche, where we eventually found a hotel with an available room. The town didn't match up to the previous day's glorious scenery, so we took a local bus to the smaller town of El Bolson. That was a winner, in a beautiful setting among the mountains and, because it was a Saturday, there was a brilliant artisans' market filling the entire town park. Great beer, great jazz-in-the-open-air, great people-watching; a really good afternoon, before the bus back to Bariloche.

We woke up to howling wind the next morning, so the planned cable-car trip up the nearby mountain was shut down. As was most of the town, despite its supposed status as a resort town; in fact almost the best bit was the long wait at the airport (which is in the middle of nowhere) during which Tony could wander off outside to take photos of the pampas grasslands, before the flight back to Buenos Aires.

Tomorrow, we will have a last morning in the big city with just enough time for a walk round the centre, before taking a taxi out to the airport for the flight home, just in time to see in the new year.

Postcards from India and Oman 2014

Hello from Lonavala, March 15

As I probably say each time we come here, India is as noisy, crowded, dirty and exciting as ever. It just gets more exhausting! After a predictably sleepless overnight plane journey we arrived intact in Mumbai (which the locals still call Bombay), and went straight to the hotel that Tony had already booked, which was everything we could have asked for. After a bit of a desultory day of sleeping and meandering around the nearby streets we set off next morning on a ferry from the Gateway to India, a giant arch that is something of an icon in Mumbai, and sailed to Elephanta Island. It was just over an hour each way, leaving three hours on the island to see the caves, which have been carved out of the solid rock to create Hindu temples with massively grand pillars and interior carvings of all the best gods. Unfortunately these are up an incredibly steep-stepped path going up more than 400 feet, so I needed a large slice of the three hours to get up there, but well worth it. And quicker coming down. The route was lined with stalls selling every Indian knick-knack you can imagine for the tourists. Tony bought a chunk of tiger's-eye mineral, I bought a handbag. Souvenirs that we've actually been very pleased with since!

We had dinner that night at Leopold's, a restaurant and bar hugely popular with travellers, that was bombed some years back, at the same time as the Taj Hotel bombing. While it was pretty well devastated at the time it is thoroughly back on track now, although the business that was next door has been wiped out, and that building is now a literal bomb site.

From Bombay we took a comfortable train to Neral, and from there a little narrow gauge toy train up to the hill station of Matheran. Quite different from other hill stations that we have visited in the past; this one was not exactly primitive, but unsophisticated, shall we say. And all the better for it. The great feature is that there is no traffic. Transport is via horseback or hand-pulled rickshaw. We walked. And walked and walked..... The town is surrounded by steep lava cliffs and there are about thirty designated views called Points. Points of View, as it were. We walked to Echo Point, Luis Point, Porcupine Point, Sunset Point, well, a fair few Points anyway, along the red dirt footpaths that are all that exist up there. Lovely at this time of year, when it's out of season, but maybe a bit frenetic in the high season.



Hotels are fairly inexpensive, and we had a good room with a balcony just on the edge of the main shopping trawl. The hotel staff became totally hysterical when we tried to open the door to the balcony,

however, because of the monkeys. They come in and will steal anything, so instead we had a lot of entertainment watching the monkeys on the balcony from inside. Some of them were banging on the glass to get in. There was a family with a tiny, tiny baby that the mother snatched up protectively at the slightest hint of danger, e.g. Tony moving to get his camera. Some young show-offs were doing a very impressive gymnastic routine.

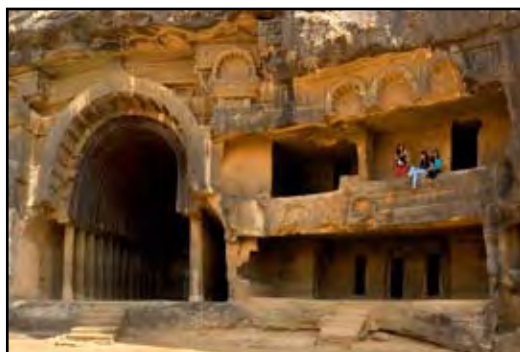


Hill railway to Matheran.

And when most of them finally went away, just an elderly couple remained, who went to sleep sitting up with their arms wrapped round each other and their heads on each others' shoulders. Unbelievably touching, and made me cry. Obviously.

Coming away from Matheran, we walked for a mile or so down to the car park where vehicles have to stop, and then took a shared taxi down the hill to the train station. The driver went like a bat out of hell, and we were down in 20 minutes flat. Then we caught the train to Lonavala. Easy enough, except the train was *packed*. Barely standing room only, let alone sitting, and despite the crush, vendors were shoving their way up and down the corridor literally every few seconds, selling peanuts, water, maps, sweets, cucumbers, various indeterminate items in large plastic bags, hot *chai* of course. You name it, they were selling it, and it just added to the chaos. Tony was standing in the open doorway taking photographs, as he generally is, so was out of the worst of the melee, but I was in the thick of it.

However, we got to Lonavala, which is where we are now and – another town, another balcony, this time overlooking a busy street with lots of new entertainment. This morning we took a tuk tuk to the Karla and Bhaja caves about an hour out of town, each of them up steep flights of steps and rocky paths of course (people always do temple things on the top of hills, very inconveniently) but worth the effort. Fantastic carvings straight into the rock face; how they ever did it is anyone's guess. And there were three monks chanting in the second cave, which was magical. I must add that the object of these visits is not just to please the inner caver of The Geologist. They are World Heritage sites, and are impressive archaeological highlights of major historical importance. So there.



Bhaja caves.

While we were here we bought reserved-seat train tickets, for Nasik, our destination tomorrow. So I shall spend my 70th birthday on a series of trains, but I shall have a seat.

Hello from Mumbai, March 21

We are now back in Mumbai, in the same hotel that we started from, and having a last fling of being independent. Back to Leopold's for dinner tonight.

All the places we have visited were very different from each other. Nashik, where we arrived after two relatively unexciting but perfectly all-right train journeys, was wonderful. A totally un-touristy town, I think we were the only westerners there bar three Italians we saw once briefly, and it had a brilliant atmosphere. Although we indisputably stood out from the crowd, everyone was very friendly, naturally curious but not overtly staring all the time like some, and anxious to please wherever and whenever they could. And of course the kids love strange foreign people, and I was particularly pleased to be followed by two small boys shouting "Hello Honey-Bunny". Very morale-boosting two days after your 70th birthday.

We stayed three nights and could not have chosen a better place to spend the time. It's a holy town on account of it having a river. Not the Ganges, but the Godavari River, which neither you nor we had heard of, but any sort of river takes on mystical, spiritual properties in India, and is a good excuse to build a few temples and indulge in a spot of total immersion. Oh, now The Geologist has taken umbrage, and says of *course* he has heard of the Godavari: major river, flows across the south Indian peninsula, etc etc etc. So. I have been told. Anyway, we spent a lot of time sitting on the ghats on the banks of said river, people-watching. Three family groups asked if they could take photos of themselves with us, something that happens quite often, we never know why, including one lovely old couple who were on holiday with their grandson, and who insisted on giving us a bagful of grapes as a thank-you.

We sent two shirts out from the hotel to be washed while we were there and as the side of the river was lined with women doing their laundry drill, we were really hoping to see our shirts being given the scrubbing and slapping-about routine, but no luck. They came back, however, spotlessly clean and immaculately ironed, for 36 pence. I think it would be cheaper to send our home laundry to India to be done in future.



On the ghats of Nashik.

After our lovely three days in Nashik we caught a rickety old bus and were driven for three hours across some incredibly rough roads to Daman on the coast. To be fair, while some of the roads were dreadful, the second half was very good, but the bus was a bit of a bone-shaker. Not exactly the 'Executive de Luxe' or even more expensive 'Volvo Superior de Luxe' that were advertised and never materialised, but for just £1.32p each, pretty good value.

Daman was different again; very much a tale of two towns. There is Nani Daman which is where all the hotels, shops, bars, restaurants and so on are. Quite busy, with a good covered market and big farmers' market, a fishing harbour and what would be a respectably black-sand beach, if it were not for the really dreadful amount of litter and dog detritus all over it. But good enough to sit on the wall and look over the sea at the sunset, and eat what were probably the worst and most tasteless choc ices we have ever had.

The other part of town is Moti Daman, across on the other side of the estuary. We walked over the bridge to find ourselves in another world. A 17th-century Portuguese fort encloses the town – the whole of Daman was Portuguese originally, and there is still a big Portuguese influence – and through the high stone gateway in the walls it seems to be a haven of peace and quiet, with lovely, beautifully maintained gardens and parks and tree-lined streets. There are two Catholic churches, a ruined monastery and loads of big and impressive-looking government and municipal buildings (the Court of Civil and Criminal Justice for instance stands in its own superb grounds) and we particularly liked the concept of 'The Office of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Boilers'. The craziest thing was the bridge itself between the two halves of town. It is ostensibly sealed off at either end by a concrete wall, barbed wire and metal barriers. Needless to say the Indians have made their way round the edge of the walls and under the barriers, and everybody walks across quite happily. We learned that the bridge collapsed in 2003 hence the barrier and the existence of a new bridge half a mile further away from town. But although they have since rebuilt the old bridge and it clearly is quite serviceable the barriers remain, and the general populace continues to sidle round the edges.

We had a good train journey this morning from Daman to Mumbai, stopping off at the Dhobi Ghat, where most of Mumbai's laundry seems to be done, and spent our last morning on our own walking through the Colaba district, near our hotel, and ended up more or less by accident exploring some incredibly narrow little streets between one-room houses. Double-decker housing in fact, as there were ladders up from the street to upstairs homes, again just one-room, although some had a tiny kitchen area at the back. Full of people either on the streets or sitting on their doorsteps, all slightly flummoxed to see us, but very friendly. Not the sort of area your average cruise liner passenger would venture, to be sure; it's actually what remains of Bombay's original fishing villages.



Upstairs apartment in Colaba.

Hello from Oman, March 28

After a week on board Voyager we are thoroughly into luxury-living-mode. On our last morning in Mumbai, we called back at the hotel to pick up the bag of relatively smart clothes that we left there while we were tripping round India; then had a tuk tuk across town to the port, where we went on to the ship.

The day after sailing from Mumbai, we were in Porbander in Gujarat. A very quiet little town – well, not quiet exactly, it is India after all – but very much off the tourist track, and a bit of a shock-to-the-system for a lot of the passengers. Three-hundred-odd passengers descending on them from the ship has an equal impact on the townsfolk, so we were glad to head off to the fishing docks along the edge of town. We walked through small streets full of friendly people, and were accompanied only by a slightly mad old Indian with a carrier-bag full of heaven-knows-what, who followed us at a discreet distance chuntering away to himself – or to us, who knows? – until he thought he had herded us safely back to the main square. (Which is just down the road from the birthplace of Gandhi, incidentally, so the house is much revered by the locals.)

After that it was full-steam-ahead for Oman, where Muscat was the first port of call. And it was raining. They have rain in Oman about once every ten years – well, that might be a bit of an exaggeration, but you know what I mean – and we managed to catch it. We stayed on the ship for the first afternoon as it was a bit wet and murky, with the intention of walking into the souk in town the next day. But the shore excursions manager then asked Tony if he and I would each escort a bus the next day on trips to Nizwa, a town famous for its souk and fort about two hours inland, a place that we have been to several times before. It was quite gratifying to be asked; usually you have to grovel and wheedle and plead to get escort duty on any excursion you want to go on, so we said we would.



Flash flood at Nizwa.

And thank goodness we did. Because of the rain, which had carried on all night and into the next morning, there was a flash flood into the dry wadi/river bed that runs through the town, and this really was a once-in-every-ten-years event. The wide wadi floor is used as the souk car-park, and the flood arrived just after rush hour when everyone had parked up and disappeared into the souk. So loads of cars were caught in it, some floating down the river, others hastily tethered to nearby



Fishing fleet at Porbander.

palm trees, and of course all the locals lining up along the banks to gawp at it. The river was positively raging through with a fair old current on it, right across the main road into town which therefore was closed, reasonably enough, so we were diverted round the ring road, along with every other vehicle in Nizwa, so tremendous traffic jams of course, and had to walk in from the edge of town over a convenient new bridge.

However, clouds and silver linings and all that, it was brilliant for Tony and he got some fine photos. He would have been beside himself if we'd missed it. The morning souk was closed by the time the ship's buses got there, and then everyone had to practically run round the fort to make up for lost time, but that was of secondary importance under the circumstances.

We left Muscat yesterday evening and by this morning we were off-shore from Sur where, having got up at 6.30am, we had intended to walk down to the dhow building yards. But the wind was too strong and the sea too rough to launch the tenders that we needed to go on shore, so we had to sail on by, and are now *en route* for Salalah. Instead of going into Sur we had a pep talk on board by a couple of ex-marines who came on yesterday, and are our anti-pirate squad. Since the whole area is teeming with naval warships and the pirates have very little interest in cruise ships anyway, the danger is fairly remote to say the least, but we have to maintain a blackout at night and there is razor wire wrapped round the front and the back of the ship, just to be on the safe side.

Hello from the Red Sea, April 6

Well, that's the end of the cruise, which we have very much enjoyed. Since we last wrote, which was the day we had to miss out the Omani port of Sur because of rough seas, the weather has steadily improved..... at least become hotter and hotter, if that counts as an improvement!

We did have another stop in Oman, at Salalah, where Tony escorted a trip on what they call the Frankincense Trail. A bit of a misnomer really, as it involved just two typically-scraggy frankincense trees and nowhere to actually *buy* frankincense, which rather upset quite a few people. Other sites/sights along the way included a somewhat dubious Job's Tomb, a 12-foot long, green-satin-covered block of stone which they maintain (rather improbably) was his actual

size, and the stop was notable for the fact that the loos were closed due to there being no water, to the consternation of many of the ladies. (Mind you, many of the ladies complain about the state of the loos anyway, even when they are open!) We also went to some blow holes on the coast that were quite good last time Tony and I went, but the sea was very calm so not much activity this time around. Still, it was a day out and we enjoyed it.

Then we had a really, really good day out, to Lake Assal in Djibouti. Five hundred feet below sea level, and surrounded by a wide, thick crust of pure salt, blindingly white in the sun of course, and very spectacular. Yet again, we have been there, seen it, done it, previously, because that's the way it has to be. In order for Tony to present his lectures, he has to have already been to most of the places, so it does mean that on some of the excursions he is better informed than the local official guides, who usually seem to know very little and have very limited English anyway. It was a long day, made even longer by the bus, **A**: having a puncture, and **B**: running out of fuel; but everyone seemed to thoroughly enjoy themselves.

We should have had a stop at Massawa, in Eritrea, but this was suddenly off-limits according to the Foreign Office except in cases of 'Is Your Journey Really Necessary?'. We safely negotiated the notorious passage up the east coast of Africa without pirate-induced incident, and I think our gun-toting ex-marine bodyguards (should that be ship-guards?) left us in Djibouti, although we still have to have a blackout at night until Safaga. The ship's entertainment people, by the way, tactfully refrained from showing the film *Captain Phillips* until after we were deemed to be safe. (Tom Hanks plays the captain of a container ship that is captured by Somali pirates soon after leaving Salalah, and it all goes horribly wrong for him until the ship is finally rescued just off Djibouti: based on a true story!)

So it was straight on to Safaga, with what proved to be another really good day out. We were away from the ship for all of 14 hours, as our bus had to travel in a convoy with a police escort, starting at 6.30am and getting back to the ship just before 8pm. There was a lot of very good bus-window-gazing across the deserts and then through villages in the cultivated lands of the Nile Valley. Key destination was the ancient town of Dendera, close to Qena and just down-river from Luxor, where the Temple of Hathor has fabulous carvings all round its outer walls and a wonderful interior that is crowded with huge stone columns. Then we had a scenic boat-ride for an hour or so on the Nile at Luxor itself; quite enjoyable, but very sad to see so many tour-boats moored up and barely used because the terrorists have frightened so many people away from Egypt. Last stop was a rather short visit to the ancient Temple of Luxor, before we had to join the last convoy back to Safaga.

And tomorrow we fly home, on some potentially rather basic ship's charter flight. Another ho-hum moment!

Postcards from Norway and Svalbard 2014

Hello from the Arctic, 27 June

We are halfway through the cruise – well, nearly – and so far so good. While in the ‘departure lounge’, before we boarded the ship, we met up with two of the other lecturers and their wives. One of them, Alan, is an ex-diplomat, having worked all over the place during his career, including Oslo (hence him being on a Norwegian cruise).

Andrew, the other lecturer, is a BBC TV producer for their Natural History unit and an inveterate name-dropper. His conversation consists of lists of ‘names’ that he’s worked with, and is pleased to reveal that he ‘writes scripts for David ...’ by which we are meant to infer that he is bosom buddies with David Attenborough, and when I sat next to him at dinner one evening and he was eulogising about how amusing Prince Charles was when he (Andrew) was talking to him one afternoon. I thought “Oh, shut up” and started to tell him about when I met the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. He just completely ignored what I was saying, and carried on with his own famous-name reminiscences!

There’s also an Orca team on board, four of them who spend from 6am to 10pm every day outside on the top deck, each equipped with a thick anorak and a pair of binoculars, looking for whales and dolphins. They do tend to get over-excited about tiny specks on the far horizon, invisible to the naked eye, and ‘blows’, when the whales blow plumes of water out of their whatever the holes on top of their heads are called, and again, they are way off in the far distance. Still, I think there may be more chance of seeing them the nearer we get to Spitsbergen.

Our first port of call on the cruise was Stavanger in Norway, and Tony escorted on the boat trip along Lysefjord, a lovely trip that we’ve done a couple of times before. It goes beneath Pulpit Rock, a huge flat platform 2000 feet above the fjord, that you can walk right up to on land. Tony and I were there 12 years ago – obviously he has a photo of me standing on it for scale! – and Tony did it again last year, but it’s quite tough going, and even tougher coming down, over very steep boulders. Twenty two of our passengers did the walk up, and 21 came down! One poor man didn’t quite reach the top, and set off down on his own, fell and banged his head on a rock, hit his face badly, and knocked himself unconscious. By the time our lot were on the way down and found him, other people on the walk had bandaged him up and called the emergency services and a helicopter was on its way. He was air-lifted to hospital, and had to spend the night there for them to check for concussion, but they deemed him fit to be flown





The village of Nusfjord, with its beautiful location in the Lofoten Islands.

to Leknes in the Lofoten Islands, where we were yesterday, and he's back on board now. I haven't seen him, and said I didn't know him and wouldn't recognise him if I did see him; but apparently you can't miss him, he's got two enormous black eyes!

In the Lofoten Islands yesterday the weather was absolutely wonderful. It's been good the whole time, but yesterday was exceptional – intense blue sky and sunshine, although cool, particularly in the wind. We were both escorting on buses, and went to the pretty little village of Nusfjord, on the edge of its own fjord with just a couple of shops and a cafe, then to a small church in the middle of nowhere, and then to a glass-blowing workshop combined with the inevitable factory shop. Although at Norwegian prices no-one in their right minds would actually buy anything!

We're now well on our way to Spitsbergen, and way above the Arctic Circle, so 24-hour sun (when it's not cloudy), but certainly 24-hour daylight, which is wonderful. No trouble sleeping, even though we don't have the curtains drawn. And now a brisk walk round the deck, as this is a sea day, and even after half a day Tony goes stir-crazy just sitting inside, particularly when he doesn't have a lecture.

Hello from Bergen, 5 July

Now we are at our last port of call on the cruise. We have a day at sea tomorrow, and then home on Monday. We're sitting in the lounge, and may not go ashore as it's raining! Which is fairly usual for Bergen, but we're not bothered as we've been here many times before; and, although it's a splendid town, it's quite small, so it's a bit of a 'been there, seen it, done it' situation. And it rains on 300 days of the year!

However, we have had quite brilliant weather when it mattered. Our first stop on Spitsbergen (that's the name of the main island of the Svalbard group) was Longyearbyen, the capital, and the weather was not brilliant, but good enough. We just walked in from the ship and did our own thing. We walked miles in fact, looking for ice wedges (geological feature, didn't find them!) and passed the husky kennels – two big pens full of – er – huskies and kennels, and in between them there was a great big patch of eider ducks nesting. They don't usually nest inland, but they've established a colony there because arctic foxes won't go near dogs, so the ducks know they're safe. Well, apart from the large glaucous gulls that tend

to go for the eggs and chicks, but there didn't seem to be many of those around. There were, however, dozens of arctic terns, also nesting, and therefore hugely aggressive. They really do dive-bomb people's heads in a big way and cause real damage, there were quite a few bloody scalps, and the only way to protect yourself, besides wearing a thick hat, is to carry a big stick upright over your head. A bin full of big red plastic poles was thoughtfully provided at each end of their nesting ground, and we were very thankful for them.

The next day we docked at a small research station called Ny Alesund. It's an international research base for climate and geophysics mainly, and also some glaciology, geology and a few other ologies, with various countries having their own stations and accommodation. Norway, UK, USA, Japan, Korea and Italy each have their own block with discreet little signs by the door, while the Chinese base is mightily ostentatious, with two great stone lions either side of the doorway, and pots of poinsettias in every window. They make sure you don't overlook them! And each country has its own 4WD vehicle parked outside – a bit of overkill, really, as the entire base is no more than half a mile square, and there's nowhere else to go. We saw a reindeer on the grass outside some houses, obviously fairly tame, and a whale obligingly came and performed right alongside the ship, which *is* my idea of whale-spotting!



Tern attack.

We were docked in Ny Alesund from 8am until 10.30 in the evening, and we couldn't think how we were going to occupy a whole day there, but in fact, as it turned out, it was wonderful. The scenery was absolutely stunning, we were surrounded by snowy mountains and glaciers and the occasional small icebergs, and it was bright sunshine the whole day – and really warm. As the sun moved round the light on the mountains was constantly changing, and it was an altogether brilliant day. Thanks to the weather, it could not have been better. Then later on a lot of people were up for the midnight sun (which in fact was 1.20am when it was at its lowest point) which got everyone very excited, even though a cloud actually drifted across the sun at 1.19am!

Then we were up to Magdalena Fjord, our most northerly port of call, where we anchored in the fjord, and four members of the crew went out in a zodiac to rig up a pontoon made out of plastic floats, so that the ship's lifeboat tenders could deposit people on the beach in batches for a bit of a walk. There was nothing there except beach, but people were glad to say they'd been, even though there were no polar bear sightings. Magdalena Fjord was realistically the only chance of seeing one, but no luck. Tony and I did, however, bring back a large rock for the garden! With permission, I might add, from the ranger who was on shore complete with rifle, so suitably bear-prepared! It was another beautiful day and everyone was well impressed.



A short walk from the ship at Ny Alesund, on Spitsbergen.

Oh, while we were anchored in the bay waiting for them to build the pontoon, the captain asked Tony to do a talk from the bridge on the surrounding geology. Since it was mostly covered in snow it wasn't the easiest, but he managed to elucidate on the landscape to good effect, and everyone thought it was well worth it.

Next stop Tromsø, which is a delightful town – just as well, since the last time we were there we were stuck for three days and nights when the ship (not this one) broke down! We had a good walk round it again. And in good weather, too.

Yesterday we went up Geiranger Fjord, easily the most beautiful fjord of all, quite narrow with dozens of spectacular waterfalls, including the Seven Sisters, one of Norway's party pieces. There is a farm perched high above the fjord, on a tiny meadow above the waterfall, where they have to tether the children to posts when they go outside. Or they did; there are no resident children there any longer, and the farmhouse is rented out to adventurous holiday-makers. We did an excursion from Geiranger up to the top of Dalsnibba mountain; we've always been at the wrong time of year before, when the road has been closed by snow. The view was superb.

So, a good trip. For everyone but Ian that is. Ian is the man who was hospitalised after he fell on Pulpit Rock, and was flown back on board a day later. It was superwindy at the top of Dalsnibba, and I was standing with him when a heavy metal clothes rail full of coats and jumpers blew over on to him, and cut his hand quite badly. It went on bleeding for ages and Tony (escort on the ship's excursion) nearly had to break out the first-aid kit, but Ian declined, and it stopped eventually. Talk about accident-prone, though. I saw him on deck this morning and asked him if he'd fallen over today, and he replied "Not yet!"

And now we're on the way home. Oh - one correction! We went into Bergen after all this morning; the rain stopped and the sun came out, and it was a lovely walk. We went in the long way round and then came back via a short cut through the park. We did **not** have a midday snack in town; £18 for a beef-burger! But I did manage one or two samples in the market, of smoked whale-meat and reindeer: very tasty, but £40 a kilo. Hmmm.....

