

Happy Holidays to scattered friends and family. As many of you know, last year we were on sabbatical in China and Australia, which provides too much material for this letter, but excellent guidance in a choice of stationery. We have about 1000 slides, 500 digital pictures and a trunk full of scrapbook material. We'll spare you the slide show, but here are a few snapshots of our travels, month by month.

September: BeiJing DaXue

Northern Capital Big School, otherwise known as Peking University, was home for three months last fall. We lived in two small rooms, dined at the Foreign Experts' dining hall across the way, visited schools, gave lectures, did a little home-schooling, wrote email when we could, and pondered what we were slowly learning about China. It was not a relaxing stay---very little about China is easy---but we found it so compelling that as I write this, twelve months after we left, I find myself longing to return. But China is slowly coming to us. Several of the students we met have come here to graduate school and more are sending email all the while.

October: Halloween in Shao Yuan

Many who visit Chinese universities complain about the segregation of foreigners from the locals, but we actually enjoyed the opportunity to meet others from abroad and compare notes about our latest mysterious experience. Halloween evening, for example, we had dinner with undergraduates from California and Iowa, a student from Cameroon studying Chinese, a Chinese-Canadian lawyer, and a Swede studying political science. Then we retired to our rooms---the kids' room transformed into a Haunted House---to host a Halloween party for our closer friends: a Quebecois family with the only older foreign kids on campus; a Vietnamese woman who spoke her mother tongue, Russian, German, French and a little English; a woman from the US via Brazil who was setting up the first Comparative Religion department in China; a Filipina teaching Tagalog; an Ohioan couple teaching political science; some recent Canadian graduates who had signed up to teach English for two years. English was, thank goodness, the *lingua franca* among these colleagues and friends, so we had no trouble sharing stories.

November: Shanxi

Shanxi Province produces coal by the millions of tons. The air is thick with smoke and the new road through the mountains six hours west of Beijing is crowded with lumbering coal trucks, three wheeled mini-trucks that crawl along at 20 mph, carts, bicycles and the occasional draft animal. We traveled by deluxe bus and I kept my eyes glued to the video screen, despite the fact that the film was in Chinese and the most violent I've ever seen, because watching the road brought my heart to my throat. But we made it to our meetings, consulting on a World Bank project to improve higher education planning in this province of 70 million. Our hosts smiled politely, wrote down everything we said, and fed us three banquets a day. By the end of the week the conversation was getting a little thin, and Stephen, who didn't eat Chinese food during our entire China stay, was getting a little hungry, so I was actually pleased to get on the same bus and back to our peanut butter supply in Beijing. While in Shanxi we toured one of the most beautiful of many temples we saw in China, spent hours in a factory learning about how postage scales are made and how the work unit was once organized (China's great invention and stumbling block---how will they survive when millions of people leave these bankrupt industries and the social safety net they used to provide?) and our kids played basketball at a middle school. I forget the grim setting and remember only the fascinating interludes.

December : Bali

We drove to the airport one dark cold wet morning in Beijing and that evening we were in Paradise. While not without its problems of wealth and poverty and environmental stress, Bali has to be one of the loveliest places on earth. Every house, no matter how modest, has a family temple, and each morning stunning women dressed in glorious fabrics place offerings in front of every dwelling and business; sometimes these are simply flowers, more often a tray woven of palm leaves, with a few flowers, fruits, a morsel of rice carefully arranged. We went snorkeling here, the first of three such opportunities during our year. Imagine a life where one can swim through tropical fish and coral in three countries within ten months. (Though I should hasten to add, we *did* work, and often more than anticipated. Just not in Bali.)

January: Brisbane

From the Tropics to the Subtropics: we set up house for four months in Queensland, Australia, on a sunny hilltop surrounded by flowering trees and eucalyptus. Chip taught a course in new information technologies while I figured out how to buy school uniforms, learned a new language for groceries and volunteered with an arts program. We imagined we would explore the continent, but it's large (about the size of the US, with New Jersey's population) and Queensland offered so much scenery, history and entertainment that we chose just to do the southeast region of this Alaska-sized state, saving the Opera House and A Town Like Alice for a future trip.