Postcards from Turkey 2014

Hello from Cappadocia, October 1

Turkey has lived up to expectations. More than that, really, since I didn't quite know what to expect in the first place. We arrived in Antalya later than planned, due to a delayed flight, so had to pick up the car and drive to find a hotel in the dark, which wasn't ideal, but we found a good place eventually. (So good, in fact, that we stayed there for two nights on the way back, as well.)

The first full day in Turkey we went to Pamukkale, a blindingly white lump of rock on the landscape, not far in from the western coast. The rock is travertine, or tufa (geologically spectacular!), a limestone deposit that forms huge terraces with pools on the top and creates great sheets of flowstone; this particular one is famed for its sheer whiteness. We climbed up the flowstone banks, along with hundreds of other people, and most unfortunately had to do so in bare feet. A lot of it was quite smooth, but rather too much was made up of sharp little ridges, and it was a bit like walking on razor blades. And then of course having walked up it, we had to walk down again. Feet may never be the same again!

That was Friday's fun, and then, after a thunderstorm in the night, we moved on to Konya, driving through thousands of acres of orchards being harvested; apples everywhere you looked, including mountains of them on the roadside, being unceremoniously shovelled on to trucks with bulldozers, presumably destined to become apple juice in due course, or possibly the Turkish equivalent of Heinz baby food! It's interesting to be here during harvest time; we've driven past hundreds of fields full of melons, squash and gourds, so thick on the ground that you could hardly see any soil. And later on it was largely sugar beet, with lorries lining up to unload the beet at various sugar refining works along the way. Not to mention acres and acres of horticulture going on under plastic, completely ruining the scenery, but no doubt extremely good for the economy, with loads and loads of bananas under wraps, and a lot of other stuff that we could not identify.

We didn't arrive in Konya until late afternoon, so having found a place to stay we walked into the town to look in a few of the many mosques on offer. It's a particularly holy town, so a **lot** of them, and the noise when all the muezzins started chanting at the same time was deafening! Then we walked about a kilometre to the Cultural Centre, on the advice of our hotel receptionist, to see two shows that were going on in separate concert halls. First we went into the Iranian Mystical Music excitement. Seven strange-looking men with assorted instruments spent a long, long time tuning up on the platform,





*Whirling
Dervishes
in Konya.*

although after about fifteen minutes we realised they'd finished tuning up, and we were listening to the actual mystical music. We didn't last long in there! We moved over to the other arena, which was a display by the Whirling Dervishes. Another bit of cult culture from Turkey, again all a bit mystic and religiously symbolic. It involved nineteen men wearing long white flowing dresses and tall hats, and yes they **did** whirl, quite spectacularly eventually, with long periods of perpetual whirling. But in between times there was a terrific amount of deeply meaningful, one-step-at-a-time pacing, bowing, embracing and stepping on again, all in super-slow motion, which made the Iranian Mystical Music seem like a rave!

Good to have seen the Whirling Dervishes, though, despite the fact that by the time we got to the cultural place it was raining quite hard, and when we came out it was absolutely pouring. No hats or umbrellas, needless to say, and no taxis or buses in sight either. So we set off back very miserably, when lo and behold two taxis loomed out of the gloom. We jumped in the first one with great glee – and despite many attempts, it simply refused to start, to the driver's, and our, consternation. Luckily the second taxi was still there, so we finally got back to the hotel fairly wet, but not totally soaked through.

Next day we arrived in Cappadocia. This region is spoken of in hushed tones of reverence by geologists the world over, but I really had no idea what it consisted of, beyond some sort of site involving underground sculptures. In fact it's an area covering quite a chunk of central Turkey, with massed bands of pinnacles, towers, pillars etc in all shapes and sizes, covering vast tracts of land. There are houses and churches and monasteries carved into the rock faces, and entire underground cities tunnelling into the volcanic ash. Truly spectacular, and rather puts the caves of Nottingham into a somewhat minor perspective! Although the heavy rain had stopped when we got to Cappadocia it was still totally cloudy and grey and drizzly – you can imagine that 'cheerful' didn't exactly catch the mood of the moment – but we made the best of it by visiting two of the underground cities, below ground seeming the obvious place to be. Hard work though. They went down seven or eight

levels, through complete mazes of tunnels and passageways, all of which entailed crouching down, not quite crawling through but very nearly, and sidestepping the coachloads of tourists that we encountered at every corner.

Then the next morning – clear blue skies and brilliant sunshine, which is what we had for the rest of our time in Turkey. Lucky for us – and even more so for the people who had booked hot-air-balloon flights for first thing in the morning, which is **the** thing to do in Cappadocia. We went out soon after first light, and counted well over a hundred balloons in the sky – we both took dozens of pictures, because they looked wonderful floating just above the myriad rock towers! And with each balloon basket containing twenty-odd people, at 200 euros per person, we reckon the Cappadocian economy is not doing too badly!

Hello from Istanbul, October 8

After we left Cappadocia we clocked up quite a lot of mileage over the next few days doing a bit of sinkhole-spotting across the Obruks Plateau, near Karapınar. Some really huge old sinkholes with beautiful lakes on their floors, but also a rash of relatively new sinkholes. One had opened up a few years ago and was more than 100 feet wide and deep, in what used to be a featureless field and is now a geological tourist attraction! And another only appeared a few weeks ago, destroying the access road and a few houses in the little village of Seyithacı. Unlucky for them, but lucky for Tony, with some useful photos out of our time there. It was all good fun, and it meant going through some remote little villages, and staying in some quite out-of-the-way places. One ‘pension’ we stayed in was owned by a man who spoke excellent English – as well he might, because it turned out he had lived for 37 years in Top Valley in Nottingham! Anyone who knows Nottingham knows that Top Valley isn’t the most salubrious of areas to write home about, but it was a strange coincidence, and he was a charming man.



*Early morning
hot-air balloon
flight across
the towers of
volcanic ash at
Cappadocia.*



The ancient tram that trundles back and forth along a pedestrainised street in the heart of old Istanbul.

Then we drove south over the Taurus Mountains and down the spectacular Goksu Canyon, to meet the coast at Silifke. But this was a disappointingly large town, so we turned east and found a hotel in the resort town of Kizkalesi, which was largely populated by holiday-makers from Russia. Next day we looped inland for a bit more Taurus limestone-spotting, and returned to the coast at the huge resort town of Alanya, with its magnificent citadel out on a rocky headland. Even more Taurus limestone the next day, with a new and spectacular mountain road to the Dudensuyu Caves, where we had a short boat-ride on the underground lake. And another spectacular road down to Manavgat and the waterfalls tourist-trap.

From there, not far to Antalya and back to the good hotel that we had found for our first night in Turkey. It was no distance from the lovely Duden waterfall, which cascades off a travertine cliff, dropping 100 feet straight into the sea. It's somewhat famous among limestoney people so we had to go there twice, to get photos in the right light. Then to get away from limestone, we took a day trip westwards, past Finike (which actually was spectacular limestone), to a place called Chimaera (not limestone, at last), where we walked half a mile up a hill to an area with lots of natural flames burning away on gas that was leaking from the ground. There is something quite unnerving about a whole hillside on fire; a bit Dante's Inferno-like, but it didn't swallow us up, which was a relief.

Stopping off between flights on the way home, we finally ended up in Istanbul for a couple of days of sight-seeing, which was excellent. Everyone says what a brilliant city, and so it is. We went to all the regulation tourist sites, the Blue Mosque, the Aya Sofya Mosque (a large part of the inside was covered in scaffolding and netting!), and the underground Cistern, especially good we thought, built in Roman times to store the town's water supply, and it's huge. The plan was also to visit the Grand Bazaar and the Spice Bazaar. Well, we walked across town to reach them, but they were closed! We had hit one of Turkey's major holidays, which lasted for four days! No matter, we took a boat trip along the Bosphorus instead, under the big bridges and past some amazingly smart hotels and houses on the banks of the waterway. A great end to a good trip.

Postcards from India and Sri Lanka 2014

Hello from Mumbai, November 26

I am writing this sitting on our ship at a Mumbai dockside. We were supposed to be in port at 9am but after many shenanigans and being shunted through an unscheduled lock for no apparent reason, and much bureaucratic paperwork to be laboriously filled in by Indian port officials, we are almost ready to go on shore, two hours late. Well, that's India for you.

However the cruise is going altogether very well. We had a day on our own in Dubai to begin with, so took ourselves off to the market area and walked to the Creek where the old trading dhows are lined up on the quayside, three or four deep, being loaded and unloaded with all manner of goods, from fridges and televisions, to plastic tables and chairs, to huge crates of sweets and sacks of rice, tea, cement, stacks of tyres..... all just sitting there, to be either loaded or unloaded. It's a terrific atmosphere, and one of our 'great places of the world' to visit.

We went over to the other side on one of the abras, the water taxis that are constantly criss-crossing the Creek, walked through some of the old souks (all a bit touristy these days, I must admit, but we bought some of my favourite dried lemons in the spice souk!) and stopped for a drink in a little Creek-side cafe. Tony had his Coca Cola, I was more adventurous and had the rather unimaginatively named Souk Cocktail: fresh mint, lime juice, pineapple juice and fresh ginger. Very good too.

Back at the ship, there was a free shuttle bus from the dock into the town, rendezvousing at the Dubai Mall. Which is an unspeakably lavish expanse of marble, glass and unnecessary *space* – it took several minutes to walk from the entrance to within sight of the first of the shops. Which were, of course, not any old shops. Every designer label you've ever heard of, and just as many that you haven't, all with their own enormous frontages, were there for the ogling, if you were of an ogling disposition.

We did admire the aquarium, which is in full view on the ground floor. It's massive, with glass-fronted walls on all four sides so that you can watch the shoals of tropical fish, sharks, rays, you name it, as well as the occasional scuba diver in and among the fish. Altogether very impressive. We didn't linger in the Mall, needless to say, but caught the metro, which was a treat to ride on, as it was all over-ground, with brilliant views, from the front or back windows, of the amazing skyscrapers that constitute downtown Dubai. They really are an architect's dream, all shapes, sizes and designs, including of course the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, 124 storeys to the



Tall in Dubai.

viewing platform (not even the top), and the lift takes you there in just 50-something seconds! Lots of passengers went up it, we didn't, and instead we stopped off at the Mall of the Emirates, the other of the two massive shopping malls in Dubai, with yet more of the internationally expensive shops – the Christmas-window decorations in Harvey Nicholls were stupendous – and we also had a look at the ski slope and toboggan run they have constructed inside the mall. We didn't go in, just looked through the windows at it, at people shivering and stamping their feet to keep warm, and children throwing snowballs, while we were watching in shirt sleeves and temperatures in the eighties. Quite surreal, but great fun.

That evening we had another shuttle bus ride into the Dubai Mall, to see The Fountains, and yes, they were good, a bit *son-et-lumière* sort of thing, with the fountains dancing in time to the music, and the Burj Khalifa, in the background, making a lighting display in harmony. The crowds were phenomenal, of course, and the best vantage point – the Apple shop floor-to-ceiling windows on the first floor of the mall – was closely guarded by queue-monitoring security guards, but we stayed elsewhere for long enough to take some good pictures. And in between fountains, the Burj Khalifa took it upon itself to light up with a magnificent colourful light display that was actually by far the best bit of the evening's entertainment.

However, sailing on.... we were overnight to Khasab on Oman's Musandam peninsular, where we spent the morning sailing on a dhow. The ship had (expensive) excursions doing the same thing, but they were full up, so we arranged our own trip when we got there, along with three or four other couples, and sundry other people nothing to do with the ship, and it worked very successfully. We just set off round the coast past some geology, of course, towards a small island where quite a lot of people swam and snorkelled, I don't think they actually saw very much, and there were later reports of them being itchy stung by tiny jelly fish, so we were glad we didn't bring our swimming things! What we did see however, was a group – no, a pod, to be absolutely correct – anyway, a load of dolphins that swam up to the boat and alongside us, and jumped out of the water and generally showed off, they really just seemed to be playing and enjoying themselves.

After Oman we had a couple of days at sea, where the lectures started in earnest. There are four other lecturers. Keith gives the port talks, describing each port we go to, and giving a general discourse about what to do and how to do it when there. He's very nervous about the job, as he's new to it, and hasn't been to the places before, so he struggles, and is relying on Tony to give him as much inside information as possible. Then there's Mike, an Army brigadier who walks and talks like a caricature of 'An Army Brigadier', but is incredibly knowledgeable and informative about his subjects, particularly the British Raj. Louise is a geographer who has lectured on whales and dolphins, and Ghandi. And her husband has given two lectures, he was a TV journalist, and bumbles on about TV celebrities that he has seen and met, but is a total waste of space – and that is **not** just professional jealousy!

Our first stop in India was Porbander, a small and very unsophisticated town in Gujarat. Voyager is still the only cruise ship that docks there, so it remains totally untouristy and unsophisticated. We love it, but for many cruise passengers, mainly those who have not visited India before, it comes as a bit of a shock to the system.

It's the next day now since I started this letter, and our second sally forth into Mumbai. Yesterday was our excursion round the city, which was surprisingly good, and packed a lot in, and luckily cost nothing as we were asked to escort. And this morning we have caught a bus into the Colaba district and walked to and through the old fishing village; we did the same thing when we were here in March this year, and it's just fascinatingly wonderful. As an added bonus, the fishing boats had just come in with their catch, so spectacularly good photo opportunities. And the people are all so friendly, and don't seem to mind a couple of westerners trying to dodge out of their way while they're trying to work!

Hello from Sigiriya, 5 December

Our second week on the ship was another good one. After we left Mumbai we called in on Goa, new to us, and we weren't really overly taken with it. We did the ship's bus tour to a small town with lots of old Portuguese colonial buildings, then to a very large cathedral which was in the throes of a once-in-ten-years exposition of St Saviour's bones (or some such!) so it was heaving with people, queuing zig-zag Disney-style to get in, so we didn't see much of it, and then to a Hindu temple. Not the most exciting, really, and I think the people who opted for a day on the beach probably had the best of it. The beaches are what Goa is best known for, after all.

Cochin (now known as Kochi) was much better. We had a long bus-ride to the backwaters of Kerala, and spent a couple of hours trundling along the waterways on a traditional rice boat. Actually, on a brand new 'rice boat', one of several thousand that now exist to take tourists up and down, but it was a lovely way to spend a peaceful afternoon all the same. Oh, and it included passing a wedding party going upstream to their reception at a posh riverside hotel, escorted by two Snake Boats – long thin boats, a bit like dragon boats only longer, with up to 100 oarsmen getting up a fair old speed, in time to the rhythm of the drums beating. A genuine outing for them, and exciting and photogenic for us.

Snake Boat on the backwaters of Kerala.





The old Chinese fishing nets at Cochin.

Tony and I took a ferry across to old Fort Cochin, to wander round Jew Town with its busy antique market mixed in with the spice traders who have been there since the year dot; and also for another look at the traditional Chinese fishing nets.

Our last port in India, Tuticorin, rarely sees a cruise ship, and the highlight of our call was a visit to a primary school. The kids had obviously spent weeks if not months rehearsing

for it; they put on a whole programme of song and dance routines, and we went round the classrooms talking to them (they all spoke excellent English, even the five-year-olds). It just seemed a little bit voyeuristic to us, really, and we felt a bit like superannuated Ofsted school inspectors, but I think it was something of a major event for them, and I hope they enjoyed it.

Then to Colombo, and a trip to an elephant orphanage. It sounds very altruistic, rescuing orphaned and injured elephants and conducting a successful breeding programme and so on, but in reality it was a bit zoo-like, and although there were a good few elephants out enjoying the sunshine in the meadows, there were some in pens swinging from side to side in characteristic stressed-out manner, and we didn't think it was quite as good as it was cracked up to be. Mind you, there have been a fair few elephants here on the streets of Sigiriya, tramping up and down the road with people swaying about on howdahs on their backs; the animals seemed happy enough, although the elephant-riding tourists looked distinctly queasy!

We left the ship in Colombo yesterday first thing, expecting to pick up the booked hire car and proceed on our merry way, but things didn't go quite according to plan. Best we draw a veil over the frustrations of the day, suffice it to say that we didn't get away from the city until 4pm, and it was a day wasted. However, tomorrow **is** another day.

We visited Dambulla Golden Temple and its caves this morning – one of these amazing sacred Buddhist sites, with caves and statues and effigies carved into the solid rock, and all with intricately painted ceilings. It was a return visit, but well worth the walk up to them.

We're now sitting on a terrace outside our hotel room beside Sigiriya, *aka* Lion Rock, and looking over to said Rock, which is one of the must-see tourist sites/sights on Sri Lanka. We are due to climb it at 7am tomorrow morning (500 feet high and

heaven knows how many hundreds of steps) so for the moment I'm making the most of sitting on the terrace with a drink, just looking! We were here five years ago, and climbed it then in absolutely tipping rain, so we're hoping for better things tomorrow.

Hello from Sigiriya again, 10 December

Well here we are again. Same time, same place, as the last email we sent, but a week later! We are in Sigiriya for the second time, on the same hotel terrace and still watching elephant-back riders plodding up and down the road, while we gear up for a trip up Lion Rock tomorrow. Talk about *deja vu*! Last week when we woke up the rock was shrouded in thick cloud, so we abandoned the project for then, did what else we wanted to do in Sri Lanka, and came back here at the end to see if we have better luck. So – here's hoping.



In the meantime we have had a fun week. We went up to Trincomalee, on the north-eastern coast, which used to be verging on Tamil Tiger territory, but that trouble has eased off now, though the town is still quiet and tourist-free. On the way north we visited a temple, of course; 1840 steps to the stupa at the top, although we found a short cut and skipped a few! And we also went to some much-heralded Hot Wells, paid good money to get in and walked up a lane lined with stallholders selling toys and souvenirs, and when we got there all it consisted of was a small enclosure containing five concrete tanks each about the size of a large sink, full of hot water. Luckily, the day was saved by the presence of a solitary monk, ritually washing and rinsing himself with buckets of warm water so, *nil desperandum*, there was a photo opportunity!

Next day to the town of Polannaruwa, past a host of fisherman laboriously hauling in their nets with the (rather meagre) early morning catch, and then via a small roadside temple with a tower that had been seriously knocked sideways by the tsunami..... ten years ago, was it? It was while we were there that it started to rain in earnest, and we realised we were in the midst of the monsoon. And it rained and it rained and continued to rain! Warm rain (sort of!) mind you, and it has been quite fun to be in it.

Hauling in the catch on the east coast of Sri Lanka.





Gathering the tea leaves to weigh the harvest.

highest hill, from which he could survey his domain round 360°. It was a brilliant drive up and down both days, through a delightful little town that we walked around each time, once in the sun, once not! But brilliant views of tea plantations as far as the eye could see, and truly lovely, friendly people. Like all Sri Lankans, they are very quick to smile..... but without exception have truly terrible **un**lovely teeth. This seems to be a national characteristic. We see signs all over for dental clinics, but it doesn't look as if they have much custom!

Our lovely hotel in Haputale was walking distance to the buzzing town centre, but unfortunately also within hearing distance of the world's worst muezzin screeching from loudspeakers atop the town mosque. We then drove through miles of mountainous and delightful tea country, stopping for the night in Nuwara Elya



Photo opportunity at Lion Rock.

It was still raining when we went up to Haputale in the hill country, amid miles and miles of tea plantations. We stayed there two nights, and each morning drove up an exceedingly winding hair-pinny road to Lipton's Seat, a very important landmark in tea country. Joseph Lipton was the Scottish entrepreneur who sorted out the local population of tea farmers to create a massive industry, and he had his favourite spot on top of the

midway, on a round-about route way back to Sigaraya. Now it's pouring with rain again, and another elephant has just ambled by.....

P.S. The next morning was clear and sunny, so we had a great climb up Lion Rock, with splendid views from the top, before driving away along back roads to Negombo and the nearby Colombo Airport. Dropped the car off, stayed in a handy hotel, and took the flight back home early the next morning.

Postcards from New Zealand 2015

Hello from Rotorua, 26 January

Three days after leaving home, we eventually made it to New Zealand! The three days getting here were, of course, intentional, and we had a brilliant stopover in Hong Kong. We arrived there Sunday lunchtime, after the predictably sleepless overnight flight – thank goodness for on-board films and videos – and spent the afternoon trying to find a tailor to make some shirts for Tony. Well, when I say trying to find, we were immediately assaulted by about seven or eight tailors' touts the minute we stepped off the airport bus, and thereafter had to run the gauntlet of them every time we came out of the hotel. In the end they were all disappointed anyway, because A, they were more expensive than we'd bargained for, and B, we didn't like the fabrics they had.

We had the most horrendous meal that night, one goose, one chicken-and-ginger, both chopped up with total disregard to anything approaching gourmet precision, so we ended up with far more bone and bone splinters than meat, and any ginger flavour was curiously absent. We had promised ourselves to eat Chinese for the three nights in Hong Kong, but after that experience we reverted to form, and ate Indian!

Next morning we got the renowned and revered Star Ferry from Kowloon to Hong Kong island, and another ferry to Cheung Chan island about an hour away, and spent most of the day there. It's quite a tiny island, very seaside resortish, and beautifully car-free, only bicycles there. Back across the ferry to Kowloon in the evening, and to the Night Market, about twenty minutes' walk away from our hotel. That was good fun, and we found our first Indian restaurant there. Actually, Nepalese, even better.

The following day we took the Star Ferry again, and caught the tram which goes practically the whole length of the island for a great sight-seeing trip, more than an hour to Shaukeiwan; actually no more than a suburb, but with a really villagey atmosphere. And from there we went to Stanley, another hour away over a great mountain road, spectacularly viewed from the top deck of a double-decker bus. Excellent! Stanley Market is quite well known, and it was very good, they had some really interesting and different things there, as well as – hurrah! – a couple of shirts for Tony!

On the way back on the bus we called in at Aberdeen, a lovely little fishing harbour (although not so many houseboats there as in the past) and our plan then was to go up



Fishing harbour on Cheung Chan, Honk Kong.

the Peak in the evening for views across a lit-up Hong Kong. It's traditionally *the* thing to do, the Peak is the highest point on the island, and going up on the funicular has always been a must-do for visitors. Big mistake! We queued for over an hour, one of us getting increasingly agitated (you can imagine which one!), and when we eventually got to the top it was nothing like either of us remembered from previous visits. We were shunted immediately off the cable train into a seven-storey, brightly-lit edifice of glitzy shops and restaurants, one escalator after another, only to discover that we then had to pay again to get on to an enclosed viewing gallery at the top! So we traipsed all the way down again to the ground floor and found the only, heavily camouflaged, door to the outside, and finally managed to find the view of night-time Hong Kong. Of course the queue to get back down again was even longer than the 'up' one, but thankfully we discovered that there was also a bus, so we jettisoned the other half of our return tickets, jumped on board and scurried away!

And then the next day, goodbye Hong Kong, another overnight flight, and hello New Zealand. Quite a culture shock: crowded, noisy, busy and exciting Hong Kong to the relatively empty spaces and laid back atmosphere of New Zealand.

We hadn't been in the country six hours before we were down a cave! We'd picked up our camper-van and driven south from Auckland, going first to the Waitomo Glow-worm Cave. Very aptly named! We climbed down into the cave, then took a slow boat along an underground lake, where the roof was covered with millions of glow-worm larvae. They put down sticky lines from the roof and hang on the end to feed on passing insects that are attracted by the light they emit. All quite biologically extraordinary, but the effect is magical.



Tony having temporarily had his cave fix, we carried on to Rotorua, via the Mangapohue rock bridge (very impressive) and the beautifully scenic Marakopa waterfall, to find our first overnight stop without too much trouble. And an extremely comfortable night we had too. As always, we are enjoying the camper-van enormously.

The last few days have been a concentration of geothermal activity! Rotorua is the heart of the volcanic region of New Zealand, so a major target for Tony. Hot springs, boiling mud pools, natural and un-natural geysers..... we've seen them all! The un-natural geyser is the one they throw soap down at 10.15 every morning to make it erupt, and which attracts hundreds of people – because it's so predictable, and they're so gullible! The best geyser is Pohutu,

which we saw today at the ridiculously named place of Whakarewarewa. It (the geyser, not the entire site) goes off every hour or less, and it was worth staying for nearly three hours to see three eruptions! Well worth it in fact, because the last one was the best one, photograph-wise. While we were waiting between eruptions we saw two kiwi birds. No, they didn't actually come strutting along the path, but they have them in an indoor enclosure at Whaka (as they call it for short). Kiwis are nocturnal, so the enclosure is quite dark, but we could just see them, about the size of chickens, and with those weird long beaks. They keep the lights on all night, so the birds think it's daytime, which will be jolly confusing for them if they ever escape, but I think great care is taken that they don't. Kiwis are mega rare, practically extinct, so we were pleased to have a chance to see ones that weren't actually stuffed and in a glass case!



Pohutu Geyser.

Hello from West Coast South Island, 30

I must say, the scenery in New Zealand seems to have a lot in common with the raw materials for my shopping lists! Acres of fields full of lambs, waiting to go to the lamb chop factory; huge herds of dairy cattle, providing the wherewithal for New Zealand butter and cheese; stack upon stack of beehives, for my NZ honey! The bees are a bit over-familiar at some camp spots, until it's time for them to go home at dusk, but then the black flies come out in force, and they're far worse, tiny and bitey!

When we're not in the heart of farmland – with great swathes of vineyards and hop-fields – the countryside is quite rugged, with hills, cliffs and gorges, rivers, waterfalls and lakes. All spectacular and photogenic, particularly in the sunshine, which we've had most of the time. I'm particularly taken by the trees. So many different varieties, evergreen and deciduous, all of them distinctive, colourful and just lovely.

We are now in South Island, after a very pleasant three-hour ferry journey from North, good views from the sea of Wellington as we left, then an hour across the Cook Strait, and then an hour going through some beautiful fiords into the South Island port of Picton.

Yesterday was a bit different. We drove 11 km or so along a dirt road to approach Harwood Hole, a cave entrance an hour's walk from the road, one that Tony always fancied having a



Kea, car thief.

trip through, but was never in New Zealand at the right time, and now the mood's gone somewhat! Anyway, halfway along the dirt road we happened upon a major rock-festival and alternative-therapy-and-holistic-healing event. Hundreds of tents and tepees, stalls selling beads and baggy trousers, everyone drifting about in dreadlocks and/or dungarees, all a bit as I imagine Glastonbury, only without the mud! The nearby town was fairly in keeping with the general mood as well, full of art galleries, pottery studios and weaving and woodcraft workshops, and grocery shops with names like 'Everything Organic' and 'Wholly Wholemeal'!

From there we went on to Pupu Spring, which is a massive resurgence, with a big wide river bubbling up through the gravel from a series of underground streams in the Takaka limestone that forms the Mount Arthur Marble Aquifer. And of course because it apparently comes from nowhere the spring is sacred to the native Maoris, who have no end of mystic stories about it, and we're forbidden to so much as touch the water, let alone swim in it. A shame, because it's beautifully clear water, and looked jolly inviting.

And then close to Pupu is Labyrinth Park, a collection of limestone pinnacles that some enterprising retired geologist, now deceased, turned into a maze with a load of paths running in between the rocks, which was sort of fun. Tony found his way out with no trouble. Left to myself, I'd still be in there!

Today's chief activity has been another drive along another rough road from Karamea to the massive Oparara limestone arch, practically a cave really, that has now been well documented on Tony's camera. Oh, before that we were on the trail of a couple of earthquakes that happened in the vicinity, one in 1920, another in 1968. There's not much evidence to be seen now, as all the landslips and so on have become quite overgrown, but we did come across a village hall with an amazingly catalogued history of the village in photos and newspaper cuttings and births, marriages and deaths records etc; lots about the earthquake of course, for Tony, while I was particularly taken with the panel about the Headless Body Murder Mystery of 1833. Did the notorious (in 1833) Jack Wentworth really do it, or was it a dastardly miscarriage of justice? We shall never know....



It's a hard life.

Now it's beginning to look like rain, we're on an extremely civilised camp site indeed, and I'm off to have a hot shower.

Next morning and the rain has set in, so we're not sure which way we're going now, but have map, will travel! We'll report back in due course.

Hello from Doubtful Sound, 8 February

After we last wrote, and the rain had set in with a vengeance, we changed plan slightly and went inland over the hills, via Arthur's Pass, and successfully found sunshine for a few days, leaving the west coast and the clouds behind.

First main stop was at Christchurch, where they had the major earthquake in 2011, and have had huge traumas over the wrecked cathedral. The spire toppled over and crashed into the nave of the church, and altogether caused quite an ungodly mess. And that's how it remains. Nothing's been done to clear it up; the city council is waiting for the government, who are waiting for the church commission, who are waiting for the insurance company..... which is where it seems to have come to a shuddering halt! The buildings around the cathedral are similarly roped off and shored up and closed, as is the Catholic church some blocks away which was, and still is, badly damaged. There's a lot of muttering and grumbling about it locally, but it seems that the money just isn't there. Apart from the internal politics, Christchurch is actually a very attractive city, and we were most impressed by the replacement, temporary 'cardboard cathedral' down the road, designed by a Japanese lady, and it's just a really attractive modern church, very cleverly designed, which they reckon will last for a good 50 years. And it looks as if it's going to have to!

The next day we spent going round Banks Peninsula, just south of Christchurch, with some lovely views of hills and coasts, and on to a town called Omaru, which is famous for its yellow-eyed penguins (very rare) and small blue penguins. Both have nesting colonies there, but they only come ashore at dusk, and we were there in the middle of the afternoon. We decided to forego penguin-spotting. Particularly after they told us that the yellow-eyed ones numbered three, maybe five if we were lucky, and probably wouldn't come on to the beach anyway because there were a couple of seals there, and they would have taken fright. They do seem to be somewhat neurotic creatures – and to be honest we feel we've rather done penguins, after being surrounded by thousands of them in Patagonia, coming up and pecking at our feet and almost literally shouldering us out of the way to get past, so we really haven't got much time for ones that daren't show their faces until after dark!

However, we have seen the flightless weka birds, which are quite rare and semi-endangered, and kea, that are very tame and flighty. "Too bloody tame", as one local observed in the car park where we were enthusiastically



Christchurch Cathedral that was.



Moeraki Boulders.

photographing one sitting on our van door, thinking 'how cute', until we realised he was pecking away the rubber seal from around the door! Hope the Britz Rent-a-Van company don't notice when we take it back!

Then a lovely day along the eastern coast, visiting first the Moeraki Boulders: about 50 huge round boulders some four feet in diameter that are just sitting on the beach, either washed up or rolled out of the

cliffs. Nobody seems to be quite sure which, apart from the tame geologist, aka Tony, who says he knows perfectly well that they're nodules that have been washed out of the sedimentary rock forming the cliffs, no question about it. So that's that! Anyway, we were there at low tide by good fortune, otherwise they'd have been covered up by the sea, and we had good sunshine to boot; so all good there then.

Then to Dunedin, second biggest city in South Island, and out to the far end of the Otago Peninsula, which has the only mainland albatross colony in the world. They only ever land to breed, and spend the rest of their lives gliding over the ocean, so it was quite something to see them. They're massive birds, and we took a guided tour up to a specially constructed viewing platform, and had about half an hour to watch and take photos. So another one to tick off our I-Spy bird-spotting list!

Later that day we went off to see Clive and Jeannette, friends we made on a cruise a couple of years ago; he was another lecturer on board, and they live just outside Dunedin. On the way there we walked up Baldwin Street in Dunedin, the steepest street in the world, according to the Guinness Book of Records; not somewhere where you'd want to live, then. We had a very good evening and supper with Clive and Jeannette, and they insisted we stay the night with them, so we even got a cooked breakfast in the morning as well – big treat!

We have now, however, run out of good weather. It has rained more or less continually for two days. In fact we've had thunder, lightning, rain, hail and tremendous winds – not the best for driving a high-top camper van. Today we drove out to Milford Sound, where we were faced with fairly substantial amounts of snow. It's high summer here, and we've got snow ploughs and gritters on the road. Ridiculous. The locals all say they've never known anything like it in all their lives, completely freak weather etc, none of which is of any consolation whatsoever! However, look on the bright side, the waterfalls coming down the sheer cliffs either side of Milford Sound were in full flow, much better than they would have been

without the rain. We have booked a trip to Doubtful Sound tomorrow, involving two boats and a bus over the high pass in between a lake and the Sound, and it's supposed to be even more spectacular than the better-known Milford Sound, so we are hoping for some sunshine, and maybe a little bit warmer so we can perhaps discard some of the jumpers, jackets, coats, scarves and hats we're wearing at the moment.

P.S. next day: We've now been to Doubtful Sound and it was a very good trip indeed, we thoroughly enjoyed it, and it only rained for a little while! The Sound was very dramatic, and the bus went through some really spectacular rain forest. And since it *is* rain forest, what can you expect but rain, to be honest?



Doubtful Sound on a good day.

Hello from Rotorua again, 12 February

More fun things to do in New Zealand that we have now ticked off:

Drive straight through Queenstown, because it seems to be not very inviting, very touristy and busy, and more to the point, we couldn't find a parking space! Instead, go on to Arrowtown, a pretty little tourist-based craft-shop-based village that sells extremely good cherries, and on the way call by Kawarau Bridge and watch the bungee jumping. It's not the highest bungee in New Zealand, by a long way in fact, but it's the original commercial one and therefore gets loads of punters. It's quite expensive, but free for over-65s, so it was tempting! But we thought, no, we've done bungee jumping already, we don't need to do it again!

So, drive on again through old gold-mining terrain, including a restored Chinese village where early Chinese prospectors settled during the 18th century, and then arrive in Wanaka, not far from Queenstown but infinitely better, with beautiful houses overlooking the lake and marina. And the lake itself is bordered by an inspired Millennium project: a park area edged with 2000 tiles dating from Year Nought to Year 2000, with one or sometimes two or three items of historical significance on each. For instance, Henry VIII's various wives coming to grief (1500s, variously!);



Millennium Walk in Wanaka.



View from Lake Matheson; Mt Cook on the right.

Handel writing the Hallelujah Chorus (1741); Hillary and Tensing to the top of Everest (1953)..... and so on. You get the idea. It was so fascinating just to walk along.

Next day, go to Glacier Country and visit Fox Glacier and Franz Josef Glacier. Both ‘discovered’ in the 1800s, and have been retreating ever since, more or less, but are still huge tourist attractions. We did a good two-hour walk to get near the face of Franz Josef, and although the weather wasn’t really sparkly, Tony was very pleased with what we saw. Less so with the nearby Fox Glacier, the approach track has been mostly closed for ‘health’n’safety’, so we couldn’t reach where we wanted to be.

But to make up for that we went into the glow-worm woods, just round the corner from our camp site, after dark, which was hilarious. There were loads of people creeping about and bumping into each other in the pitch dark, and hissing “put that light out” if anyone dared to shine so much as a modest torch, because the glow-worms switch off at any hint of competition. But we did see a satisfying number of glow-worms in the bushes and amazingly, managed the odd photograph. The following day, when the rain eventually stopped and the sun came out big time, we went back in the daylight, obviously no glow-worms in evidence, but it turned out to be a truly magical wetland-forest walk, with mosses, ferns and fungi everywhere among the trees, and probably my favourite place in the whole of New Zealand.

Then, having done the rainforest, wild-wood thing, go to nearby Lake Matheson and do the two-hour loop walk around it, for some lovely views of Mount Cook and Mount Tasman, the Top Two, and also reflected in the lake in, for once, cloudless blue-sky sunshine! Tony had earlier climbed up a fairly steep track for views of the whole Southern Alps, looking wonderful with their snow toppings in the sunshine.

Next, get the ferry at Picton for reverse journey back to North Island – and discover that North Island is distinctly warmer and more insect-free! Jump ship at Wellington and drive out to suburbs through horrendous traffic (but even more

going in the other direction) and up into the hills overlooking the city. Wellington is claimed to be a really small capital city, but when you take into account all the suburbs it's actually pretty vast.

Travel back up towards Lake Taupo, passing through a town called Bulls. Why it's called Bulls is anybody's guess – mind you, most of the town names are Maori and completely unpronounceable,

but the good citizens of Bulls obviously see the funny side. You are greeted by the municipal sign saying 'Herd of Bulls?' Then there's the estate agent who professes to be 'Best agent in town – and that's no bull!', the book shop called 'Knowledge-a-bull', and the café rather regrettably advertising 'Coffee on the moove'!

Now we are back near Rotorua, with a few more thermal sites to investigate, and we just had breakfast by a farm track, where we were passed by 1100 cows plodding along to their pasture after being milked. We know there were 1100, because we asked the farmer who was following them down!



Cathedral Cave.

Last hello from Coromandel, February 14

We left the steaming hills of Rotorua behind and headed out to the north coast, where we found an idyllic spot for the night (in the camper-van) out near the tip of a sand-spit at one end of Kohigawa Beach. This looked beautiful from the adjacent headland, with endless waves rolling in across the huge stretch of sand. Inland were miles and miles of kiwi-fruit plantations, with trees laden with fruit. The nearby town of Maketu is apparently the kiwi-fruit-capital of the world, and to prove it they have a kiwi-fruit visitor centre, where you can ride around the kiwi-fruit plantations in a toy train with kiwi-fruit-shaped carriages (full of giggling Chinese – perhaps looking for gooseberries?)

Then we headed up the Coromandel Peninsula, and were lucky to find a space in the road-end car-park, so that we could take the 40-minute walk to Cathedral Cave, which is a rather lovely marine arch at the end of a rather lovely beach crowded with sunbathers of varying degrees of loveliness. And our last night was spent on a delightful wooded campground.

Now we're running out of fun things to do in New Zealand, because tomorrow morning we have to hand in the keys to the campervan and fly home. But it has been – and still is being – a very good time.

Postcards from The Alps 2015

Hello from Grindelwald, June 19

This trip originated because we had a cruise, with Tony lecturing of course, that started at the end of May in Dover and ended on June 12th in Venice, where we declined the flight home and just set off on our own by train. The cruise was as gently relaxing as ever, and we loved the sail-ins to the great natural harbours in Menorca and Malta. Had a final couple of good days in Croatia, when we just wandered on our own around Hvar and Zadar, the highlight being the Sea Organ on the quayside in the centre of Zadar. It's quite new, 2005 I think, and a very clever construction, consisting of a series of steps. And within them there are vents that link to the sea, below water-level, with tuned pipes, so that the waves force air through to create an endless variety of musical notes. Someone said it was only a matter of time before it played Beethoven's Ninth. About the same time it will take a monkey to type the complete works of Shakespeare, we thought!

Our final morning on the ship, we sailed into Venice early. Everyone was out on deck by 6am, the string quartet played Vivaldi as we passed the Bridge of Sighs, St Mark's Square and the Grand Canal, and we were treated to a champagne breakfast! I must say, ships do know how to do these things in style, and Venice was, after all, the highlight of the cruise for most passengers.

We left the ship and simply walked through town to our hotel, which Tony had booked ahead, and where we stayed for a couple of nights. A brilliant hotel it was too, by the Academia Bridge over the Grand Canal, and right on the canal, with a marvellous view of the non-stop water traffic. The room was quite small: Tony was

just half an inch off being able to touch the walls on both sides, but the view made up for having to shuffle sideways past the bed to reach the window-ledge, which was large enough to sit on for breakfast!

We had a brilliant couple of days just walking the back streets beside all the little waterways, stopping every now and again at pavement cafes in one or another of the squares, and we remembered all over again what an amazingly wonderful city Venice is. Highlight of Venice? Probably the church of San Rocco, where the interior is decorated with massive paintings by many of the well-known Italian artists, notably Tintoretto. And outside we listened to a somewhat ancient opera singer busking;



he still had an amazing voice and clearly had been a professional in his younger days, and was well deserving of our contribution to his cap!

On Sunday, the day we caught a train out of Venice, we woke up to a terrific thunderstorm, so instead of walking to the railway station we caught the *vaporetto* water-bus – it was less than a minute's walk from the hotel to the bus stop, but we needed the umbrellas all the same! Then it was a good three-hour, two-train journey to Bergamo, a fairly large Italian city, where we took a bus up to the old town, which was charming. Very walkable distances around it, and we found an excellent hotel at a very reasonable price, right on the main square. Which was just as well, as it meant we didn't have so far to go when the heavens opened again and we had another mega thunderstorm! It didn't last for ever, though, and we really enjoyed the town. A brilliantly overdone baroque cathedral, the best cobbled streets I've ever seen (albeit horrid to walk over) and loads of quaint little shops and restaurants, including a bar at the top of the funicular with a wonderful view over the city below.

We only stayed there one night, and the next morning caught a train into Switzerland, which was really the start of our epic, multi-train journey home. The first thing we did when we got to Switzerland was to buy an eight-day Swiss rail pass, which turned out to be a brilliant investment. That, coupled with the fact that most of the hotels we fetched up in provided a free pass for local buses, trains and cable cars, meant we could pretty much come and go at will, changing our plans from time to time according to the weather. Which we had to do, because the weather, to be honest, was not brilliant. Certainly not days and days of intensely blue skies and sparkingly white snow-capped mountains; instead rather a lot of grey days and cloud-topped mountains! But wherever we were we usually managed to glean some sunshine when it mattered, and we certainly made the best of it.

First Swiss stop was Pontresina (which is the economy town next-door to St Moritz), where we took a train to the cable-car that rose to an overlook on the Bernina mountains, mostly shrouded in cloud so not as spectacular as they should have been, and then back in the valley we walked to the foot of the ever-retreating Morteratsch glacier. It was about a three-mile walk. According to the posts along the way, if we'd done it in 1953 it would only have taken us half an hour to get to the glacier! (If we'd done it in the early 1800s, we could probably have seen it from the hotel window before it started retreating!)



Landwasser viaduct.

Next stop was Fiesch. Five different trains to get there, and lots of window-hopping for pictures as we went through and over some awe-inspiring viaducts and corkscrewing tracks to get up the steep gradients, with some excellent views of waterfalls and gorges and mountains (apart from when they were in thick cloud, but mostly they were good!). We went through what they call the Swiss Grand Canyon (actually cut through the debris from the gigantic, prehistoric, Flims landslide), which was very impressive, and much of the route was on the World Heritage railway that the (very expensive) Glacier Express covers, including the totally spectacular part where the train comes out of a tunnel straight on to the Landwasser viaduct. In fact, we covered the entire Glacier Express route in bits on our very uncrowded local trains, so felt quite able to wave condescendingly to the big-fee-paying passengers in the actual GE trains when we passed them (choosing to ignore their wine waiters and silver-service luncheons!).

From Fiesch, we went up the Eggishorn for the classic views of the Aletsch Glacier during a window of clear blue skies. Then nipped over to Zermat on our rail passes, went up the rack-and-pinion train to Gormergrat, where the sun came out (hurrah!) and we had great views of the Matterhorn, so that was that box ticked. From there we progressed to Grindlewald, through the Lötschberg Tunnel, then via Interlaken, and in Grindlewald we had one of the best hotels of the trip. They couldn't provide a double room for two nights, but could let us have two single rooms, with a shared balcony, which served the purpose ideally! (With one or two more characters, we could have had the makings of a Brian Rix farce!)

From there we were shoulder-to-shoulder with the Eiger, but it was seriously head-in-the-clouds for virtually the whole time we were there, so we didn't altogether get the benefit. However we did discover, by accident, the brilliant series of waterfalls known as the Trummelbach, near Lauterbrunnen. For a handful of Swiss francs, a lift takes you part-way up the cliff, and then you walk down various sets of steps through clefts inside the cliff face, beside ten waterfalls cascading through an impossibly narrow canyon, and finishing up back on the valley floor. Altogether a very good way of spending a rather wet afternoon! And then the very tall Staubbach waterfall was in fine flow from all the day's rain.



Rhine Gorge.

Hello from the Rhine Gorge, June 25

From Grindelwald we proceeded to Lucerne, first on the Post Bus that runs over the pass to Meiringen. Tony wanted to drive the road when we were there with the whole family 30-odd years ago, but it's not open to private cars. So he was really looking forward to going over it in the bus, but sadly, that was one thing we did miss out on, as it was in cloud and rain the whole way. Ho hum. But Lucerne was great, we walked across the wooden bridge with its painted panels that we saw a few years ago, when part of it was closed after a recent fire; it's now restored and looking good again. Went to the top of Mount Rigi (via a lake boat trip and a series of trains), a touch of cloud cleared and we had good views of the valley, and we walked part way down before we took another train down the other side of the mountain and back to Lucerne; so another good day.

Engelberg next. The plan here was to go up the series of three cable-cars to the top of the Titlis mountain for magnificent views. But, on the day we got there, not. Thick cloud! And camcorders on the hotel TV displaying the stages up the mountain showed just that: thick cloud! So: on to plan B. We had a very lazy day doing very little except visiting the monastery that dominates the town – *massive* – with a beautiful church, went to bed, and the next day woke up to Blue Sky Day!!! The best yet, so we walked straight up to the cable-car station, got tickets for the first car that went at 8.30am, and were on the top by 9.30, having it more or less to ourselves at that time of the morning. It was brilliant, and we had an excellent couple of hours before we were among the first to come down again. By which time, the cable-cars coming up, which we passed along the way, were all absolutely *packed*, and huge queues at the bottom by midday, so it all worked to our benefit brilliantly.

The final stop in Switzerland was at Basel, via a short stopover in Bern for a quick walkabout, and from there we came by trains to St. Goar in Germany, in the Rhine Gorge. A *wonderful* place to be, and for me, probably the highlight of the whole trip. Our hotel has a balcony looking over the Rhine, and we are just mesmerised watching the traffic up and down the river. River-cruise-boats of varying sizes of course, but more dramatic are the barges taking freight in both directions, just non-stop day and night..... I could stay here for many days, just sitting and watching. It is beautiful. We caught a bus up to the Lorelei Rock, a high pinnacle that overlooks the meander of the river in both directions, and walked down about a million steps (very knee-trembling!) back down to river level!

Next will be Cologne, and on to Belgium, to stay a couple of nights with Sam and Jennifer and the grandchildren. Then home, on the Eurostar back to St Pancras, King's Cross to Grantham, and change for Nottingham.

P.S. With a final bus to the end of our road, we clocked up 86 trains, buses, ferries and cable-cars in total. Not bad, heh?

Postcards from Northern Mexico 2015

Hello from Baja, December 16

We've been here a week, and the Mexican peninsula of Baja California, the long thin bit on the far west of Mexico, is looking good, after a decidedly rocky start. The weather is not too hot, the sky is mainly cloudless, the natives are friendly, and everything is going well. A great deal better than our first day in Baja, anyway.

We arrived in La Paz via Mexico City, good flights to both cities, collected the car from Budget, and about 11am set off north up the coast road that looked very appealing on the map, heading for the town of San Evaristo, about 100 miles away. It was a rough dirt road, but once we found our way through a maze of tracks around a phosphate mine complex it was perfectly drivable in our Volkswagen saloon (with 2WD) – for the first 50 miles or so. But then it got rougher, and dirtier, and rockier and steeper and stonier.... but we were past the point-of-no-return by then, so we pressed on, and after four hours of heavy-duty driving we triumphantly crested the hill overlooking what we thought was going to be the metropolis of San Evaristo – to see barely a dozen shacks in varying degrees of decrepitude. Nowhere to stay, nowhere to eat and, so the one person we met told us, no other way out either. The road beyond was apparently even worse, and would have been impossible for us to negotiate.

So we were **not** past the point-of-no-return after all, because the only way was back the way we had come, a deeply dismal prospect, but it had to be done, and thankfully we made it back to La Paz where we started from seven hours earlier. The most annoying thing was the Hub Cap Incident. We both noticed it on the track on the way back, both thought we hadn't seen it earlier, but neither of us had the wit to check if it was ours. Needless to say it was, and there it remains.

But having said all that, apart from the Rocky Road experience it was a great drive. Some fantastic bright green and pink rocks and cliffs, lovely glimpses of very pretty coastline from time to time with beaches dotted with shacks and

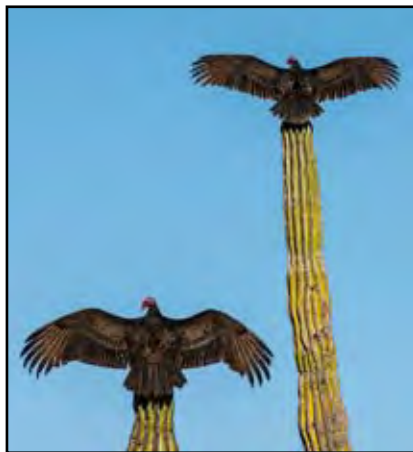


trailers, and most notable of all, cacti as far as the eye could see in all directions – the classic ‘Mexican Pete the Bad Bandit’ cartoon-style cacti (technically speaking, the Mexican Giant Cardon), which, we have since discovered, are endemic throughout the whole of Baja.

So, the first day was by no means all bad, and since then we have gone from strength to strength. We have driven north, again, from La Paz, keeping to the main tarmac roads as

far as possible, across the border from South into North Baja, as far as San Rosaria, and back again, with minor deviations along the way. The very northernmost town is Tijuana, which is where the Californians cross from the USA, but is very Americanised apparently, and we didn't venture that far.