February: Aussie Speak

A good bit of the early email we sent home was devoted to contemplating Aussie speech. As we dug deeper, we began to reflect on how these similar cultures diverge, ours and theirs. I'm not sure we ever figured it out, but we felt very much at home. Our kids survived two months of real school, playing cricket, memorizing details about the First Fleet, learning new homophones like "caught" and "court", "saw" and "sore"---these sound the same, right? Harder was learning what exactly the newspapers meant when they reported that "the prime minister was gobsmacked." However, despite the language problems, we found their newspapers far better than ours, Rupert Murdoch notwithstanding.

March: Fraser Island

Australia IS the outdoors. And there are spectacular places to explore, while attending carefully to the sharks, crocs, poisonous spiders and snakes. Fraser Island is a 70 mile stretch of sand, with rainforest in the interior, kettle ponds tucked in here and there, and the most amazing white sand beach. The beach is the highway: check your watch for high tide, mind the buried rocks, steer clear of the teens exceeding the 35 mph speed limit, dodge the surf-fishing folk and kids and wrecked Japanese tankers, and wait for help when you get stuck in deep sand, as we did once. From there we headed north for the highlight of our travels in Oz: watching baby loggerhead sea turtles hatch and head out to sea at night. Stephen and I later swam with the great-grandmother of one of them, squeezing hands as we wandered across the Barrier Reef until we were so far from our boat, I feared for our ability to swim back.

April: Malaysia

If you can't make it to Bali, try Malaysia, a different sort of paradise, bigger and more complicated. Sitting on a bus stuck in the horrendous traffic of Kuala Lumpur we could entertain ourselves watching an incredible procession of ethnic diversity: Malay women with head-scarves (some conservative and others flamboyant), Bangladeshi workers, Indian-Malaysian women in saris, Malay men in sarongs or business suits, Chinese-Malaysians, children of all persuasions in school uniforms, Western business types selling computers and setting up restaurants like Fridays and Chilli's, Malaysians programming those computers and managing the restaurants--but still eating in the far-better and cheaper night markets. We dipped into Singapore for a few days with friends who teach at the American school there and

learned about the expatriate life in this fascinating city, also worth a trip, as long as you're in Malaysia.

May: Serendipitous Italy and UK

On to Italy and the UK, because once we were flying this far, why not go all the way around? These were Stephen and Emily's choices, respectively. Everything seemed to work out: the trains in Italy ran on time, the gypsy girls startled us but failed to pick our pockets in Rome, Stephen ate enough pizza to make up for China. We found the houseboat in the Norfolk Broads that Emily was sure we would find; it came complete with dinghy, so we rowed to the coots' nests mentioned in the children's books from the 1920's that were our inspiration for traveling to Norfolk and the Lake District. The smaller places we came across during May are the ones we remember best, like the Spada Museum in Rome where we were the only visitors, or the convent where we were given entry to see some 13th century frescoes while the church below filled up with Indian-Romans singing the mass in Hindi or Gujarati or Punjabi. But the most-visited site, the Basilica of St Francis in pre-earthquake Assisi was also dazzling, despite the crowds. It's disheartening to know that the Cimabue and Giotto frescoes we found so stunning will never be seen in quite the same way again.

June-December: Home

This is enough, too much. I'll leave it that we're back to real life, the kids continue with drama and music activities, and they've adjusted to their huge and slightly chaotic middle school. We work and drive around too much, but we're all well. We claim we're cutting back this spring, but I doubt it. I muse about finding a project to save the world, or at least our community, but something else has to give first. We suffer the Late Twentieth Century malaise that so many of us bore each other talking/writing about: too much stuff and too little time.

Our families are generally pretty well. Aunt Polly just marked her 92nd birthday on Cape Cod, which we celebrated six months early during a quick trip there last August. My Dad had some surgery a few weeks ago which has set him back a bit, but he doesn't want me to dwell on it, so I'll simply say he finished a spectacular tile and adobe patio just before going into the hospital, and will no doubt tackle a similar project when he's back in the saddle this spring. Chip's Dad also had surgery earlier in the fall, but is fine now, and the Todds are getting set to gather with Chip's sisters and their kids in Austin. We'll miss that event, but look forward to having my sister and her husband join us for Christmas, along with some international students, and to seeing all of our extended family one way or another in the spring and summer.

I hope this hasn't bored you. The slide show would have been much worse. Signing off, as my close friend Garrison Keillor would say:

Be well, do good work and keep in touch.

Susan, on behalf of all the Bruces