As we drove northward to and across the south/north divide, we moved in to yucca land as far as vegetation goes, with huge varieties of both yucca and cactus, as well as some amazing plants called cirios (immediately nicknamed Cheerios by us, although I suspect that is not the authentic Mexican pronunciation). They are very tall, incredibly spindly, covered in bristles and with an orangey-red tuft on the top. Really quite ugly, but somehow with a certain charm and rather appealing. We went through several Valleys of the Cheerios; they are obviously quite an important Baja plant, and we were really sorry when we ran out of them as we came back south. The 'Mexican Pete' cacti are a constant, but everything else that grows seems very dependent on latitude and altitude. Everywhere we go there are dozens and dozens of turkey vultures either wheeling around in the sky or else sitting on top of cacti, which looks decidedly uncomfortable, but they seem to like it. Along the coast, though, pelicans are our personal birds of choice.



Turkey vultures on cardons.

The towns are relatively few and far, between lots of mileage, but the tarmac roads are good apart from rather a lot of rogue potholes, with very little traffic, and the towns are all very different from one another, with some wonderful names. Constitucion, Insurgentes, La Purisima (a lovely, remote, old mining village), San Ignacio, Guerrero Negro..... to name but a few. I particularly liked Santa Rosalia, with its rusting old relics of a 20th-century copper-processing plant. Tony prefers all the volcanic features, including the very impressive cones of Las Tres Virgenes. So we now have lots of new volcano-oriented pictures, which are all grist to the mill for his lectures on the cruise that starts in Mexico next year.



Baja beach camp.



Cabo San Lucas with three cruise ships anchored in the bay.

Now we are back down south of La Paz, in real American seaside holiday-townsville. Different again from what we have seen, but all fun. There was a big fire this morning which took out most of a palm grove on the edge of town. I gather it happens with some regularity, but the fire brigade somehow got it under control, luckily before it got to our hotel!

Hello from Copper Canyon, December 28

Since the first email, we had another three nights in Baja, two in San Jose del Cabo, and one back in La Paz. We passed through Cabo San Lucas, stopping for a walk around. This is the ultimate seaside touristy town, the favourite with holidaying Americans, and crawling with cruise-ship passengers putting the prices up in the fresh orange juice bars! There were three ships anchored outside the port while we were there (and it's amazing how snobby you can get about 'cruise-ship passengers' when you're not one yourself!!!). Anyway, we pressed on to San Jose del Cabo, which we thought was a greatly superior town, the best bit being the town square. Like



Christmas in San Jose del Cabo.

all Mexican town squares, it had its statutory Christmas tree and Nativity scene, but this square beat all others, both evenings we were there. It was absolutely packed with highly excited crowds, with processions of people in silly hats and carnival floats and lots of Santa Clauses along the surrounding streets, and a continual programme of performances from schoolchildren on stage, singing, dancing, playing various musical instruments..... some good, some excruciatingly bad, but all of them having so much fun, and enjoying themselves so much, it was really a tremendous atmosphere. We could have stayed there a lot longer, just for the evening entertainment, apparently the kids do it every evening from about December 12th right up to Christmas Eve.

Then it was back to La Paz for the night, before we delivered the car back to Budget in the morning (some degree of hassle over the missing hub cap!), and caught the ferry away from Baja to the mainland, to the excellently named Topolobampo: inordinate amounts of queueing, to get our boarding passes, to get on the ferry, to get the lunch that was included in the ticket, eventually to get off the ferry..... but finally we arrived about 11pm, and found the hotel which Tony had judiciously booked ahead. As you know we don't normally book, but since this was a one-hotel town, and we knew we wouldn't be there until late, it seemed sense. Not that there was much to the hotel, or the town for that matter.



Village sales where the daily trains pass each other.

Next morning, we took the local bus to Las Mochis. Then wandered the streets till we could find another bus heading east. (Not a bad town, except that two weeks later Snr. Guzman, the Sinaloa drug baron, had a major gun battle in the streets!!) So perhaps best that we missed the excitement, but the next bus was good and took us to El Fuerte, a delightful town where we stayed in a magnificent (but very cheap) hotel. And were ready the next day to catch the train over the Copper Canyon railway first thing in the morning.

This rail trip was something of a highlight, travelling up into the hills with a series of loop-the-loops and corkscrews and viaducts and tunnels through some fantastic scenery. The train was fairly full but not too crowded, and we had excellent seats (even though Tony was standing at the open doorway most of the time!), it was immaculately clean and the staff were all very efficient, friendly and helpful, including the two armed guards who patrolled the corridors the whole day with their automatic rifles. Don't know whether we should have been comforted or concerned by that fact! Luckily though the journey was incident-free, although the weather was at its worst that day – no rain, but very cloudy and dull – and we got to the little town of Creel about 4.30pm, only an hour late. (Later in the week, when we were back in Creel, we saw the same train, due in at 3.30pm, arriving at 6.15pm!)

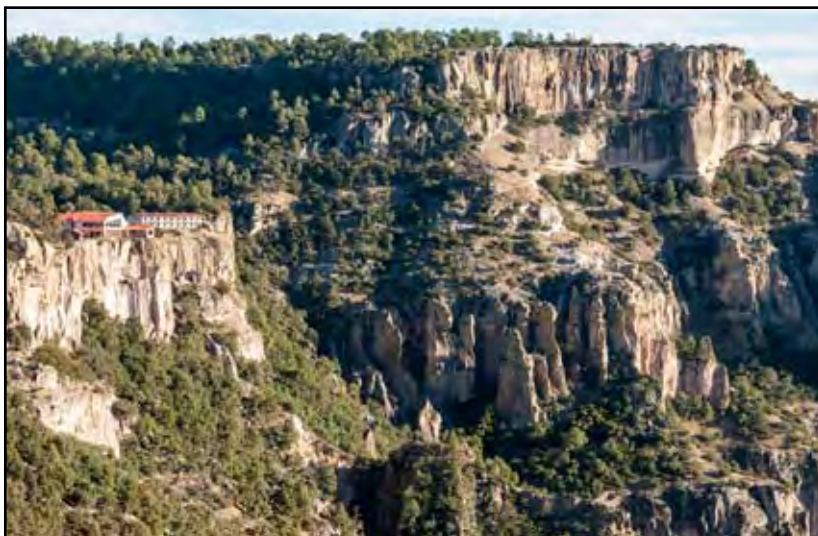
Creel was a good town to stay in, lots of hotels, restaurants, shops etc. without being big-city-busy. We had a lovely hotel to stay in, and then we just had to stroll up the street in the morning to catch a long-distance bus to Chihuahua. We were fortunate to get good seats, because the bus was packed, with people standing in



Street band in Chihuahua.

the aisle the whole way. It was a shifting population, with passengers getting off and on all the time, but it was definitely standing room only for some!

Chihuahua *was* big-city, but pleasantly so. We found a good hotel just behind the cathedral and just a few steps away from the square; and now I come to think of it, this was definitely our favourite square of all! Yes, there was the tree and the nativity scene and a beautiful tunnel of lights to walk through but – what made it by far the best was the Hallelujah Chorus! At the foot of all the trees were loud speakers set into the ground, continually playing Christmas music, and that first evening as we walked into the square, we timed it perfectly to hear them playing Handel's masterpiece! As time went on it rather degenerated into Pinky and Perky, and the inevitable Bing Crosby and his White Christmas, etc. etc, but we'd had the best of it by then. The other 'best bit' of Chihuahua was the municipal palace (town hall!), with a great frieze round the walls depicting the history of Mexico, beautifully painted, and a massive Christmas tree in the middle of the room fashioned out of squashed Coca Cola bottles sprayed with what looked like industrial Polyfilla and hung with huge red balls! Very effective indeed.



Our hotel at Divisadero, built right on the edge of the Copper Canyon.

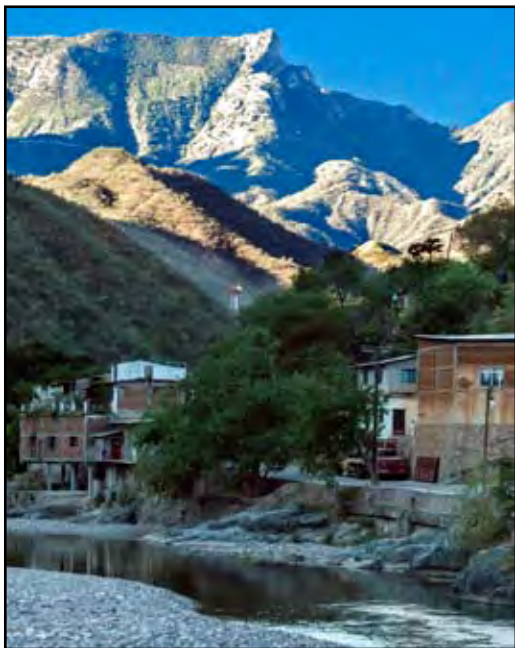
We picked up our second car of the trip (with a full complement of hub caps) at Chihuahua airport and set off back to the Copper Canyon area, in considerably better weather this time, which worked out very well, because with having the car we could stop whenever we wanted, and walk to good views and so on, which was good for the photographs. We stayed two nights at a brilliant hotel at a place called Divisadero, which is literally a..... 'place'. Not a town, not even a village, just a railway station – but the major railway station on the Copper Canyon route. It's the highest point that the train passes through – the train stops for 20 minutes here on its journey, to allow passengers to get off for photographs (and to buy dolls and baskets and stuff from the dozens of Indian women and children who live in cabins around and about) – and the scenery is all pretty awe-inspiring. But, the best view of all was virtually out of our bedroom window! Copper Canyon is huge, same sort of size as Grand Canyon, and often claimed to be deeper. It's a big complex feature, with lots of side canyons and internal cliffs and gorges. All cut into pale volcanic rocks (actually ignimbrites, much to The Geologist's excitement), including a strong bed at rim-level to create lines of dramatic cliffs, with our hotel perched right on the edge of one.

Hello from Chihuahua, December 28

Following our stay at the lovely Divisadero hotel, we drove down a newly tarred road into the depths of the canyon, on Christmas Eve. This was the best day weather-wise that we had the whole time, absolutely cloudless blue sky, and we drove through more amazingly scenic stuff, all the while not really knowing what to expect when we got there. Batopilas is the old mining town on the floor of the canyon nearly 6000 feet below our previous night's rim hotel. It is also at the end of the road, literally, and it was obvious that the road gets more than its share of rock falls, so who was to say we wouldn't be trapped in the town by a landslide overnight?? What's more, the town appeared to be closed when we got there! The two hotels seemed to be locked and bolted, not a great deal in the way of shops, so we were a bit nonplussed – when out of the blue four young lads appeared, and after lots of very bad Spanish and a great deal of arm-waving, they led us to the owner of one of the hotels, who was in another house altogether, but who was delighted to let us stay in her extremely welcoming establishment! So there was



Local folk above Copper Canyon.



Morning shadows at Batopilas.

room at the inn for us after all on Christmas Eve! It turned out there was an American couple staying there as well; he was a geologist, so lots for him and Tony to talk about! And then an excellent dinner at the local equivalent of Mrs Miggins' cafe, which was the front room of Mrs M's own house.

Next day, Christmas Day, we came back up the road (no overnight rock falls, and hardly another car to be seen) and back into Creel for the night – that was when we saw the very late train pulling into the station! Plans then were to travel to another couple of towns in the area, but when we got there the weather had turned cold and wet, and the towns themselves looked very

dingy and uninviting. So after a lucky break in the clouds at the viewpoint for the 800-foot-high single-drop Basaseachi waterfall, we hot-footed (hot-wheeled?) it back to Chihuahua for the last two nights, which was by far the best plan. By the time we drove away, the rain had turned to snow, and it got colder and colder and it was *freezing* by the time we eventually got down to Chihuahua. It was several degrees below freezing in fact, and with a wind as well, so we were glad indeed of the warm clothes we'd lugged about up till then.

But we then had a totally wonderful day, quite unexpected, going to the old mining town of Santa Eulalia that Tony remembered reading about when he was a student. Although the mine is defunct now, we spent ages in a wonderful shop, stuffed full of mining antiques, old bank records (because of the wealth of the mine, it was only the second town in Mexico to have a bank, after Mexico City), photographs, and just general memorabilia and absolutely fascinating junk-shop style stuff. Just my sort of shop!

Then all at once it was the 28th December, and back-to-the-airport day, Chihuahua to Mexico City, and overnight to Heathrow. End of a brilliant trip.

Postcards from South America 2016

Hello from Costa Rica, March 7

I'm writing this sitting in a sort of open-air shed at the base of Mount Cerro Negro in Nicaragua. It's a volcanic cinder cone, and Tony and 25 others are walking up it, in shadeless sun and a temperature of 98°F. Let me expand.....

To begin at the beginning, we arrived in Acapulco last Saturday evening after a better-than-expected flight from Gatwick. Owing to my sciatic back and leg we booked a passage on one of those beep-beep mobility car things (very embarrassing for Tony, but I was fine with it), and not only did it transport us painlessly to the far distant departure gate, but we were fast-tracked through security and on to the plane, so altogether well worth the sciatica. I can recommend it.

We spent the next day in Acapulco. Well, I was on board the ship in Acapulco, Tony went on a very long and tiring walkabout. He got to the cliff where people climb up and dive off from 50 feet up, but didn't see the cliff divers themselves, although people who went out to see them in the evening said they were very impressive.

Then it was two days at sea, when the four lecturers all had one, or in some cases two, stints. We have: Sue, a marine biologist, whose first talk I found a bit boring; too many maps and diagrams and graphs and not enough pretty pictures of fish and corals. I know, I know, I am so shallow! Then there's Andrew, retired diplomat, who talks in a diplomatic monotone and reads it all from a script. Next is Carrie, a youngish British textile designer who reads her lectures and is rather heavy on promoting her own company that makes panama hats in Ecuador. (Breaking news: panama hats come from Ecuador, not Panama!) And then of course there's Tony. I'm sorry to keep banging on, but he is good. His second lecture was on volcanoes, and I am now universally categorised as Mrs Volcano!

Our first port of call on Wednesday was to Guatemala, where we had a long, two-hour, bus-ride to Lake Atitlan, with good views of Mt Fuego spitting out ash and steam and rocks. All very exciting. Actually the whole of the Guatemala/Nicaragua area of Central America is a hotbed of volcanoes – so to speak – so it's all good geological stuff. At Lake Atitlan we boarded a slightly rickety boat across the lake to a village on the far side, lots of locals selling lots of local rugs, local shawls, local jewellery etc, then boat back, lunch at a local hotel serving local food; altogether lots of 'local', then a bus back to the ship! Not a bad day out.

Our next stop should have been San Juan del Sur in Nicaragua, where we were due to anchor offshore, but the forecast was for so much wind that it would have been impossible for the tenders to be loaded safely with



passengers, so the captain changed the plan and we landed a day early in Puerto Corinto, another Nicaraguan port. A nightmare for the shore excursion people, who had the task of cancelling all the San Juan trips and arranging new ones at the last minute, at Corinto. They literally worked through the night to get it done.

Anyway, the upshot was that Tony got escort duty on the two-hour bus trip through the countryside to Cerro Negro, where I now sit waiting for the intrepid hikers to return. **Intrepid?** There was actually much trepidation when they set off, with warnings of steep paths, rough and rocky climbs, searing heat, and generally doom-laden prophecies ringing in their ears.....

Well, the travellers returned, euphoric at having achieved the climb, and in a high state of self-congratulation! It was hard but not **that** hard apparently, although the unexpected wind at the top was so strong they could hardly stand up. The crater was well worth the climb up, and the coming down, virtually running down an ash slope on the other side of the mountain, was brilliant. So Tony thought, anyway! Everyone was very glad to have done it, and while I would have gladly joined them if possible, I was quite grateful to be able to play the Bad Leg Card! (Which is steadily getting much better, although not quite there yet).

Now we're in Costa Rica, where we are on the coast in a volcano-free zone. We went out yesterday on a boat trip through a mangrove swamp, and saw loads of different birds including a lovely pink spoonbill, and also crocodiles, which we think are actually caimans, but either way are very primeval looking creatures.

Next stop – or slow-down, I suppose I should say – is the Panama Canal.

Hello from Cartagena, 13 March

We have now come through the Panama Canal, which for many people was the highlight of the cruise, and why a lot of them were on the ship in the first place. We arrived at the first locks, Miraflores, at about 9am. They took an hour to pass. Then 30 minutes later the Pedro Miguel lock and out into the main canal with Gatun Lake beyond, 85 feet above sea level. Remains of huge landslides on either side, the result



Miraflores Locks on the Panama Canal at night.

of excavating the canal. All a little difficult to comprehend, but we had heard about the engineering and geological complexities the day before from our geology lecturer! And then Tony was on the bridge, talking us through the story of the landslides as we passed them. It took four hours to cross to the Gatun Locks at the far end, where we duly dropped

85 feet to pass into the Atlantic. Somehow, I'm not quite sure why, the Gatun locks seemed more interesting than the first ones. Perhaps because the novelty had worn off for lots of people, so I could get to a rail and actually see what I was supposed to be looking at! Anyway, we're doing it again in a few days' time, the other way round, so I'll see if it looks any different on the return journey.

The day before we went through the canal we had a ship's excursion to the Miraflores Locks visitor centre (not very good) and a walk through the old town of Panama, which **was** good. Panama City is very impressive, with a terrific skyline of skyscrapers. It's a very rich city – as well it ought to be, when it charges up to \$400,000 for a ship to go through the canal.



Ladies of San Blas.

The day after Panama we anchored off the San Blas Islands, and took a ship's tender to Isla Carti, which is only a tiny little fishing village and so rather swamped by hundreds of cruise ship passengers, but the villagers turned out in force, selling brightly coloured embroidered and appliqué wall hangings, bags, pot-holders, T-shirts and so on. Also bead bracelets are very popular, with many local women wearing them to cover their legs from ankle to knee. Altogether, the island was very colourful, with lots of children wanting photos taken with their pet parakeets that they carried around on perches (the birds weren't tied down or in cages, so clearly happy enough not to want to fly off) and nearly every family seemed to own a pet dog, and again they all looked very happy and well cared for (children and dogs!), We thought it was a lovely place to visit, but some people off the ship were horrified because it was 'so dirty and squalid and *poor*'. Which it wasn't; it was just simple. But if it doesn't have air-conditioned cafes and flush loos it automatically ranks as poor!

Now we're in Cartagena in Colombia. We have done a tour of the city, including a monastery high on a hill overlooking the city, a fort high on another hill, and a walk round the old town – and Tony and I did an extra walkabout on our own through the town, which is actually beautiful. Although there are plenty of skyscrapers and new commercial developments in the new parts, the old town has been well preserved, and hasn't been encroached upon.

From where the ship is docked it's about a quarter-mile walk to the port buildings, which are set in the most delightful garden area – they call it a zoo, but it's not quite that. It's just a green space of trees and shrubs, with howler monkeys in the trees, macaws and flamingos and various other exotic birds wandering about, and an aviary with toucans whose favourite occupation is pecking shoes (and toes if you happen to be wearing sandals; like me!).



Cartagena.

Yesterday was changeover day for the passengers, so most people who know and love us have gone, and we have to start ingratiating ourselves with a whole new lot! Although already we have bumped into several who have been on with us before, and know Tony from his lectures, which is gratifying. We had a good afternoon yesterday, Tony got a taxi organised to take us and another couple (Sara and Nick, also staying on for the next cruise) to the El Totumo mud volcano, an hour out of town. This isn't a volcano in the hot sense, as its mud rises to the surface under pressure of water and methane. It's a very steep-sided cone, with a rickety ladder up the outside, and another ladder, even more rustic and slippery, inside down into the mud, which is so thick and dense that it's impossible to sink into it. You just wallow in it for a bit, and then clamber out to be washed down

with buckets of water by dusky maidens (Tony wishes; actually, rather gnarled old ladies, who then demand extra pesos for the pleasure!). It was originally one of the ship's excursions, but because of the exceptionally dry weather recently the mud level has dropped to an unacceptable level for the average passenger to manage the internal ladder. Most of them would never have got up again! But it resulted in some good photos and it was a fun day out for the four of us. Sara and Nick gamely volunteered for the mud bath, Tony and I wimped out!

So – one cruise over and another just beginning. It's been good so far, and satisfactorily bumpy once we came into the Atlantic (actually the Caribbean Sea, which was rougher than usual), with at least one exciting storm that caused the captain to cancel his farewell cocktail party the other evening, which is fairly exceptional. Mind you, loads of people had already taken to their beds by then anyway. We had dinner with Veronica instead – an old stalwart of this ship, having clocked up 57 cruises! We know her quite well by now, and she makes a point of booking at least some of her cruises to be the ones that Tony is lecturing on.

Now we're due to leave Cartagena this afternoon, back to the San Blas Islands tomorrow (but a different island this time, just a little patch of sand and beach for the dedicated sun-worshippers), back through the Panama Canal, then turn left to Ecuador, Peru, and back to Ecuador where we will leave the ship.

Hello from Peru, 25 March

So, we have just had our Big Day Out. More precisely a Long Day Out, to see the Nazca Lines. Some people have heard of them, some haven't – but they are ancient lines and geometric patterns etched into the Peruvian desert that are only visible from the air. Nobody quite knows how or why or when, but probably going back to Inca/Mayan/Druid ages as symbols for the gods, certainly way before planes, satellites or drones. And of course Tony has a theory as to how (but not why)!

As we were docked in the port outside Lima for three days, the middle day was the ideal opportunity to have a day out on our own. We had a car from the ship to Lima bus station, then a five-hour bus journey to the town of Ica, 200 miles away (in super-luxury business-class bus travel, I might add) and from there an hour's flight in a little 12-seater Cessna over the desert. And I must say the desert itself was absolutely beautiful, magnificent dunes and gullies and river valleys, but the actual Nazca figures and symbols were really difficult to make out, and we struggled to see anything at all. We did spot a couple, and in fact Tony got a brilliant picture of some that he didn't even realise he was taking at the time; we only recognised them when he enhanced the photos on his computer this morning! Like those pictures of ghosts and fairies that mysteriously appear on people's cameras!

Having seen or not seen the famous Nazca Lines, we went on to an absolutely lovely little oasis town about twenty minutes from the airstrip, that was the highlight of the day in the end, and Tony managed to trudge most of the way up a massive sand dune nearby (is there any harder work than walking up a sand dune?). And then it was a five-hour bus trip back in rather less luxury to Lima, and then a good hour getting back to the ship because the Lima traffic is horrendous. So is the security at the port gates – a long story – because the area is apparently crawling with 'banditos', but we managed to negotiate it without coming to grief!

So that was that box ticked, and it was an excellent day out. During the three days we were in port, a great majority of the passengers went off to Machu Picchu and

*Nazca Lines:
straight and
broad lines
crossing the
thinner lines
of the Parrot
figure.*



were off the ship for two nights, so it was a bit like the Marie Celeste on board. We went to Machu Picchu on our own 12 years ago, so didn't want to get involved this time, and actually we were quite pleased to be out of it, as there is some evidence of the dreaded norovirus on board, and the prospect of being responsible for people potentially being struck down on that sort of contained-space trip, involving planes, buses and strange hotel rooms, was not to be countenanced – not to mention half of them being scared stiff of altitude sickness into the bargain.

Having said that, the ship has moved into sickness-bug red-alert action very efficiently – no more buffet service, you even have to ask for the salt and pepper to be sprinkled for you, and staff bearing hand sanitizers jump out at you from round every corner – and it seems, touch wood, that the bug is contained.

Before all that, this second cruise has gone very well. It still seemed odd having a second shift of passengers to get to know, but we're over that now, and Tony is once again man of the moment. We then did the Panama Canal in reverse, which was even better for me, because instead of standing on the top deck in the boiling sun fighting to get a look-in (or would that be a look-out?), I stationed myself in the aptly-named Lookout Lounge with a perfect view out front in air-conditioned comfort, while Tony did his bridge-commentary bit again.

We were still in Panama on my birthday, and ventured out for breakfast at 7am to be hit in the face with balloons and streamers stuck outside the cabin door! They check these things out from your passport of course. That was quite fun, though, and served the purpose of reminding Tony that, oh yes, it's March 16th, isn't it??? Oh, and I got a card from the captain as well. OK, it was a printed signature, but I'm sure the thought was there! The balloons are still up, stuck to the cabin wall above my bed now, which is about as sad as keeping our Christmas cards up until just before we came away at the end of February!

We were on our way, at 7am on birthday morning, for a trip to the rain forest, an aerial-tram ride, and tours round an orchid farm, butterfly house and frog garden. The frogs, all tiny thumbnail-size, were hard to spot, but we managed a few good pix of a red one, and some bright green ones.

We sailed on and crossed the Equator – cue for high jinks on the pool deck involving well-known members of staff dressing up as Neptune etc, and being covered with a great deal of spaghetti and green jelly; don't ask – and we were each given an Equator certificate, to go with the two each we've now got for the Panama Canal. Rainforest, eat your heart out! Then after we called in to Ecuador briefly, we now have another day in Peru, in Sallavery, before back to Ecuador and off the ship to fend for ourselves! Actually, really looking forward to that now. (A confession to make: this morning, having the ship more or less to ourselves, we played a game of deck shuffleboard. This is conclusive proof that we are well down the slippery slope to becoming chronic cruise-goers. An independent trip through Ecuador comes none too soon!)

Hello from Ecuador, 9 April

Yet again we're home before I've written the final email – it really is becoming rather difficult to send them from foreign climes – but this is a quick lowdown on how we fared, just the two of us together travelling round Ecuador. Basically, it was great. The weather was mixed; lots of cloud (some of it low enough to count as fog!) and a fair amount of rain, but I suppose that's what you might expect in the Amazonian rain forest in the rainy season. And every other day was better, with sun in all the right places, so we didn't actually get the umbrellas out once; it was after all warm rain. In fact very hot and steamy near the coast, but once we drove up into the mountains it was a very comfortable temperature indeed.



We left the ship at Guayaquil, second biggest city in Ecuador, on Easter Sunday, picked the car up, and drove, virtually without incident, to the lovely old mining town of Zaruma, 'clinging picturesquely to the side of a precipitous hill' (as they say in the guide books!). The memorable thing about the journey there was when after stopping at a village for a drink, no sooner had we set off than we heard monumental sirens and bee-baa-bee-baa wailings, and kept looking around for police cars, ambulances, fire engines etc, and going up on to the kerb in a panic, couldn't see anything, but the sirens kept going..... until we realised it was our own car alarm that we'd inadvertently set off! Not that anyone took any notice, because as we came to realise, there is practically always an alarm going off within earshot. And in fact at 04.40 the next morning the burglar alarm in our hotel went off, which had everybody (including us) out on the pavement, but the owner eventually managed to turn it off, and we all went back to sleep again!

From Zaruma, we continued on some fairly remote dirt roads through various hill villages. Then, in the middle of nowhere, as we turned a corner – **wow!** There in the valley beneath us was the most massive basilica, all blue, white and gold in the sun (this was one of the good days!), quite magnificent and totally unexpected. And pretty fantastic inside as well, as were all of the churches in all of the towns,



if truth be told. Most were open, so we visited more than a dozen altogether, and being a Catholic country, many of them had services going on, but as everybody seems to come and go at will we didn't feel that we were intruding.

The basilica in El Cisne was evidently a tourist hot-spot, with rather sad llamas, dressed up in jumpers, silly hats, sunglasses etc, being paraded for kiddies to sit on to have their photos taken. Rather like the local people (who weren't sad at all) but dressed up in traditional national gear and equally willing to be in the picture! The costumes varied a bit from town to town, but were generally wide skirts to below the knee, intricately woven shawls, long plaits down their backs and trilby hats (women) and short trousers/long shorts to below the knee, intricately woven shawls, long plaits down their backs and trilby hats (men)! Depending on where we were there was a good sprinkling of panama hats (made locally of course), and in Otavalo, the women were notable for their very colourful embroidered blouses, which made a welcome change to at least be able to tell one gender from another.

Saraguro was notable for the huge crowd in the square, so we realised something was going on, parked the car and rushed over to find – a massive television rigged up, to watch the Ecuador v. Columbia football match. (Ecuador won; probably just as well for our comfort and safety as the crowd dispersed around us at the end.)

Next stop was Tamba, after an abortive attempt to stay in Zhud, 20 km further along the way, which turned out to be 'The Town With No Beds'! So back to Tamba, where there was a good small hotel, and even a place to eat – another amenity singularly lacking in Zhud. If ever you go to Ecuador, *don't stop in Zhud*. On the way there we called in at the Church in the Rock, built literally into the cliff face. Then on to Banos, very much a gap-year-traveller rest-and-recreation town, where most visitors go canyoning down the river, zip-wiring *across* said canyon, or bungy-jumping *into* the canyon. We had hoped to see Tungurahua, the volcano that towers over the town, erupting, which it was doing three weeks earlier. But now it wasn't. We made a day trip east off the mountains for a beer and a coke in Misahualli, at the head of navigation on a big tributary of the Amazon.



Reventador.

We stayed two nights in Banos, and the volcano simply wasn't playing, so we left it behind and went on to Reventador, a village that boasts another volcano, coincidentally called Reventador, which did come up trumps, with some good mini-eruptions during the day, although sadly hidden by cloud during the night watches! But this was on the edge of the Amazon rain forest, and we had a very green walk through to a huge waterfall. Then we returned over the Andes by a remote high pass that was close to the Colombian border, on a rather rough road through beautiful cloud forest, and passing only one truck on the entire journey.

Other than volcano-spotting, we also visited Quito, the capital city: and another story altogether. While the standard of driving is haphazard, the roads are generally good, although subject to massive and unexpected landslides which happen overnight during the rainy season, and tend to be just round the corner when you are least prepared for them (we even saw one small landslide come down on to a main road). **But** the main drawback is the total lack of signposts. Any hint of direction is non-existent, and since maps are also more or less unobtainable, it was a question of going by the sun, which I have to say Tony is extremely good at doing – but at midday on the equator it's not so easy!!!



Lots and lots of potatoes.

So the first time we tried to drive into Quito, we tried and we tried, for what seemed like several hours, until Tony finally lost patience and said: “blow this for a game of soldiers” – or words to that effect – and we just gave it up as a bad job. Several days later, we approached it again, from the other side and with some trepidation, and – yippee – actually managed to breach the city walls, and park the car, so we had two hours walking round Quito. Another city with streets either up or down, nothing horizontal. One of the two main churches wanted eight dollars to go in, and no photos allowed (so we didn’t), but the other church was absolutely stunning with vast quantities of gold leaf.

Then we went to Saquisilí. It was a brilliant sunny morning, and we spent it in the town’s Thursday market. They sold everything you could think of, but most notably bananas (Ecuador is the world’s top exporter of bananas), potatoes (potatoes were invented – were discovered?? – in the Andes, and they had umpteen varieties by the sackful), and sugar, sold in bucket-sized blocks. Altogether a great market.

After that, we continued on to Quilotoa and the volcanic caldera lake that Tony was especially keen to see. We had thought that morning that there wasn’t much chance, as the cloud was looking..... cloudy. But it turned out to be fantastically good, beautiful sunlight and the lake was the most amazing shades of green, so it was something of a highlight for our last day. Unfortunately the afternoon went seriously downhill, literally and figuratively. The road down to the coastal plains was in thick cloud (**fog**) for practically the whole 10,000 feet of descent, coupled with heavy rain and landslips, so not an easy drive for Tony.

Our last night was back in Guayaquil, which seemed hot and steamy after the mountains, and thence to the airport (eventually; yet again, no signposts to it) and away. (The plane journey home was as miserable as ever, so good to *be* home!)

Postcards from Norway 2017

Just the one postcard this time. We had a fabulous trip on the Hurtigruten during the last two weeks of February. A very comfortable ship – the MS Richard With. I was going to make a feeble joke about it being better than the Richard Without, but I won't bother, as you may well know that Richard With was the fine fellow who started the Hurtigruten originally. We set off from Bergen in sunshine, then sailed up, calling in at all ports, as you do on the Hurtigruten, which was effectively a water-bus for Norwegians, before they had a lot more road-access to the coastal towns. It still serves the purpose for locals hopping up and down the coast from town to town, but these days the ships are chiefly mini-cruise ships, with an international clientele.

We were disappointed in the weather to begin with, because we'd come for snow, but it had been an unusually warm winter. Still no sight of snow as far as Trondheim, where we had time to walk into the town and to the cathedral with its magnificent frontage, sadly in the rain. Once we'd crossed the Arctic Circle, however, and called in at Bodø, it was snow all the way. And we had some brilliant sunshiny days, so good for photos. We didn't get off at every single port, but did well enough.

We walked over the long, long bridge at Tromsø to the modern Arctic Cathedral, knocking icicles off the railings as we went. Hammerfest was during the night northbound, but we came off for a morning's walk around Honningsvåg, which was lovely, after which we saw the best of the northern lights during the next couple of nights. And so to Kirkenes, the end of the line, so to speak, where we stopped for most of a day. So we walked around the town (and Tony also went up on to the hills), all in deep snow with beautiful snow-covered trees.

Many passengers left at Kirkenes, to fly back south, but we were very glad we were doing the Bergen-to-Bergen option, because the weather and scenery were even better in reverse. Back in Tromsø, we went to a midnight concert in the cathedral, which was lovely. Even lovelier was the fact that a bus picked us up from the ship and brought us back, so I didn't have to trudge across that bloody bridge yet again;



I think it's four times we've walked it now and it gets longer every time! And then a beautiful afternoon along the narrow Raftsund, a fiord-like strait amid snow-covered mountains just north of the Lofoten Islands. We peered into the famously narrow Trollfjord, but the ship couldn't go in because of the danger of avalanches dumping tons of snow on the decks.

It was interesting comparing the Hurtigruten with the cruise ships we've been on. It's a working ship, so when hop-on-hop-off passengers come aboard between two ports you can't get annoyed when you find them sitting in the seats in the lounge that you've appropriated

(actually, you can – get annoyed, that is!!!), but it was all very comfortable and organised. The food took a bit of getting used to, but it was actually very good. It helps if you like fish, naturally, but once you learned to pick your way through the dried, salted, boiled, baked varieties, there was plenty to go at. We had reindeer a couple of times in a sort of stew which actually wasn't particularly tasty, but it served the purpose.



Kirkenes.

What we did find odd was that dinner was a set meal, at a set table, at a set time. On our “normal” cruises we always opt for the evening buffet and sit with whoever happens to be there, so we were a bit taken aback by the somewhat rigid regime. The first evening we were destined to eat at 8.30pm, and found ourselves on a table by ourselves. So we asked to change, and were moved to 8pm (better) on a table with a couple who turned out to be absolutely delightful, we got on really well with them, so we all four thought we'd actually been very lucky. One night they were out on some late-evening excursion and missed our regular dinner slot, so we joined another couple who were similarly on their own; and they were soooo boring, well she was all right but he was dreadful.

All the crew and staff were really friendly and easy to get on with, and we were well impressed with the cruise director (I suppose; not sure what his title was) who gave the announcements over the loud speaker, switching from Norwegian to English to German to French practically in one breath, absolutely effortlessly. It turned out that he is Swiss, which accounts for the German and French (he can do Italian as well, if called upon to do so), learned English at school, and has lived in Norway for years, so he's got them all. But he couldn't manage the Japanese!



Tromsø.

So all in all the Hurtigruten was a great experience. We had often said that we would try it, and winter made it different. Also it nicely filled in the gap left by the sad demise of Voyages of Discovery. We had been scheduled to join Voyager in Singapore for a cruise round Indonesia, and then go off on our own to Laos (but see 2018), until the company went bankrupt, three days before we were due at the airport.

Postcard from Ireland 2017

Needless to say, four weeks at home after the Hurtigruten was more than enough time for the itchy-foot syndrome to set in, so off we went for a week in Ireland, end of March and early April. Actually there was a bit more to it than that. Tony had lectures in Belfast on the Monday, and Dublin on the Tuesday – both reprises of the lecture that he gave when he was presented with the Glossop Medal by the Geological Society. So since we were expenses-paid travelling to Ireland anyway, we hired a car and made a week of it, mainly travelling round the northwest coast of Eire.

A long-standing friend, Mike Simms, was at the Belfast lecture. He's the curator of the geological bit of the museum there, and we had an hour or so with him the next morning going round the museum, before it opened to the great unwashed public! It really is brilliant. Some truly remarkable dinosaur fossils, and collections of minerals, meteorites and fossils that are stunning even to a heathen non-geologist, and some quite quirky stuff as well. One of Mike's prize purchases is the *Boys' Own Radioactive Chemistry Set* with 'things to do that will glow in the dark' etc etc. It included a Geiger counter so you can see how rapidly you're likely to expire. The small sample jars of uranium and plutonium had to be taken out before they were allowed to export it from the USA, but otherwise the kit was intact. Just what you want for Christmas, hey?

When we left Dublin the next day after the second lecture (not a particularly easy option, given the traffic!) we made for Cong. It's quite a pleasantly touristy town, with a now-defunct canal that joined the two big lakes, Lough Corrib and Lough Mask, which are at different levels. It's the standard Irish-joke canal, because it was built across limestone, so it's empty for most of the year, when all the drainage sinks underground. The weather was a bit iffy, quite a lot of sunshine but one amazing rainstorm that only lasted about five minutes, though we were barely able to keep driving. Had to, though, because anyone following would have gone straight into the back of us, when you simply couldn't see more than a few yards ahead.

We ended up that day in Westport, which is a delightful town. We found a lovely hotel, and they recommended the best bar in town for live Irish music: Matt Malloy's.



And it was..... amazing. Four of them, guitar, ukulele, fiddle and piano accordion, later joined by another guitarist, and naturally all accompanied by copious pints of Guinness (them as well as me!) and the atmosphere was fantastic. Packed to the ceiling of course, but luckily we were in there early enough to get a seat, for me anyway, Tony was up and taking photos, and it was just the best evening ever.

Next day we carried on investigating side roads and peninsulas along the way with some good sea-scapes, before stopping overnight in Ballina. Notable in the fields are the rainbow-coloured sheep! I know farmers put dye on ewes to identify them, and rams have bags of dye underneath them to establish who's done what to which, so yes,



The very best of Irish music at Matt Malloy's in Westport.

blue or green or orange markings I can understand. But some of the sheep were totally multi-coloured, with five or six dyes. They actually looked rather fetching and very Vivienne Westwood – but I bet they felt a bit stupid. And some of the quite tiny lambs were already dyed, as well. They were quite sweet. Like little girls prancing around in their mummy's make-up.

Halfway through the trip we fetched up near Enniskillen, where we stayed the night with old friends, Tim and Pam Fogg, in their lovely cottage. They are both cavers, and set up their own rope-access company, which is still going, but Tim was head-hunted by the BBC some years ago, and goes on a great many of their wildlife-filming ventures all over the world. His role is to get photographers and cameras either up trees or down caves or into difficult spaces. 'All at our expense' as Tony can never resist telling him, us being BBC licence-holders! Pam sometimes goes with him, but they were both at home when we were there, so we had a great evening with them. When we said we'd been to a music bar in Westport, Tim immediately said: "Oh, was it Matt Malloy's? His bar is absolutely the best!", so we felt very pleased that we'd clearly been to the right one.

The next morning they were due to be rigging a cave with ropes and belays etc for a television crew that were due in the afternoon. I sensibly opted to stay at home reading the paper. Tony went with them, and got **soaked**, in the worst weather we had the whole time we were in Ireland.

However, we then had a beautiful, blue-sky day in Donegal, searching out some excellent scenery. Some lovely wide bays with your actual 'azure sea and golden sands', it was all very beautiful. One of the best was Trabane Bay, at Malin Beg. And we went up to the super-tall cliffs at Slieve League, in good sunshine when we arrived, until the rain set in and provided a fantastic rainbow. Then down to Killybegs, which we think is the biggest fishing port in Ireland, but there's not a

*Trabane Bay.*

great deal else there, so we ended up in Ardara for the night, which was fine. The hotel, however, was packed out for some corporate event, and so when we went down to have dinner the dining room was a no-go area, but we could eat in the bar, we were told. So we ordered, and sat. And sat. And sat..... An hour later our meals arrived, but in the meantime they'd plied us with drinks on the house by way of apology, and in fact we were perfectly timed after we'd eaten to go next door to another music bar, where we had another great evening's entertainment.

We didn't do Malin Head, it was a bit off our beaten track with limited time, but Tony walked part way up to Horn Head, and we visited Port Stewart and nearby Portrush, and called in at Giant's Causeway. We have walked all over Giant's Causeway in the past, and since it was raining, and it cost £10 each to go down, we didn't. But we did have a drink in the Causeway Hotel in order to walk round and establish that no, you can't see it from the top! It's all very aggressively National Trust these days. Tony went there on a cruise excursion a couple of years ago and was horrified at the dumbing-down of the information that they provide, so we didn't feel the need to pour more money into their coffers. (Although a Coca Cola and an Irish coffee at the Causeway Hotel would probably have kept a medium-sized family in comfort for some considerable time.) We then went to the Rope Bridge at Carrick-a-Rede, which Tony walked down to but not across (no charge for looking, £7 to walk over it and back!). I stopped at the top to be entertained by hordes of Japanese tourists taking selfies!

All in all, Ireland was lovely. The yellow gorse was out in force (that I suppose should be the start of a limerick, but my poetic talents are somewhat lacking at the moment!) and there were miles and miles of peat diggings and peat drainings and peat baggings – lots of peat in other words – and quite a lot of muck-spreading as well! There were some very cute Shetland ponies – which I suppose were actually Donegal ponies, but clearly close cousins! – and everywhere we went, white houses dotted around the countryside at random. It's a very Irish thing, there seem to be very few actual communities, just lots of individual houses everywhere you look.

We've been to both Northern and Southern Ireland many times now, but somehow, I don't think this will have been our last.

Postcards from America 2017

Hello from Atlanta, September 8

We flew into Atlanta about 9pm on Friday September 8. Sam was there to meet us (very heroically; as he'd been there for nearly two hours by the time we came through border-control!) and drove us back to his new home in Alpharetta, a very pleasant suburb of Atlanta, where they have an enormously beautiful and beautifully enormous house! It is enviably large by British standards, but Sam and Jen, 12-year-old Jack and 10-year-old Sarah and Belle-the-cockapoo have already made it very lived-in during the year or so since they moved from Belgium.

We had a lovely weekend with them, inevitably fairly sports-oriented given the ages of the grandchildren. Sarah had the first Softball match of the season on Saturday morning, preceded by a celebratory parade of all the teams (she's in the Smashing Pumpkins; named after an American pop group, apparently; and they won 2-1). And Sarah's friend Piper, also aged 10, sang the *Star Spangled Banner* solo over the microphone before the parade. Very brave. Very American! The evening was spent watching Jack playing ice hockey, at which he excels (his team won 5-3, Jack scored three of the goals!) and going on to supper at a local diner with a load of ice-hockey families. Sunday was largely spent watching the TV, with increasingly dire warnings about Hurricane Irma, which was changing course from the Atlantic and heading straight for Atlanta (cue *Jaws*-style doom-laden music). Schools and public offices were closed, hatches were battened, and we left on Monday morning through a..... well, through what we would call a light rainfall! Yes, I know the hurricanes this year did cause a lot of devastation and grief to a lot of people in a lot of places, but Atlanta did seem to be going into panic-overdrive.

Anyway, there we were, setting off on our fairly epic road trip in the VW Beetle which Avis had seen fit to endow us with. The slow puncture in the rear offside tyre was a minor irritation, the fact that we couldn't get to the back seats easily was a bit more annoying, but all told it went well, and was very economical on fuel, so we didn't really complain.

In his nominal itinerary Tony had allowed for roughly 500 miles a day. The first day we did 660, the second day 800, and the next two days an average of 500 each! But it was all exciting, just driving through all the different cities and states: Chattanooga in Tennessee,



Kentucky, Illinois, staying the night just outside St Louis in Missouri, heading on through Nebraska, narrowly missing Iowa, and into South Dakota and the Black Hills. After three days of ‘name that film, name that song’ I was well into Doris Day and *Annie Get Your Gun*!

We stopped off to look over the plains at herds of bison grazing, and then called in to see the Crazy Horse carving. Which you may not have heard of. It’s a kind of follow-up on the Mount Rushmore carvings of



Crazy Horse in granite.

four US presidents (George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt) but this one is a monument to one of the major Big Chiefs of the Red Indian community. (Oops, sorry, I mean the First People, or Native Americans, or whatever’s politically correct to call them these days). It was commissioned 60 years ago, and is going to be massive when it’s finished, in probably another 60 years’ time! It’s an amazing on-going project that we first saw 10 years or so ago, and it doesn’t look much different, but obviously they are chipping away at it, bit by bit. And one of the bits they chipped off – a great lump of the bedrock granite – we have brought home to put in our round-the-world rock-garden.

Oh, and that was the first time we got stopped for speeding! It only happened twice, and both times we were let off with a caution, but the roads in America are really frustrating, because although they’re wide and straight and well maintained, all the motorists and truck drivers are on cruise control, so even if you’ve got a four or five lane highway, all the lanes are blocked with everybody going at *exactly* 75 miles an hour. So when you do get a chance, you tend to go as fast as your VW Beetle will take you!

We stopped off in Columbia Falls, where we found that the pass through Glacier Park was closed because of forest fires that had been raging for weeks if not months, and the whole area was wreathed in smoke. So we headed straight for the border into British Columbia, where we had no hassle getting across, very laid back (although we didn’t tell them about the crate of beer we had in the boot of the car as a present for John, in Calgary!). Oh, once into Canada we also stopped at a florist in order to take a bunch of flowers to Megan (we were spending the weekend with daughter Megan and John, parents of Matt, Alice and Ruby, and Toby-the-cockapoo), but were so horrified by the price of flowers up there (\$50 for a mixed bunch, \$12 a single stem) that Meg ended up with a box of chocolates instead! The flowers are all imported from Mexico or thereabouts, as they can’t grow them in the BC/Alberta climate.

Hello from Calgary, September 15

So a good weekend with the family in Calgary. Sports for the children of course, soccer and swimming for the girls, soccer-referee training for Matthew, and sport for us, in that we were taken to our first game of American football. Obviously I still don't understand the rules (does anyone?), but it was a great experience. Meg had bought tickets for fairly high up in the stadium – the 'nosebleeder stand' as it's called! – and we watched the Calgary Stampeders beat the BC Lions 27-13. Cheers, whistles, bells, drums and high-kicking cheerleaders all round! There was more entertainment off the pitch than on it, to be honest. Every time one of the 'Stamps' scored a touch-down, their mascot white horse did a victory gallop round the pitch, and at one point for some unknown reason, an impromptu karaoke version of *Sweet Caroline* broke out among the entire crowd, flagged up on the giant screen at one end of the pitch. Neil Diamond would have been proud!

We left Calgary first thing Monday morning and went back into the USA, through fairly heavy rain and snow in Montana, alongside the upper Missouri River with fields teeming with cows and young calves, into Idaho with huge flat spaces dotted with impeccably stacked hay bales but not much else. By Tuesday we were in Utah: Salt Lake City, and Bingham Canyon, the largest copper mine in the world, that we'd seen before years ago, but this time we went to a different overlook, and finally the sun came out for some pictures. The mine is still working, and is still mightily impressive in its sheer size.

On Wednesday, cloudless blue sky and sunshine, at last! Drove into Moab and Arches National Park, where the scenery really *is* amazing. Yes, we've been there before but it's still breathtaking. We stayed in Moab for two nights, at a lovely little motel we found, off the main road and half the price of the big motel chains. We had two early-morning starts (5.30am) to drive up to Dead Horse Point in Canyonlands for the sunrise colours on the red rock canyon of the Colorado River, but on both days there was a bit too much cloud and shadow around for the best photos.

Next port of call: Mexican Hat. So called because of the very distinctive boulder sitting on top of a sandstone rock column that does look just like a..... Mexican's hat! From there we were



Classic view from Dead Horse Point.

within spitting distance of Monument Valley, location for many of the John Wayne cowboys-and-injuns film, and you can hardly go into a shop without being confronted by life-size posters of ‘The Dook’! The park is run by the Navajo Indians, and is Big Business these days, with a huge hotel complex that was new to us, and unfortunately booked up on the night we were there, but we had dinner there, with a brilliant overlook at sunset. (Only non-alcoholic beer in the Indian communities!)

We left Mexican Hat for a Kodak Moment at Goosenecks, the quite extraordinary river meanders that provide amazing viewing from above, then past Natural Bridges and onward to Glen Canyon National Park, all of it in spectacular red-rock country. Finally into the quaintly-named barely-a-town of Bullfrog. (There is a vaguely frog-shaped rock nearby, which is a good enough reason for some.)

Hello from Lake Powell, September 28

Anyway, this was where we came to Lake Powell, which in many ways was the highlight of the trip. Tony had long wanted to hire a houseboat on the lake, which is not so much a lake as a reservoir that is a long (very long, 180 miles of it) strip of water through a steep-walled canyon, with multiple mini-canyons off to the side. Yet again, unbelievably awe-inspiring scenery.

So. We collected our rented boat – an unwieldy great thing that was intended for six people – and set off on our five-day water adventure. We were given all the unnecessary instructions: “here’s the bed, here’s the cooker, here’s the light switch”, but nothing about how to actually drive the thing, so it was a steep learning curve when we chugged off, Tony at the helm. The process of actually getting away from the dockside was highly amusing entertainment for the various spectators on the quayside, but once we were on the lake proper we had plenty of open water to get used to the steering. Which was.....interesting. Turn the wheel, and about ten minutes later it responds. By which time you’ve over-steered, so a mad panic to wind the wheel back again. And then another canyon wall is looming ahead, so another spin of the wheel to avoid it. Tony got the hang of it quite quickly, and he was somewhat critical



Overnight stop on Lake Powell.

of the zig-zag wake that was left behind when I was in the driving seat! In fact, after a couple of days he was so proficient that he was doing three-point-turns near the end of really narrow canyons as to the manner born. And my zig-zags became marginally less bendy.

Tying up at night was another challenge. The idea is to find a sandy beach, nose on to it, and dig a hole to bury the anchors. The trouble is, with rock canyons on either side, there are not a lot of sandy beaches – and those we did see had already been bagged by other boats. So we ended up grinding our way on to the occasional gravelly flat bit, where Tony had to clamber over rocks to tie up to boulders. His caving-belaying experience and boy-scout knot-tying techniques came in extremely useful! Apart from the first night, when the wind came up at about 10pm, the boat swung round, and one of the boulders rolled down into the water and we were blown



Clear Creek Canyon.

sideways along the bank. In the pitch dark and extremely cold wind, we reviewed the situation and decided to go back to bed, pull the covers over our heads and hope for the best. And indeed we lived to tell the tale – although I don't know if the boat company have noticed that they have a rope rather shorter than originally, after we had to cut the recalcitrant boulder loose in the morning! But after that we had perfect stops for the night, always all to ourselves, and we loved it.

The fact that we couldn't get the gas cooker to work didn't matter (nothing wrong with cold tinned tuna and cold baked beans); that half the lights were non-functioning was OK (the other half were all right); that the bed was crammed into such a small space that you literally had to crawl into it from one side, was a mere inconvenience. But what we weren't prepared for was when we were filling up with fuel on the last day, before 'come in number four, your time is up', the very nice young guy doing the refuelling was suddenly approached on either side by gun-toting cops, and taken away in handcuffs! Nobody knew quite why, but the other staff just shrugged their shoulders and said "oh, it happens all the time, just leave the boat where it is", so we did. Apparently something to do with out of-date work permits and OTT National Park police.

Meanwhile....the side canyons were beautiful, confined as they were between towering cliffs which made for some really spectacular sights. Davis Gulch was a winner, with our first idyllic, all-to-ourselves overnight mooring near the La Gorce Arch. Then Clear Creek Canyon was lovely, ending in a basin with a huge cave overhang that caught the sunlight off ripples on the water. There were so many more of those beautiful, red-rock canyons that we cruised up and had to ourselves, before our last night out, all alone again, at the end of the tightly meandering Crystal Spring Canyon.

Hello from Arkansas, October 2

So with a fond farewell to what had become our watery home-from-home, we returned to the car (and a practically flat tyre after five days, but luckily there was a pump within limping distance). From Bullfrog we caught a ferry across the lake to an alternative route back south, with a wonderful winding road (Mokee Dugway) down the side of a mesa (big flat-topped rock to you and me) to Mexican Hat for another overnight stay and another 6am morning trip for sunrise over Monument Valley. Then to Canyon de Chelly, where the Navajo still live and farm in the valley. It's one of our favourite national parks, and we spent a good few hours there, dodging mega thunder-and-lightning storms in between sunshine. And there was a **massive** thunderstorm immediately overhead that night, but by that time we were safely ensconced in our motel.

Then it was goodbye Canyonlands, and along a bit of Route 66 through Oklahoma into Texas and to Amarillo for the night (*"Is this the way..."*), before another long road trip through Oklahoma again and ultimately into Louisiana. On the way, passing through Arkansas (as you do!), we stopped at the Crater of Diamonds, which is basically a big field full of potential diamond finds, where people go for a day, hire a bucket and spade, and literally dig for diamonds. It's on top of a kimberlite pipe that contains the diamonds, but not enough to finance a decent mine, according to The Geologist. One or two people have got very lucky indeed (like \$30,000 lucky), quite a few get a bit lucky, my shovelful of glittery stuff turned out to be worthless quartz. Ho hum. But quite a fun place to visit.

Along the way, we were bang in the middle of the Bible Belt on a Sunday morning. So we stopped at a Baptist church, and went in hoping for some jolly gospel singing and lots of happy-clappies and hallelujahs, and a good time had by all. No. About 250 people in there, not a black face among them, and after catching the end of one bloke's speech a woman got up on the stage and sang a hymn (just her, not the congregation), and then another chap climbed up and started sermonising in full evangelical flow,



Canyon de Chelly.

and went on.... and on..... and on. We thought we'd wait till he'd finished, out of courtesy, but after 40 minutes and no hint of an end in sight, we crept out! Only to be confronted, at the mineral shop down the road, by a lady who we merely

said hello to, after which she suddenly launched into a heavy-duty ecumenical conversation involving the Grand Canyon not being formed by the Colorado River but created by Our Lord. Then she was joined by a passing road sweeper who swore blind that Jesus and Joseph of Arimathea were at Glastonbury picking up minerals only the other day..... well, radical fundamentalism is putting it mildly. We made our excuses and left!

Hello from Atlanta, October 10

By then we were homeward-bound, with just a couple of essential stops along the way. First was New Orleans, where we looked around the areas hit so hard by the flooding from Hurricane Katrina, twelve years ago, and which we had visited the following year, when the devastation was horrendous. Now it's more or less rebuilt, but there's still work going on with some of the buildings. We stopped to talk to a guy working on his house on one suburban street in the Ninth Ward (the worst-hit area). He was a big fat Indian whose name was Big Chief Cisco, who was evacuated to Nebraska after his home was demolished (he thought he was going to New Mexico!), met his wife there, had two children, and now the family is back in their new home that he's still making improvements to. In the meantime he makes enormously elaborate costumes for the annual Mardi Gras, and very proudly showed us the photos to prove it!

We spent the day going round and about, then in the evening headed off to the French Quarter for the jazz! The classic Preservation Hall is not only mega expensive these days, but also it's standing-room only unless you get there an hour before the sessions start, and I wasn't up for standing for any length of time. So instead, we found an excellent bar along the road, Maison Bourbon, at which there was a great jazz band. Uncle Yoke's Catahoula Music Company was brilliant entertainment, with coke and beer too!

Nextday, we drove along the coast of Alabama and Mississippi on the way to Tennessee, and caught the Cruising-the-Coast day. About which we knew nothing previously, but were fascinated by the hordes of people sitting on either side of the road in



Street music in New Orleans.



Memories of Katrina linger in New Orleans: one house had been washed off its footings during the hurricane floods; its neighbour has since been raised above the flood level.

deck-chairs, and green parks full of camper vans and rapidly filling up with cars, which, we suddenly cottoned on, were all classic vintage vehicles. Apparently that was the annual week of driving vintage cars through the coast towns of Alabama. There were 10,000 cars actually registered to take part, and many more just turn up. We were in Biloxi, which was in the middle of it all. Great fun to see the variety of immaculately prepared classic cars and buses, and to talk to some of the owners.

After a night in Prattsville (ho! ho!) we carried on to Birmingham (the Alabama one), which was one of Tony's sinkhole-heaven hot-spots 30 years ago, and where this time he wanted to revisit the road that we had photographed then, full of patches and dips and hollows, thanks to a nearby quarry. But, despite all efforts (and not having anticipated being there again), we couldn't find the road. Instead, though, we just happened to drive past some orange cones on another road, with a work crew on standby, and lo and behold – a brand new sinkhole that had appeared overnight. So, phew, that was worth half a day driving around after all (?!).

And so to Nashville, Tennessee. Another major musical focal-point, for the Grand Ole Opry, and the country music. We had tickets already booked for Ryman Hall, from where the show has been broadcast live on the radio since heaven knows when, and we had a great evening. Some excellent singers and musicians, and always good entertainment when the compere stops every half hour to do his commercial break over the air: "Brought to you by our sponsors, Dime-a-Dozen Grocery Store" in a really all-American cringe-making voice! Nashville, the town, is really buzzy and whizzy and full of flashing lights, and much more of a tourist spot than New Orleans, which is relatively sedate!

Finally, back to Alpharetta for another good weekend with Sam and Jen and the family. Including a lovely meal in an outdoor restaurant with a street market going on, and a visit to Stone Mountain, a brilliant park just south of Atlanta which was the site of a massive quarry a hundred-odd years ago, with some excellent short walks and exhibitions, and a lot of Civil War history.

Then airport, then home. Five weeks, and 8000 miles. All in all, not a bad trip!

Postcards from the South Pacific 2018

Hello from French Polynesia, 19 January

Well here we are in hot and sunny French Polynesia, playing at being extras in South Pacific! Sorry to have to tell you that, while I suspect you are probably in the throes of ice and snow and all things cold, but if it's any consolation it's also very humid here with quite a lot of fairly heavy rainstorms, but they're mostly short and sharp, and then it's back to sunshine.

We joined the ship in Los Angeles, on the second leg of its World Cruise. Most of the passengers started in Miami a month earlier, for what will be just one week short of five months before they finally disembark in London. (We have to get off in Auckland, a day or two short of four **weeks**!) More than 700 passengers are American, there are 40-odd Brits, some Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders, and a smattering of 'others'. But it's a lovely ship, Viking Sun, and all the passengers are extremely friendly and in thrall to Tony after his first three lectures, when they were literally standing in the aisles, and then rushing back to their cabins to watch them again on their TVs!

We had a great day out in Los Angeles, renting a taxi to trip round some sites of classic geological disasters. But then we had seven days at sea without sight of land, which I think is heaven, although it's hell-on-high-water for Tony, particularly if he hasn't got a lecture to do. The routine was slightly enlivened by the obligatory Crossing-the-Equator ceremony on January 11, a rather classier affair on Viking than on some other ships we've been on!

We finally reached our first port-of-call two days later, when we anchored off Nuku Hiva, one of the Marquesas Islands of French Polynesia. We went on shore, and while it was classically pretty, with palm-fringed beaches between turquoise seas and lush green hills, there was not a lot to it other than a welcome committee of local people dressed in flower garlands, grass skirts and not a lot else, and some village displays of local crafts – banana-leaf baskets, coconut carvings, batik garments and so on. Tony walked a long way up the hill at the back of 'town' just for photographs of textbook Pacific Island views, and that was more or less it.

Another day at sea, before arriving in Tahiti. Such a romantic sounding island, very Fletcher Christian and handing around of breadfruits and so on, but actually the capital Papeete is very much just a big city and otherwise the island is a lot of forest and not much more. But, thanks to Tony's fore-planning, we caught the ferry to the nearby island of Mo'orea, half an hour away, which





Luxury holiday village built on stilts over into the fringing lagoon of Mo'orea.

was truly idyllic, and very much the epitome of South Pacific islands. We took the local bus to the far side, and stopped at the 'Little Village', which was half a dozen shops and a convenient bar for a beer and a coke, before we climbed back on the bus and returned to the dock, through some wonderful scenery that Tony was photographing through the open windows. And since we were the only people on the bus, the driver very kindly stopped at the best view-point for us to get out and take pictures!

The third island so far, Bora Bora, was yesterday. Another very pretty place, supposed to be the most beautiful of all, and it may well be, although a bit too commercialised these days, with practically every shop competing to sell black pearls, *the* must-have in Polynesia. We were on a ship's excursion on 'Le Truck', an open-sided bus that trundled us right round the island, with various obligatory stop-offs. First at a tie-dye open-air workshop in a tiny little community; second, at a particularly picturesque beach for a short while; and lastly at Bloody Mary's, a bar and restaurant that is purely famous for being famous, with prices accordingly! At least it provided a loo stop, although the loos were rather unnervingly open-plan! It was a good day out altogether, and now we are back on board for another sea day before we call at Rarotonga, one of the Cook Islands, tomorrow.

Hello from New Zealand, 28 January

So our South Pacific adventure is nearly over. We leave the ship tomorrow when we reach Auckland. It always makes me laugh when it's time to go. They all fawn over you like mad for the duration, but once your purpose is served you're yesterday's news, and it's 'right, get off, go'! In a way we're sorry to be leaving Viking, although at the same time we're looking forward to doing our own thing from now on. Twenty-five days on board is about enough. After 141 days, like they're all doing, I think we'd be ready to jump overboard, or at least chuck a selection of certain other passengers over!

However, it has been a very good trip. We didn't stop at Rarotonga as scheduled, as there was too much swell on the ocean to be able to launch the tenders, or

rather, to be able to launch the passengers on to the tenders without mishap, so the ship did a loop round and we just looked at it from a distance (another ridiculously pretty, story-book island) and sailed on to Tonga.

Meanwhile we had another major on-board celebration with the Crossing the International Dateline ceremony, when we skipped from Saturday to Monday without drawing breath. As one of the passengers



Mountains of Mo'orea.

commented: "Someone stole Sunday!" Apparently this is known as being in 'The Domain of the Golden Dragon' which I don't understand (and I can't get my head round the International Dateline anyway), but Viking gave it their full-on treatment with an open deck brunch party by the pool, with obscene amounts of food laid out, from 9am to 1pm, quite in addition to breakfast and lunch being served at their normal times in the restaurants. I imagine there was plenty left over to keep the crew fed and watered for days afterwards!

Anyway, having lost a day, we tipped up in Tonga, which was fun. The usual welcome committee of a very good band and dancers dressed up in what appeared to be potato sacks made of woven palm fronds wrapped round their waists. We ran the gamut of craft stalls selling batik, shell jewellery and wooden carvings along the jetty, and took a local taxi to the three places that we wanted to see on the island. And what a taxi! And what a driver! He was massive, with a belly-rippling laugh, and his taxi was something to behold. Gaping holes where the metal had rusted through, flattened cardboard boxes covering what remained of the floor with a folding chair representing the back seat, and a huge spider-web crack on the windscreen, apparently caused by a falling breadfruit! The engine also made a very strange and slightly worrying noise, but no matter, it got us there and back.

First to the Mapu'a 'a Vaca Blowholes, where a kilometre stretch of old coral reef is perforated so that the waves blow up through the holes quite spectacularly. Then to Tsunami Rock, a huge lump of coral, several hundred metres inland that they think was washed up by a tsunami that happened 'about thousands of years ago' according to the blurb at the site, which seemed about accurate enough!

We also scouted around looking for one of the colonies of flying foxes (or fruit bats, to be correct) which our driver eventually found for us; a lot of them high in the trees and one or two flying around. A little girl came out of a nearby house with a baby bat that had fallen out of the tree, and she had made a pet of it, clinging on



Blowholes on Tonga.

upside-down to a sort of wire frame. For reasons best known to himself the taxi man was determined to buy it, so he gave the little girl a couple of Tongan dollars for it, and I, perched on the folding chair, had to hold it all the rest of the way back into town, very gingerly, in case it gave me a) fleas or b) rabies! I don't know how the poor creature will end up, I told the driver he must be sure to feed it, but I suspect it was going to be the other way round, and he has probably eaten it already.

Next stop was Fiji, which I found seriously hot and huffy, and only managed to stagger across the road to the market, which of course was full of interest. It was huge, the ground floor predictably packed with pineapples, coconuts, taro root, cassava (tapioca) etc. Upstairs, there was a sea of stalls selling wacko: a major crop on the island, and relatively aptly named. It isn't quite wacky-baccy, but is the main ingredient

of kava, which is the locally preferred intoxicating hallucogenic tippie! They sell bundles of spindly twigs of wacko that they boil up, or alternatively powdered wacko that they mix with water, tip it into a cloth bag and then wring it out; we got all the wacko recipe details from the stall holders.

Some passengers went on an excursion that included a kava tasting, and they likened it to muddy dishwater. Kava for the tourists, obviously. When I sampled it in Vanuatu a few years ago, in an ominously darkened hut way off the beaten track and miles from anywhere, I recall it had considerably more oomph about it!

I came back to the ship after the market, a bit wiped out by the heat, but Tony went off on a walk about town and up the only hill in order to reach a good view, a couple of miles each way, he reckoned.

This morning we stopped at the first port in New Zealand, anchoring offshore in the Bay of Islands, near the town of Russell, which was the first capital of New Zealand, back in the 1830s, and altogether quite a historic town. We took ourselves off in a slightly different direction, to the little seaside town of Paihia, for a wander about and a look round a delightful outdoor craft market where each stallholder had personally made what he or she was selling. Some lovely stuff, and we had long chats with some of the local folk. Quite a relief really, after Polynesia, in that they were all fully clothed, and speaking a recognisable language!

Now we are back on board, Tony has delivered his last lecture, and so it's all over bar the shouting. We just need to pack up, and then tomorrow we fly from Auckland to Hong Kong, ready for the next stage: on our own in Laos.

Postcards from Laos 2018

Hello from Houay Xay, February 2

It's so good to be back in Southeast Asia! The South Pacific islands are all very well, but being in Asia just feels so right! We had two nights and a good full day in Hong Kong, took the Star Ferry to Hong Kong Island for a good wander round, and a tram and bus to Stanley and back. Hong Kong is always exciting, although this time so *cold*. So unusually cold that the Hong Kong government had put out an official cold-weather warning, and the locals were in a state of minor shock, wrapping themselves up in whatever winter woollies they could find. Well, we were somewhat surprised ourselves!

From Hong Kong we flew into Chiang Mai in Thailand, where our plan to take the next bus to Chiang Rai was scuppered, as it didn't leave until 5pm, so most of our journey would have been in the dark. So we stayed in a monastery guest-house that night, and had the afternoon visiting a few temples, then caught the morning bus to Chiang Rai, which we loved (Chang Rai, not necessarily the bus!). A really fun town, much smaller than big-city Chiang Mai, and with a monumentally ornate gilded clock-tower as its centre-piece, complete with the Westminster chimes, no less, every hour. There was a wonderful night market in the evening, where we bought a tiny jade elephant for our tiny-souvenir shelf-collection – our sole purchase so far! – and ate delicious kebabs in the huge communal food-court, while being entertained by singers, dancers, and a couple of very glamorous lady-boys. There was also an amazing flower festival in the town, which we discovered slightly late in the day, but was still an extraordinary sight. The mind boggles at the work that had been put into all the set pieces – crinoline ladies etc – all made from fresh flowers, but many of the decorations were sensibly created with plants in their individual pots, so the flowers weren't wasted.

From Chiang Rai we caught a bus to Laos, the emptiest bus we've ever seen in Asia, so a comfortable three-hour journey to the border, where we endured the usual passport-control fiasco, lots of totally pointless form-filling etc, and once in Houay Xay, the Lao border town, we were dropped at the wrong hotel, so had to walk a mile to find the correct one, but arrived there in the end. Our first impression of Lao hospitality was uncertain, the woman we checked in with found it impossible to crack anything approaching a smile, but



the next day we boarded the boat for a two-day cruise down the Mekong river, where the local people were all delightful – as they have been for the rest of our time in Laos, incidentally.

Hello from Luang Prabang, February 5

There were 27 passengers on the boat, mostly German, some French, plus a good-value English couple from Macclesfield. The boat was big, loads of space to sit, walk around, take photos, and luckily loads of blankets to pass round, because it was **cold**! (It is winter, but this is an unusually cold spell.) We had several stops during the two days, including one at a 'typical rural village', which the boat company supports, paying for its school and health facilities in return for them putting up with a load of tourists traipsing round taking intrusive photographs of their houses, children, dogs, pigs and chickens etc. We also stopped at a limestone hill containing the Pak Ou temple caves that were filled with Buddha statues in all shapes and sizes (very popular with tourists, and also with worshipful locals), and an even more touristy village for a Lao whisky-tasting and silk-weaving experience. The whisky bottles containing snakes and/or scorpions pickled in alcohol were a particular highlight!

We stopped overnight mid-journey at the little town of Pak Beng, where we had a brilliant hotel room with a balcony overlooking the river and opposite the sandy beach



Village house above the Mekong.



Pak Ou temple cave.

where we were promised herds of elephants would be brought down to drink and bathe at first light in the morning. So we were duly up at 6am, and about half an hour later one elephant ambled down with its mahout, eventually followed by a second, and neither went anywhere near the water, they just stood there stoically until our boat finally moved off at 7.30 when they ambled back into the forest, thinking to themselves 'Phew, that's another tourist shift over and done with'.

The actual river trip itself was really good, through some excellent scenery, past a couple of Chinese bridge-building developments, and with a fast current, positively white-watery on occasions, so it was lucky the captain knew what

he was doing to negotiate the rocks in the water. Apparently lesser (cheaper) boats are known to capsize from time to time, with deaths not unknown. The major downer from my point of view was that, because it is now the dry season, the river is 20 feet lower than it is during the wet season, so everywhere we stopped necessitated a 20-foot clamber up steep sandy banks, of the 'one step up, two steps down' variety!

The boat ride finished up in Luang Prabang, a town which historically was the back-packers' prime R&R location, and is now hugely touristy. Which isn't altogether bad, as there are loads of places to stay, and it's easy enough to find buses to wherever you want to go next. Which we did, to Tat Kuang Si, a wonderful series of tufa waterfalls, which were far, far better than we had anticipated. It was also a bear sanctuary, with a big collection of Malaysian bears that had been brought in to keep them from poachers. Chinese poachers of course, who capture them



Luang Prabang.



Pak Beng.

and keep them in tiny cages for years and 'milk' them for the bile, which they believe to have some medicinal value. All very horrid, very Chinese, and the sanctuary is obviously doing a good job.

One of the things Luang Prabang is famous for is the monks' procession, another 6am affair. As luck would have it they process right past our hotel, so we were in the right place when they came past, all in complete silence, with local people on the streets putting sticky rice into their begging bowls as they go. They make quite a big thing of it, and it's all quite emotive, in the just-dawn half-light.

Menu mishaps

*Just a few classic items from various Asian menus!
They try **so** hard to translate for our benefit,
and it just brings tears to the eyes!*

Bow leg eggs

Bread and Jane (or alternatively Bread and James)

Fire egg, sunny steed up

Fried pumpkin to fly in fat

Language bovine

(Tricky one, that last one: cow's tongue, quite literally)

Hello from Vang Vieng, February 11

After Luang Prabang we had a three-hour bus ride to Nong Khiaw, another riverside village, where we had an overnight stop in a guest-house that was reached down steps so steep that I literally couldn't get up them without help. Tony went off for a walk to a cave in the next village, while I stayed in a roadside cafe/bar; I didn't dare go back to our room, because I knew I'd never be able to get back up again! Anyway, we were only there for one night, before we moved on to Muang Ngoi, up-river on a smallish boat where the 20 passengers were absolutely knee-to-knee for an hour and a half. It was worth it, though, because it was a lovely village, despite the fact that the main street – well, the *only* street – was under total re-construction, and was just one long dry-mud obstacle course!

Until now, Muang Ngoi has only been accessible by boat, but time marches on and now they're building a road to it, which will benefit the villagers of course, but will take away a great deal of its character, I think. We were there two nights, and Tony took a day out to go for a long walk to a couple of villages, caves and sites of geological interest, while I had a day off, sitting and reading. The village lies amid some beautiful countryside dotted with steep limestone hills, so we also took time for a few short walks together and also a boat-ride to the next village and back just enjoying a bit more of the river scenery.

The sun came out, it was actually warm for once, and our hotel balcony offered a brilliant view of the river with boats zipping up and down, and the limestone hills beyond. Oh I forgot: at 4.30 that morning the drums in the monastery up the road started going off, because that day was Buddha Day. Normally you don't hear the drums until 6am - which we did the next morning, and Tony went out, and happened upon another monks' procession along the muddy main street, which he said was



Monks' parade for rice alms in Muang Ngoi.

far, far better than the rather touristy one the other day in Luang Prabang. Apart from the locals doing their alms duty, he had it to himself, lurking at a discreet distance to take some lovely photos.

We were back in Luang Prabang (via boat and bus again) the following day, to book seats on a bus to take us to Vang Vieng. Very much a 'local' bus. Filthy windows that you could barely see out of, much less take pictures out of. A very mountainous

road, so it was slow going, and two sets of road-works that caused seemingly endless delays. Amazingly, we only broke down once, requiring the driver and the bus crew to spend some time lying on their backs beneath the engine. The fact that the driver's door kept flying open every time we went round a bend didn't seem to worry anyone. There were two loo stops and a lunch break, and we finally arrived nearly eight hours later.



Morning boat from Muang Ngoi.

But having arrived here, Vang Vieng is lovely. We have a hotel called Elephant Crossing, with balconies overlooking the river. Although we have seen no explanation, it was presumably at the point at which elephants did indeed cross the river back in olden days, because it is shallow enough for lorries to drive over, and people to wade across. We hired a tuk-tuk for the day to take us round the local sights/sites, including a 'blue lagoon' where there were hundreds of people swimming, diving, jumping in the water, zip-wiring over the hillside, and also a Buddhist temple cave. Tony clambered up horrendously steep steps to reach it, and spent well over an hour exploring, some of it in the pitch dark (he had a small torch!), and after that he climbed 800 feet up another hill just for the view from the top.

Hello from Hong Kong, February 16

Next port of call was Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Another day, another bus, another good hotel not too far from the town centre. We had a morning walk to an excellent market – beautifully displayed fruit and veg and meat and fish, including totally unidentifiable roots and fruits and scary bits of offal – and called in at a monastery to catch the monks receiving alms from local people offering food and drink. From Vientiane we were off to Nong Khai (which is over the border into Thailand, with the border being the Mekong), where we stayed at an excellent guest house, and went out on an excursion to Phu Phrabat Historical Park. It was a sort of Asian version of Brimham Rocks, with huge sandstone rocks of all shapes, sizes and balancing acts.



Tourist boats at Vang Vieng.



Hong Kong Central.

And then we were on our way home! A bus to Udon Thani, and then flights to Bangkok and Hong Kong which were uneventful, apart from having our bag unpacked at security, because they'd detected a spoon in our washbag. Hands up, yes, we had a **spoon**. They solemnly inspected it, and we were allowed to keep it. Even though we might have given someone a nasty rap over the knuckles with it.....

We arrived in Hong Kong quite late, so just a quick meal in the night market and that was it. But we had all of the next day there, as our flight home didn't leave until 1am the following morning. So we took ferries to Lantau Island, and a bus across to the little village of Tai O, which has a large population of stilt houses, all looking a bit fragile these days, but very much lived in. Then took another bus up the hill to the site of the Big Buddha – the biggest Buddha in Asia, apparently, and very much the centre of attraction that day. Absolutely

seething with local folk on holiday, as it just happened to be Chinese New Year (the Year of the Dog, in case it's escaped your notice). You could hardly see your way across the temple grounds for the smoke from incense sticks. They're always a feature of Buddhist temples of course, but since this was a special occasion there were even more than usual, ranging from delicate slender incense sticks to huge things the size of telegraph poles, that had to be lit with blow torches!

Tony walked up to the Big Buddha, something like 300 steps, then we came down the hill on one of the longest cable-car rides imaginable, four miles of it, which was quite spectacular. We queued for about five minutes to get on it. When we arrived at the lower end, the queues to go **up** went on and on and on..... about three hours' wait, we were told!

We took a metro back to Hong Kong Island, then Star Ferry to Kowloon, where seemingly the rest of Hong Kong that wasn't waiting for the cable-car was gathering to watch the line-up for the Chinese New Year evening float parade. We saw some of the preparations, with loads of kids dressed up, and all very jolly, but by the time we'd battled through Chinese crowds, and been told endless times to "move along there" by Chinese police when there was no space to move to, we called it a day and escaped back up out of it all, to a last drink in the night market before the bus to the airport.

One o'clock in the morning take-off, 5.30am landing in Manchester, 10am home..... yes, we will be a bit jet-lagged! But it has been a great trip.

Postcards from North Korea 2018

Hello from Pyongyang, September 4

Well, we are back in North Korea, and are already glad to have made a second visit. In many ways it has changed enormously since we were here 17 years ago, certainly from our first impressions arriving in Pyongyang. The high-rise apartment blocks that were all dull white and grey are now very cheerily painted in all colours of the rainbow, and very much the better for it. There are even some cars on the roads, and the people walking the streets generally seemed brighter, happier, more purposeful if you like, rather than worn-down and drudgy as they were before. And there are shops! With stuff to buy in them! In fact we were taken into a huge department store on one occasion and allowed to roam free among its four floors, where there was everything from washing machines and fridges, to shirts and dresses, to a fully-stocked supermarket on the ground floor, all very busy, and didn't seem anything out of the ordinary. But – away from the elite zone of Pyongyang, it must be a different story. We saw the good bits, and there are lots that are kept well away from visitors' eyes. You can never be sure of what really goes on.

We – Tony and me, and our group, nine of us in total – were met at the airport by our guide, a lovely lady called Kim, and the back-up 'minder', a personable young lad who had 'volunteered' for the job (he wasn't paid, but the experience would be all to the good on his CV, he told us, as his ambition is to join the army) and who was very vigilant about never letting any of us out of his sight! We were put up in a smart hotel on the edge of town, in the Sports Village, surrounded by stadiums of all shapes and sizes, each one individually dedicated to its own sport – gymnastics, table tennis, swimming, martial arts, football, athletics, you name it, think of a sport, and it has a stadium to itself.

Dinner that evening was quite literally a taste of what was to come: a full-blown breakfast, lunch and dinner every day, usually consisting of dozens of different dishes to pick and choose from (luckily, as there were only so many that you would want to get involved with). Copious amounts of beer at all meals (good for me) and assorted suspect 'colas' (but not American Coca Cola).

Next morning, we were introduced to the North Korean experience in earnest. We had a visit to the Kumsusan Palace, or the Mausoleum, for Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Il, the now-dead Great Leader and Dear Leader. We were told what to wear (long everything) and what not to take (anything), and were subjected to high-powered, rigorous security.



Cameras were obviously out of the question, and went into a tray to be collected later, along with wallets, hotel key-cards, coins..... Tony had a pen confiscated, my chiffon scarf was taken off me, we were patted up and down by guards and passed through various x-ray machines until we arrived at a holding pen, where we stood and waited. And waited. (We were to discover that there's a great deal of queuing and waiting, and waiting and queuing, in North Korea!)

Finally we were escorted down an escalator, and then on to the first of two interminably long and tediously slow travelators, where we had to stand still and look straight ahead (Tony at one point turned sideways to talk to me, and was immediately put to rights by a guard). All the while we were passing through corridors and into an immense building, lined with marble and granite, massively opulent, until we eventually arrived at the first room, practically bigger than Wembley Stadium, occupied by two larger-than-lifesize waxworks of Kim One and Kim Two. Here, we were told to form lines of no more than four people at a time, walk forward, and bow to the effigies. To show our respect. I did a sort of quick nod of the head, I don't think Tony did anything, but no guards took us outside to be shot, so we got away with it.

Then it was through rooms and more rooms, each lined with medals and honours that the Kims had been given, along with more rooms of gifts (including two cars, a plane and two railway carriages), with the adjoining corridors lined with photographs of them meeting and greeting the people. And ultimately, two rooms: a humidifier to pass through on entering and leaving each, one room for the actual mummified body of Kim Il Sung, and the other, similar, for Kim Jung Il, both with dimmed red ceiling lights for macabre atmosphere. Weird. Very weird. These, obviously, required a great deal of bowing and scraping, first at the foot, then to the left, then to the right of the bodies, before we filed out along more corridors, more blown-up photographs, more marble and crystal chandeliers, to the outside world. Phew!



Blocks of flats near the centre of Pyongyang, seen from the top of the Juche Tower; stark in 2001, painted in 2018.

Time for lunch, naturally, then off to the Juche Tower, the tallest stone monument in the world (apparently), in honour of the Juche Idea, which was Kim Il Sung's philosophic, idealistic, communistic answer to religion. Much revered by the well-indoctrinated North Koreans, who pay homage on a daily basis to everything that the various Kims ever thought, said or did. More practically, as the highest point in town, the tower provided an excellent viewing platform for pictures of the city!

Moving out of Pyongyang, the next port of call was a half-day bus ride away to Kaesong, and the DMZ (De-Militarised Zone) at Panmunjom, the bit that is absolutely on the border of North and South Korea, and has the well-known three blue huts straddling the border. Inside the middle hut, the not-to-be-crossed dividing line is marked by a microphone wire down the length of the boardroom table, where officials of each side can sit to talk to each other without leaving their respective countries. And outside, the North and the South army patrols glare at each other across the concrete strip that is the actual border. We've been to the DMZ four times now, twice from each side, and it doesn't change much! Each side has its own story of who did what to whom, and there's absolutely no point in arguing, so you just accept it for the tourist attraction that it's now become. Although it does serve a purpose when President Moon of South Korea recently stepped across the sacred concrete strip to shake hands with Kim Three; all very symbolic, though not very fruitful.

We moved on, along the border zone, and up a very steep path and a long flight of stone steps, in rain and cloud, to view The Concrete Wall. I can't remember who built the wall or what the significance of it is, but it was irrelevant anyway as it was shrouded in cloud and nobody saw anything. And we had to go down the steps and path (a good 15-minute walk) in absolutely torrential rain, so despite umbrellas, hats, raincoats, the lot, we were all soaked to the skin by the time we were back at the bus. And we were staying that night in a 'typical Korean dwelling'. In other words, a mattress on the floor, 15-watt lamp and questionable bathroom



Statues - magnificent.



DMZ huts astride the border; at Panmunjom.

facilities. Tony and I had been there before, so we knew what to expect, and in fairness, it was a very well thought-out hotel complex. They had taken an original village street and turned each house into a guest room, so that it really was a ‘typical, old-style, Korean dwelling’. We really enjoyed it, but the rest of our group were not happy at all about the minimal amenities!

There was much grumbling, even when the management laid on a demonstration of the rice-smashing ceremony. This was a first for us, and has to be seen to be believed. Two men dressed in white satin suits (looking for all the world like Elvis-impersonators) stood opposite each other wielding hefty sledgehammers, and proceeded to pound seven bells out of an innocuous heap of steamed rice until it was reduced to a mass of glutinous starch. At which point a pretty lady in national costume sliced it up, rolled each slice in brown flour, and then *made us eat it*. I can’t tell you how disgusting it was. One small nibble was enough. Any more and I suspect our internal digestive systems would have been clogged up permanently.

Next morning we hot-footed (or hot-bussed) it out of Kaesong back to Pyongyang, and to the giant bronze statues of Kims One and Two on Mansu Hill (last time we were there it was only Kim One, as Kim Jung Il was still alive and kicking). The statues constitute a hugely reverential site for local worshippers! The perceived custom is to buy flowers (ready-made bouquets from a handy, near-by stall) to lay at the foot of the statues. I’m slightly horrified to say that all the rest of our group each bought a bouquet, and made much of having their photos and selfies taken on their smart phones. Needless to say, Tony and I didn’t. I’ll buy as many poppies as you like for Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, but I’m damned if I’m paying good money for dead commie despots!



Kim One and Kim Two.

Then came the obligatory trip on the Metro. And this again was quite different from our previous visit. The stations are still deep, deep, deep underground, and beautifully decorated with mosaic images, but whereas last time we were ushered on to a specially selected train with two student girls coincidentally already in the coach, studying their college books and never glancing in our direction: the whole episode shrieked ‘stooge, stooge, stooge’. This time we were in with the general rush-hour standing-room-only hoi polloi, and it struck us as a refreshingly good step forward in, just, ordinariness.

Hello from Chongjin, September 7

From trains to planes. We had three internal plane flights while we were there, none of which I was especially enthusiastic about beforehand, but in the event they were perfectly all right. They were old-fashioned, Russian propeller-planes of historic vintage, with frilly curtains at the windows. Furthermore, no airport terminals, just land anywhere on the runway and get off and walk. Everything was totally relaxed. A bit like those vintage BOAC adverts you sometimes get a glimpse of!

Anyway, first plane journey over, we landed at Samjiyon, in the far north of the country near the Chinese border, and close to Mount Paekdu. This is the nearest thing the North Koreans have to a sacred mountain. It's an extinct volcano, the highest mountain in Korea, with an apparently beautiful lake in the caldera. This was the high point of Tony's trip, half the reason we'd gone there in the first place, the one place he really wanted to be and to see. And it rained. And it poured. And the clouds were down to ankle-deep, and the wind was horrendous, and it was freezing cold and..... suffice it to say, it was **not** the highlight of our trip. Tony was bitterly disappointed, but what can you do against the weather? The bus ground its way up to the halfway point, where the promised funicular was not running (out of fuel), and after several hours' waiting, a 4WD bus took us up to the summit, where we braved the elements sufficiently to peer over the edge of what should have been the viewpoint, but was in fact just cloud and more cloud, and then we went back again. And of course the disappointment was made even worse by the fact that the next few days were all in cloudless blue sunshine. Ho hum.

Never mind, the bus-trip back was good, past some very fancy waterfalls, some very abundant-looking allotments, lots of families enjoying themselves, and eventually to our hotel for the night: minimal illumination, only enhanced if you plugged in the (dysfunctional) fridge, but it didn't matter anyway, because there was a six-hour power cut. Dinner by torchlight, then! Hey, we're enjoying ourselves!

Next morning, after a breakfast of bread *and* jam – wow! – we went to a Grand Monument, an enormous great statue of Kim Il Sung (again), but more extraordinarily, a series of statues, effigies, I don't know how to describe them, but just brilliantly carved and sculpted 3D images of people, both soldiers and citizens, and unbelievably realistically cast in bronze. The talent that went into creating those..... for me, that was the highlight of the trip. No, it was one of them! Because next we had the visit to the kindergarten in Chongjin. Six and seven-year-olds, so sweet you wouldn't believe, singing, dancing,



Mosaic wall in the Metro.



Manual labour in a quarry, or is it womanual labour?

drumming, doing acrobatics, playing highly complex piano duets and complicated Chinese harp instrumentals..... these are **six** and **seven** year-olds! How much pressure has been put on them to have so much undeniable ability at that age? What normal childhood have they missed out on? We loved their performances (tears-pouring-down-the-cheeks material) but you do have to stop and wonder: at what expense?

We stopped at the Language School, and were taken into the English class, where the (very, very indoctrinated) head of department gave a 'power to the people' type of introduction, before letting the students loose to talk to us. Tony came up trumps, chatting to our two 16-year-old lads, one of whom wanted to be a doctor like his brother, the other wanted to be an IT engineer. The privileged ones. Yet again, you wonder about the others.

In between all these Special Sites of Specific Interest we were frog-marched on endless visits to Revolutionary Sites. There are a great many Revolutionary Sites around, wherever one of the Kims, or occasionally the first Kim's wife, had single-handedly defeated the marauding Japanese infantries by means of super-human powers, or had at least set foot, or had possibly looked out over the horizon, or might conceivably have lost the will to live (like me) before ultimately conquering the Japanese enemy, thanks to the empowering and energising forces of Kim. And Kim. And – er – Kim.

Hello from Pyongyang again, September 9

I know I'm being facetious. But really – beyond all the bright lights and the pretty colours and the happy smiling shoppers, there is still a huge chasm between them and us. Particularly the 'them' in the countryside, beyond the bounds of where we were privileged to be. The people we came across are totally brainwashed and indoctrinated, and have no concept of what real life is all about. We were taken to the International Friendship Exhibition (out among the mountains at Myohyang). This is actually two sites devoted exclusively to the gifts that Kims 1 and 2 were given by grovelling, sycophantic heads of state and organisations. Both buildings were of the grandly opulent style, 'marble hallways' doesn't even begin to describe them, and the goods on display behind the showcases must have added up to **billions** of poundsworth. Everything from tea sets to trains (from China), and from pottery to a plane (from Russia). Room after room after room of priceless gifts, all sitting

unused and just for show. Even, I'm slightly horrified to admit, a framed photograph from the Nottingham Union of Miners, to commemorate the miners' strike in 1985. Crocodile handbags, snakeskin shoes, far too many elephant tusks from just about every African country: there is no end to the obscenity of the wealth on display, and it did, in the end, rather get to us. And they are all underground, far inside a granite mountain – nuclear fall-out shelters for Kim and his cronies.



Kindergarten concert with Chinese harp.

We were glad to get out, and to enjoy a most enjoyable outdoor barbecue lunch in the park, with lamb, beef, duck and wild boar cooked on personal table-top griddles, while smiling waitresses came with little hand-held bellows to keep the charcoal going. Far too much food for us to eat, and I only hope that somewhere behind the scenes, the smiling waitresses got to enjoy what we decadent Westerners left behind.

And so to the grand finale. Our visit was timed to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the founding of North Korea, and there was a huge commemoration ceremony in the May Day Stadium (as stadiums go, their biggest and best). Known as the Arirang Mass Games, it cost us a hundred dollars each for seats. It was worth every penny. It's impossible to describe how magnificent the performance was. More than 100,000 men, women and children taking part in a performance that was halfway between mass drill and grand ballet, with superb gymnastics going on at the same time. Thousands of people synchronised to perfection: 3000 girls doing back somersaults in perfect synch; 600 ladies playing Chinese harps, beautifully. And on the far side of the stadium, 17,000 men holding open pages of over-sized books to create giant pictures. The backdrop, the lighting, the projected images were superlative, but it was the sheer mass of people performing so brilliantly that took the breath away. We won't forget that in a hurry.



Rehearsing for the parade.



Arirang Mass Games, spectacle on a giant scale; Kim Three (Kim Jong Un) was there, along with wife (Ri Sol Ju).



Oh, incidentally – we were under the same roof as Kim Jung Un, Kim Three, The Supreme Leader, as he's known to his fanatical compatriots. The fact that he was there – sitting not that far from us, actually – was a bit special. I can report first-hand that he's still small, still fat, still got a stupid haircut. We saw him wave to the crowd, but after that we couldn't see very much, because the entire stadium was in a semi-orgasmic state of uproar, standing, waving, cheering, bowing, scraping.....

We came away totally mesmerised. It's impossible to explain quite how fantastical it was. Obviously and needless to say, cameras weren't an option. During the four-hour security screening we had endured to get there, everything was taken from us apart from absolutely essential clothing! Par for the course. You don't go to North Korea to come away with much photographic evidence. Practically everywhere we went our guides were hissing "no photos, no photos". While the cameras were confiscated we obviously couldn't, but when we did have them with us, Tony was shooting from the hip, as it were, left, right and centre. Lots of illicit pix, therefore, and ones that Michael Palin and the BBC camera crew couldn't get.

Postscript

So, when it came to escaping from North Korea, by plane to Beijing, we were slightly spooked by tales of cameras being searched at the point of departure, and any offending material being wiped out, or possibly offenders being taken outside and shot! So Tony put a back-up card in his camera, with acceptable pretty pictures on, and the **un**acceptable card was hidden in my handbag. So yes, I was his mule! But we were lucky, they waved us all through without a second thought, and..... we still have the pictures to prove it! After Korea, we continued to Mongolia for a further week. That's another story.

Postcards from Mongolia 2018

Hello from Ulaanbaatar, September 10

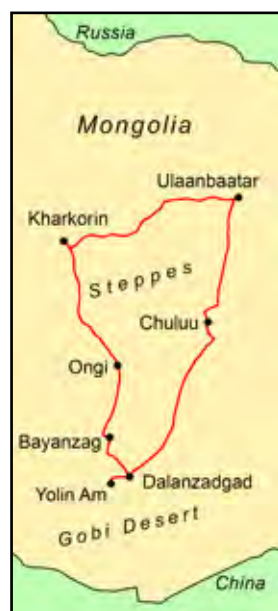
We really didn't know what to expect when we took an Air China flight from Beijing into Mongolia, and I suspect we expected the worst! In which case, we were very pleasantly surprised. When we were kids, people used to say things like: "Well you might as well be in Outer Mongolia" when you said you were planning to go to somewhere remote, but here we were, actually *in* Outer Mongolia, having flown into the capital Ulaanbaatar, and found ourselves in..... the worst traffic jam *on the planet*. Seriously, not joking. It takes half an hour to move a hundred yards. There are traffic lights, but nobody takes any notice of them, and all roads seem to be permanently gridlocked. Traffic police only compound the issue, obviously.

There are three million inhabitants of Mongolia, and one million live in Ulaanbaatar. In their cars, presumably. But of course once outside the city (and we did eventually make it!) there was hardly a car to be seen, and the whole extraordinary landscape of Mongolia was there as far as the eye could see. And you can see a long way, because basically, a lot of it is flat or gently rolling, with huge vistas of open space! First you get the steppes, which are miles and miles and miles of grassland, then you get a long, long belt of what they call intermediate land, which is the in-between bit of changing climate and gradually reducing plant cover, before you arrive at the Gobi Desert.

And because you can't do it any other way, we were there with a driver and a guide. The driver was Miigaa (pronounced meagre! although he wasn't in the least, and did a sterling job), and the guide was Zolo, and although she told us a million times, we never could get the pronunciation quite right! They picked us up at the airport that first evening, finally negotiated the traffic and deposited us at our very smart hotel, in the middle of a downpour and a howling gale. We picked our way through thunder, lightning and puddles to the nearest restaurant, and discovered that the Mongolian menu consists of meat, meat and – er – more meat. You can choose between beef, mutton, goat, horse or camel. Pork is a bit of an imported luxury, as is chicken. Vegetables don't come into it. You can of course always opt for meat soup.

Hello from Dalanzadgad, September 13

Next morning they drove us out of town, past a brilliant industrial area, which contains the central heating plant that provides for the whole city, and where the hot water is channeled through huge pipelines going in all directions.





Ulaanbaatar, old and new.

I thought it was fascinating, and I could have spent all week there, but no time to investigate it, so we just passed by en route to the wide open spaces of the steppes.

Now, take this on board. While there are three million people in Mongolia, there are 65 million animals. That's a lot of animals per person. And the other thing to take on board about the Mongolians is that a large proportion of them are still nomadic, in that they up-sticks (or *gers*, as their homes are called)

and move, usually four times a year, to better feeding grounds, according to season, for the animals on which their lives depend. It's a basic-beyond-basic lifestyle that takes a bit of getting your head round. So, as we travelled through the endless steppe grasslands, their livelihoods were there to see! Huge, enormous, flocks of sheep and herds of goats. Mostly mixed flocks/herds, sometimes one or the other, but all of them massive; several thousand animals at a time. Fewer herds of cattle, although still plenty of them, and similar numbers of horses, always in big herds. And, in this modern world, the sheep and goat and cow herdsman hardly ever ride horses; these days, they're nearly always on motorbikes!

Most exciting of all, of course, were the camels. Again, huge numbers of them at any one time, particularly when we got to the Gobi Desert, south of Ongi. Proper Bactrian camels with their two humps, and totally unfazed when we stopped to take pictures of them, even though many of them had camelettes (or whatever you call baby camels) with them. As a matter of interest, a camel will cost you the equivalent of about \$450 in togrogs (Mongolian currency – love it!), while a horse is about 300, a cow 200, and sheep and goats are ten-a-penny!

We were sleeping, mostly, in gers. Which are the same as yurts. Which are like Arabian Nights' big tents. And the ger camps we stayed in were essentially for tourists, so it was a bit like 'glamping'. For which I personally was eternally grateful! The first one was fairly typical: a circus-tent-like construction round a central chimney rising from a wood-fired stove, two beds and a table and chairs round the perimeter, and a low doorway to stoop through to get in. Plus, let me tell you, an electric light bulb and a charger for i-phones and stuff. What's not to like? Well, apart from the loo block several hundred yards away, but – another plus for the Mongolians – they had sit-down loos everywhere, so again, what's not to like? After we'd had our meat supper in the camp cafe, we went back to our ger where it was getting a bit chilly, but lo and behold, a delightful young

Hospitality on the Mongolian steppes: the herders' ger in which we dropped by for tea, but were given mare's milk!



couple arrived and proceeded to load up the stove with charcoal and stacks of firewood, and set fire to it all with a couple of blowlamps, leaving us very toasty warm before they disappeared into the night!

And – oh yes, the nights. When nature called and we were obliged to brave it into the darkness, the stars were just amazing. With absolutely no light pollution, you could pick out every star and planet you've ever or never heard of, and the Milky Way was spectacular. It made going for a wee well worth it!

Having said how good the gers were (although the last one was a bit more basic, and *freezing freezing* cold) they were slightly smaller versions of the genuine gers that the genuine nomads call home, with each single ger housing the whole family. We stopped at one, in the middle of nowhere. Tony and I had no idea why, I thought Zolo was asking directions, but no, we were just calling in. As apparently you do, in the middle of Mongolia, when you happen to be passing by. The lady who appeared at the doorway, looking somewhat bewildered, invited us in – as custom decrees, she was obliged to do so – and we all sat down and waited for the warm, fermented mares' milk that was brewing on top of the stove, and which she was equally obliged to offer to us. This was not the best experience of the day, we just sipped a tiny bit, and passed the bowl along, which was the acceptably polite thing to do (and best all round for our digestive organs, I believe), and the bowls of milk were followed by blocks of dried milk curd. They looked like bits of Kendal mint cake, but there the similarity stopped. It was impossible to get our teeth through even a tiny corner of them, Tony thinks they could be put to good use filling in the potholes in the roads, and has brought home his chunk as a souvenir. It will outlast us, and probably the shelf that we've put it on!



Visitors in the ger.



Along the way from the steppes to the Gobi.

So we sat there, making polite conversation through Zolo, who interpreted for us. The ger lady has four children, all in their 40s or so; one daughter, who turned out to be mildly disabled, was there in the ger, not taking much part in the proceedings, while her other daughter, sons and grandsons and her husband were away in the outback, watching the animals and doing whatever has to be done out there. She and her daughter were just stirring the milk curd and watching TV before we arrived. The television was propped up on a shelf, and powered by the solar panel outside, alongside the fridge. (Ninety-five percent of the nomads do not lead a typically austere life: they all have TV and every mod con, Land Cruisers parked outside, iPads and smart phones.) Suddenly the door opened, and six burly men filed in and parked themselves on whatever seating they could find. I assumed it was part of the family coming home, but no, they were complete strangers, just passing by, and fancying a bit of a mid-morning snack of mares' milk and dried curd. As you do, in the Gobi Desert!

As a final party piece, the old lady went out to milk the mares that were tethered outside. She has to do this every two hours throughout the day. She has about 12 horses, each with a foal, and a lad from a neighbouring ger (some miles away) comes over to help by putting the correct foal to the correct mare to start the milk flowing while she follows up with a bucket and extracts about a cupful from each. It's a good half-hour job, so she only has an hour and a half between milking to watch TV, stir the curd and wait on passing strangers! A bizarre life indeed.

In between travelling over desert and steppe and from ger to ger we did, of course, stop at various sites of special interest! A few monasteries, both ancient and modern, notably the restored Buddhist Erdenezuu Monastery at the ancient Mongol capital of Kharkorin. And a sandstone gorge set into the cliffs of Bayanzag, where dinosaur fossils were found early on in the 20th century, but none to be seen now, and although the gorge was lovely, the weather wasn't, so Tony just took some short walks to inspect the red-rock geology beneath a rather grey sky.

Midway round our Mongolian tour, we stopped (after many hours and miles of driving) at the town of Dalanzadgad, where we had two nights staying in a rather luxurious hotel, which was a treat.

Hello from Ulaan Baatar again, September 17

The plan for our day in Dalanzadgad was to drive to the nearby Yoliin Am gorge, which is set into a section of the nearby mountains, now a National Park. We set off the next morning, in heavy cloud, and the nearer we got, the worse the weather, until eventually we were driving through thick snow, and the road became impassable. Snow in the Gobi Desert? Surely not!!! (Well, it does, in January and February, but is not supposed to in September!) So we retreated to the hotel for lunch, during which time the sky cleared, the sun came out, and we decided to give it another go. And it was absolutely worth it, because the difference was astonishing. The previously impassable road was just about OK for the 4WD Landcruiser, and the final two-mile walk was worth the effort, according to Tony and Zolo. They followed a meltwater stream down into the dramatic, rocky gorge of Yolin Am, until they were stopped where the path crossed the stream yet again but which was now in flood from the morning's snowstorm. Miigaa and I sensibly stayed in the car.

We then headed back north, out of the Gobi Desert and back across more miles of steppe grasslands. Took a break amid the low Chuluu hills that are all formed of beautifully weathered granite, and walked into a little rocky canyon had once held a really remote monastery (the never-heard-of-it Delgerlin Choiriin, which had thrived until closed down by the communists in the 1930s). That night, our intended ger camp had been taken over by a large group of Chinese, so we headed for another that Zolo knew of. But was not quite sure where. So we just drove across trackless grassland to a distant ger, and asked the way. Then headed in the direction of the nomad's out-stretched arm, and repeated the process at another ger. We eventually did find the camp, lurking behind a low hill.

On that final ger night (the very **very** cold one) we were intrigued to see some of the gers being dismantled. (We were there in late September and the season finishes for tourist camps before October, so they take them down for the winter). It's a remarkably simple job that involves removing all the outside canvas and felt cladding, folding up the four collapsible wooden lattice panels that form the walls, taking away the central pole and roof stays, and stacking it all up until next time. It's exactly the same procedure for the nomadic gers that the families use. They can dismantle, move (on the back of a camel, or a 4WD truck, whichever comes in handier) and erect on the next site, all within a single day.

Our last afternoon was back in Ulaanbaatar, and we had a good time wandering around on our own, this time in perfect weather. Genghis Khan Square (now re-named as Sukhbaatar Square) was a must-visit, and had a Sunday afternoon concert in progress, which was amazing. A succession of singers and bands, with Chinese harpists, superb drummers, a dreadful squawking Japanese singer that the audience loved, and generally a wonderful atmosphere. All around, there were families having picnics, and kids on bikes, scooters and roller skates – it was altogether a very happy-family Sunday-afternoon, and a lovely one to have finished up on.

Postcards from Rajasthan 2018

Hello from Bikaner, December 12

That was, we think, our eleventh visit to India – including three mini visits as ports of call on cruise ships – but our eighth ‘proper’ do-it-ourselves trip. And as always, it was a good one. We were back in Rajasthan, which was the first slice of India that we travelled through back in 1997, so we re-visited some cities, but some were new, and thanks to Tony’s very careful and thoughtful forward planning and booking and arranging, it was as calm and peaceful a trip as could be..... given that northern India is probably the busiest, noisiest, most crowded and *least* peaceful place on the planet!

The overnight flight to Delhi was of course horrible (although I must say, Virgin Atlantic is an excellent airline; we were impressed with them both going and coming back), and the minute we got to our hotel at about 2pm I collapsed into bed and slept for a solid three hours while Tony went out and did all the necessary stuff like finding an ATM, buying rail tickets, and getting in supplies of Coca Cola and beer!

So come the next day I was just about ready to surface, in time to catch the train from Delhi to Bikaner, our first port of call. It was an eight-hour journey, with good open-window seats to look out of while we journeyed into the desert, with lots of camels, which were a delight to see. Because it was desert, there was a thick layer of dust over everything, including us, by the time we got to Bikaner, and I think most of it stayed with us for the rest of our time there; we probably brought some of it home with us!

Bikaner was a new venue for us, and a new experience. We stayed in a former Maharajah’s palace, so very grand and very gothic – huge rooms, all extremely dark, with red and gold wallpapered walls hung with family portraits, various animal heads, spread-eagled skins, spears, guns and arrows and similar sorts of weapons of mass destruction. We walked across some extensive grounds to the dining room, which was an experience in itself. We were the only people there, and the waiter was a dead ringer for Fawlty Towers’ Manuel. The meal was, erm, interesting, but not one we wished to repeat, so luckily we found a very good restaurant a tuk-tuk ride away for the next two nights. However; Manuel’s breakfast was

perfectly good; omelettes and toast and fruit, you can’t go wrong, and, as it turned out, Manuel was actually the guiding force for the whole hotel. When he wasn’t cleaning the swimming pool or raking the garden he was running into the restaurant to take orders, and it was he who slept beside the reception desk and got up to open the gates for us when we had to be up at 6am on the third morning to catch our next train.



In the meantime, Bikaner was an excellent town to visit. The first day we went up the fort (practically every city in Rajasthan has a fort, therefore a must-do visit!), and in the afternoon went to the 'old town', which actually didn't seem very old at all, just more crowded and louder and busier than ever! (Bear in mind this was Day Two, and I was still feeling ever so slightly fragile, so everywhere was crowded, loud and busy!)

Day Three, however, provided one of the most memorable excursions ever, on a local bus to Deshnok, where we went to the Karni Mata temple. And not just any old temple. The local goddess, so the story goes, decreed that her friends and relatives didn't die, but were reincarnated as rats. So the entire temple is given over to a colony of rats which runs into several thousand! They are everywhere, up and out of drainpipes, all over the floor, running up the walls..... running up and down my trouser legs when I stood still long enough! We actually loved it, although I can appreciate it might not be everybody's idea of a civilised day out! They were actually quite sweet little brown rats, the same sort of size as a pet mouse, not like the big brown buggers you see on railway tracks; those I would *not* like running up my trouser legs! Anyway, the Karni Mata temple was a load of fun, and well worth the day out from Bikaner!



Kote Gate into Bikaner's Old City.

Hello from Jodhpur, December 16

Next destination was Jaisalmer, which is one of my most favourite places in India. It's a beautiful town, quite holiday-like compared with busy Bikaner, and our hotel another Maharajah's ex-palace, was just outside the gate into the market, where we spent the best part of two days just sitting and people-watching. Or in Tony's case, just walking about and taking pictures of people! We did venture further, of course, to parts of the town that have the very grand old houses, known as havelis, with the most beautifully carved stone facades, packed with Indian tourists taking selfies; and naturally, another fort. If it's another town, it's another fort! We walked up there, and it was not so much another fort as another town, with loads of people living up there and setting up shop, selling all sorts of stuff, but most notably some beautiful patchwork throws, wall-hanging and



Karni Mata rat, and no shoes.



The great fort at Jaisalmer, standing above the new city.

bedspreads. I don't know what you'd do with them, to be honest, but they were lovely and, apparently, made from old clothes that are bought from gypsies, cut up and manufactured in local factories, so it's a major industry throughout the area.

It was in the market up in the fort that we saw one of my favourite 'cut-out-and-keep' handwritten notices on a hardware stall: 'Reductions for dwarf people'. I mean, tell it like it is, hey? On the other hand, the far more politically correct signs are on railway carriages. At either end of the trains they have specifically designated carriages. One says: 'For the physically disabled', fair enough, but the other one says: 'For the differently abled'. Can you get *more* politically-correct than that? Love it.

Another day, another 6am tuk-tuk ride to the railway station, en route for Jodhpur. A much bigger city than Jaisalmer, but just as colourful and just as good to visit. Another city, another fort, another maharajah's ex-palace to stay in, yes



Haveli window in Jaisalmer.

yes yes, but also..... our first visit to a stepwell. Yes? No? In my case, a definite No; I'd never heard of them, but they are a feature in quite a few Indian cities, towns and villages. They are literally big open wells, with steps on each wall, leading down to the water, so at whatever level the water happens to be, people can walk down to fill their buckets etc. Some are fairly utilitarian, others are gloriously ornate. They are difficult to describe, and equally difficult to photograph at this time of year, as the shadows are all in the wrong place. And as the water table is quite low in India at the moment, they are all open to depth; some of them have dried up altogether in fact. These days practically everybody has running water out of a tap anyway, but the stepwells are a significant part of their historical culture.

Jodhpur is known as the Blue City, and from up on the fort you can see way over the other side of the city, where most of the buildings are painted blue. Hence.... Blue City. Oh, and this was fun: because it was Sunday, we were too early when we went into the market area, and they were only just setting up their stalls, so we went round the back streets behind the market, and found, just next door to the public conveniences (always encouraging to know they've got public conveniences, even if I preferred not to participate!) – the re-cycling plant. This consists of several sari-clad ladies sifting through bags and bags of rubbish from the streets which are hauled round to them by small children (their own, maybe, or just any of dozens of street children), and they go through it all, methodically separating the plastic from the cardboard from the..... totally unmentionable, and the good stuff gets collected and taken away to be dealt with accordingly.



In the Sadar Market, Jodhpur.

It is still a chaotically dirty country, but they are trying to do their bit on the ecologically 'green' front. Interestingly, some of our train journeys took us through some very new developments alongside the railway tracks, where everything is modern and clean and generally white'n'bright! This is the New India. It is changing dramatically, for the better, certainly for them. I suppose it goes without saying that the re-cycling area was heavily populated with cows, pigs and feral dogs all snuffling through the sari-clad ladies' rubbish at the same time, but you have to have some of the 'old India' as well, don't you?

Hello from Bundi, December 22

Udaipur was the next (six-hour) bus ride away, through lovely countryside and a welcome stop halfway, beside a farm with well-fed cows and calves, pigs and piglets, and sundry dogs and cats, all looking well-nourished and very content – in contrast to their urban cousins, who struggle to scrape a living, foraging among the rubbish to make a good meal out of a bit of old newspaper or a cardboard box. We went to Udaipur on our first visit to India, 21 years ago, and stayed at the Lake Palace Hotel for one night, as a special, surprise, treat for me from Tony. He can't (or won't) remember how much it cost, but these days prices start at £600 a night, so this time we stayed at a rather more modest place overlooking the lake and the aforementioned hotel, where the sunsets



Udaipur market.



Lake Palace, Udaipur.

were amazing, and the ducks on the water in front of the hotel, made for some lovely pictures. We went up a cable-car, which I don't think was in existence when we went before, and had some amazing views from the top (along with market stalls selling jewellery and advertising 'bracelet and neckless' – another of my favourite signs!)

From Udaipur we were into new territory, first at Chittaurgarh, which was a bit of a one-horse town (or more accurately, one-cow town!). Chittor, as it's more easily called, didn't have a lot going for it, to be honest, apart from a huge fort (13 km of it) where we spent three or four hours hopping from site to site with a very friendly tuk tuk driver. Tony heroically clambered up the main tower at the top of the hill; the steps up the inside were horrendously steep, and in the pitch dark at some stages (he was glad that he had a torch), while I sat at the bottom entertaining the local children who all wanted to have their photos taken with me. No, I don't know why, either!

And then to Bundi, a memorable train ride away. We had to get last-minute, cannot-reserve, train tickets, and the train, when it arrived, was absolutely packed, as only an Indian train can be packed, with bodies standing in the aisles and hanging off the ceiling racks. We managed, I'm not sure how, to acquire a corner seat between us, so we took it in turns to have either a left cheek or a right cheek perched on the edge for the three-hour journey! Bundi, however, was a surprisingly lovely place to be. Hardly any westerners go there, just stray backpackers, and you feel it's a bit of 'real' India. Little streets with businesses off to the side, grinding knives, weaving silk, packing spices and so on.



Group photo at Chittor.

Both Chittor and Bundi are remarkable for their difficulty in finding suitable drinks. Chittor was a no-Coke town. Every other shop had Pepsi, no-one had Coke. Eventually, we found the one shop that did have Coke, right on the edge of town, so we were all right in the end, but it was a bit touch-and-go! Then Bundi was different again. Our hotel owner informed us that Bundi is a holy city, so they don't have beer. "However," he said, "if you go to the shop over the road – which sells Coca Cola by the gallon – and ask for

a beer, the shopkeeper will give a nod to his mate who will run down the road and come back with as many under-the-counter bottles of beer as you like”. So where there’s a will there’s a way, when it comes to our evening wind-down ‘drinks on the balcony’ routine.



Tower of Fame in Chittaurgarh Fort.

Hello from Delhi, December 28

Our last port of call was Jaipur, where we had four nights in a somewhat regimented hotel, run by an ex-Indian Army brigadier and his very imposing wife. They didn’t so much check us in as interrogate us on arrival. They were very kind, but were *memorable*! Say no more! And while Jodhpur was the Blue City, Jaipur is the Pink City – as much as anything for the amazingly fantastic wall of the Hawa Mahal palace. This has 60 small bay windows on five levels, all for the women who were confined to the palace to be able to look out on to the real world outside. And it is now one of the most photographed structures in India, nudging up to the Taj Mahal, I would think. All fashioned in red sandstone, as are most of the buildings and terraces in the city.

Totally unexpected in Jaipur were the kites. Up on the rooftop of the hotel you could look over the city, and the sky was full of little kites, hundreds of them. Apparently there is to be a huge competition on the 14th January, which will be a massive event. I’m not quite sure how it works, I think the idea is to bring down as many other kites as possible (did you read *The Kite Runner*, which explains it better?) and the last kite left flying is the winner. I think. There must be more to it than that, but whatever it is, it’s going to be big, come January 14!

Next day was another early train, back into Delhi. And to the same hotel as before because it is so well located between the railway station and the Paharganj district, which is our favourite area in the middle of the old town. And for our last dinner we went to our favourite roof-top restaurant (memories of previous years) overlooking the main square in Paharganj. And next morning the flight home.

Our major expedition from Jaipur was a bus to Sikhandra and then a tuk tuk to Abhaneri. No, you don’t have to remember these names! What you need



Hawa Mahal, Jaipur.

to know is that Abhaneri has the most amazingly beautiful, wonderfully designed, truly spectacular stepwell in the whole of India. It is a magnificent piece of architecture, with nearly 2000 stone steps in criss-crossing flights. Quite stunning, totally well worth the journey out there.

We were in Jaipur for Christmas Day, where the brigadier and his scary wife paid no homage whatsoever to Christmas (apart from a tiny tree with some lights on, hidden away in a corner) until it came to supper time, when they suddenly found themselves justified in charging three times the price of the exact same meal that they served every other night of the week! Luckily we had by that time found ourselves a delightful local restaurant only a short walk from the hotel, and looking out



Preparing our Christmas dinner in Jaipur.



Abhaneri stepwell.

on to the city's central market; so we ate there every evening after the first night. And to my delight, after having spent a very un-Christmassy Christmas Day, we saw a small baby-in-arms, probably no more than 18 months old, being carried through the square, in full Santa Claus regalia – hat, suit, boots, **and** full-on white beard – and his mum waved to us and wished us Happy Christmas. That completely made my Christmas Day.

There is so much to say about India, and I seem to reduce it all to 'wonderful, amazing, fantastic, brilliant, beautiful'. Which it is. What more can you say? We have been there so many times, and probably will not go back again. The older we get, the noisier, busier and more crowded it seems to become. But we are so pleased and so very happy to have seen as much of it as we have.

Memories of India: the endless crowds of people, the vibrant colours, and the seething activity make it my favourite country to visit.



The view from our favourite rooftop restaurant in central Delhi, overlooking the main street in the heart of Paharganj; it serves excellent curries, and is well worth the very steep stairs up to it.



Two-level maisonettes alongside the railway into Delhi.

Memories

Besides these postcard travels, there were many others that we enjoyed back in the previous century, but from which now remain only a shelf-full of my diary notebooks and another of mini photo-albums. They were equally great adventures, all well remembered, with some real highlights. Such as:

A series of journeys round the western USA including recce trips gathering data, finding hotels and compiling road-logs for the geology tours that Tony led in the subsequent years (long before we had another short visit to the same area in 2017).

Two grand road trips with all five of the children, one round much of Alpine Europe when they were all small enough to fit in the car, and another round the western USA in a rented minibus.

Two great adventures across China. One just after the Tianenmen Square event, so very few other westerners around as we toured the sites from Beijing to Guilin, travelling by train. Then another grand train ride that started at Bukhara in Uzbekistan, and went via the Aral Sea ships' graveyard and the mountains of Sichuan to end up in North Korea (to which we also returned in 2018).



Petra: first view from the Siq.



Memorable loos

Hua Shan, China. A wooden plank suspended over the pigsty below, with the snuffling and grunting occupants eagerly awaiting all offerings. Bacon for breakfast, anyone?

Chongqing, China. Just a long channel with a trickle of water running through, and all participants squatting one behind the other, without a shred of privacy.

Ghandrung, Nepal. The ultimate loo with a view. Open to the elements, but with an amazing vista across the Himalayas.

Kyoto, Japan. Automatic loo seat cover over the pre-warmed seat; hot or cold water jets at the press of a button; hot or cold air jets at the press of another button; all with Japanese messages over a loud-speaker. Just lacked a hand under your bottom to help you up!

To Jordan just after the Iraq war, so we had Petra almost to ourselves. Then again with Syria tagged on as a recce for another geology tour, and fortunately while that country was delightful but rarely visited, and well before its near-total destruction.

A series of long weekends during winters, fitted into the university's semester break, so to Prague, Budapest, Krakow



Walk in the park at Tsarskoe Selo, St Petersburg.

and St Petersburg, and on snowmobiles into Yellowstone National Park in the USA, all very cold and very memorable; also one to Venice to experience the flooding on a winter high tide, one to Dubai before it became popular, and a memorable winter trip to Iceland, when we caught unusually good weather with sunshine and Aurora Borealis alternating over the snow.

My longest-ever walk (two weeks of it!), trekking to the Annapurna Sanctuary in the Nepal Himalayas, followed by the first instalment of much travelling round India, which probably remains my favourite country to visit.

Another shorter trek in the Langtang Himalayas, as part of a grand trip that started with the Pushkar Camel Fair in Rajasthan, and continued with the classic road trip from Kathmandu over the Himalayas into Tibet via Rongbuk (at the northern side of Everest) and onwards to the magical cities of Shigatse and Lhasa.



Annapurna Sanctuary.

Gourmet Experiences

Ratings: Good, Middling, Disgusting.

D. Ethiopia. Injeera flat bread; aka sour dishcloth.

D. Korea. Kimchi fermented cabbage. Rotted for years?

M. Greenland. Reindeer. An Arctic name for venison

M. Iceland. Whale. Big-fish stew. (PS. I **know** it's not a fish.)

M. Australia. Kangaroo. Rather beef-like, and tough.

M. Peru. Guinea Pig. Too much like pet guinea pig on a plate.

M. Costa Rica. Crocodile. Fishy-flavour; OK curried.

G. China. Char Sui. Wonderful pork, from a village butcher!

G. Jordan. Falafels. Lovely surprise as Jordanian street-food.

G. Namibia. Ostrich. The best 'fillet steak' ever.

G. Yemen. Selection of dishes. Looks awful; tastes delicious.

Multiple visits to Alaska, first for the experience, and then to recce for more of Tony's geological tours, so that the last one continued across to Kamchatka to plan one of the first-ever geological tours of the Russian volcanoes. And from there we returned home on the Trans-Siberian railway.

And in between all those we travelled frequently round Britain, Ireland and Europe, and made it to Hawaii, Vietnam, Namibia, Taiwan, Cuba, Burma, Costa Rica, Greenland and Egypt in pursuit of just some of the world's delights.



The Hoba meteorite, Namibia.

Worst Hotels

Rongbuk, Tibet. A monastery 'guest house' with beds but no bedding, the 'amenities' consisting of a cess-pit some fifty yards away across frozen ground in the pitch dark, and almost nothing to eat. (And altitude sickness to boot!)

*One in Japan where we found ourselves **locked in**. Nobody on the premises, registering was all done by computer. It turned out to be a 'love hotel', which you're supposed to pay for by the hour. We just wanted a room for the night – but not locked in! Tony managed to force the lock, and we escaped.*

Kathmandu, where dogs across the entire city barked and howled throughout the night. And in the morning, I put my toothbrush under the tap, and the water came out black. Eurgh. That probably accounted for several days of Delhi Belly!

Venice, tucked up right alongside a church where the bells chimed every quarter of an hour, all night long. No sleep for either the wicked or the righteous.

Another monastery, this time in Egypt, with only dormitory accommodation, where the dinner was boiled spaghetti (no sauce), dry bread, plain water and an orange.



Leg rower on Inle Lake, Burma.

Best Hotels

Actually most of them, all over the world. But there have to be special mentions for India, for the Lake Palace Hotel in Udaipur, and also for China, for the old Peace Hotel on The Bund in Shanghai. Both of them qualify as mega-expensive, and both were booked ahead by Tony, but just 'for one night only' as special surprises for me.

Never to be forgotten

The tapir that reared out of the water inches from me in front of the canoe that Tony was paddling through the rain-forest wetlands in Costa Rica. I don't know who was more surprised, it or me.

The final few steps up to the tea house at Annapurna Base Camp in Nepal. Six days of trekking to get there, and even 25 years ago we were the oldest among the trekkers. They all applauded when I finally trudged up the last bit of hill!

The station master in Delhi railway station. We had just arrived in India, and climbed up the outside steps to his office for some advice and information, I can't remember what, which he very efficiently provided. We thanked him, and he – with that particular shake of the head that Indians do, to mean yes, no or maybe – smiled and said: "Everything helping." That was the moment we felt we'd come home, to India. "Everything helping" has now become part of family vocabulary!



Aran Islands, Ireland.



Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet.

All these were travelling light, making our own way around, so missing the inside knowledge (and endless talking) of the guided experience, but savouring everything we saw either by design or by accident. We started as relatively young and energetic adventurers, and slowly matured into two of the oldest backpackers on the world's by-ways. There could be another book in all those, but more likely they will just stay as great memories.

When we were young - early days travelling with all the children. Posing for a selfie on the top of the Stelvio Pass, in Italy, during our truly memorable camping trip round Alpine Europe. Now a faded family photo, but memories are made of this.



