

New Zealand and Fiji Emails

John Mosley / Barbara Foster

November 27 - December 27, 2015

00: New Zealand and Fiji

Hello Friends,

Winter has come early to southern Utah — high of 48 today -- so it's time to head south. Far south. 70 degree south of where we are.

After a short (very short) 2-week break in St. George we're off again, this time to enjoy 3 weeks in New Zealand and 1 week in Fiji. We'll return on December 28th and then head straight to Borrego Springs in our motorhome, so this week we've also packed for California. Look for daily emails as we travel when we have an internet connection; that should be frequently in New Zealand but probably rarely in Fiji.

Attached for starters is a summary of our New Zealand odyssey. It gives more info than you want, but it's easy for me to send it. We traveled by ourselves on our last several trips — Iceland & Norway, South America, Spain & Morocco — and we felt the lack of company, so we thought it might be nice for a change to travel with others in a small group and have someone to talk to other than each other. And let others do the planning. And the driving — on the wrong side of the road. We're both looking forward to just showing up and letting others worry about where to eat, admission times, transfers, etc. We'll see how it goes. The New Zealand tour is limited to 18 people in a small van and our Fiji ship has 24 passengers total. It should be manageable; we definitely don't want to be herded in a busload of 60.

I'll send a brochure on our Fiji leg when we reach that point in our travels. Again we just show up, and that trip even includes all meals. We'll feel pampered — which is OK. Attached is a photo of our ship.

What we're NOT looking forward to is two more day-long flights over the ocean immobilized in tiny cramped seats. And changing nearly a dozen time zones. But there's not much choice in the matter. We do wish there was a pill you could take to adjust your internal clock ("swallow one for each time zone") — wouldn't that be nice!

One problem is that we're allowed a normal-size suitcase and 25kg per person on all flights except ONE, from one island in Fiji to another, and then we can have just one carry-on plus a handbag each (knapsack in our case). So our luggage for the whole trip is limited by this one freakin flight. We bought two new cute small suitcases and we fit in what we could, but there are no spares and nothing bulky. We didn't quite cut the

handles off our toothbrushes to save space but we thought about it. We just weighed them: 18 lbs each, including suitcase!

Our flight leaves Las Vegas in a few hours and we arrive in Auckland at 1 p.m. on Sunday. Look for an email Sunday evening (NZ time; your time zone might be different) assuming we have an internet connection.

- John (and Barbara)



#####

01: Arrival in Auckland

Hi Friends,

We drove thru snow flurries on the way out of St. George, so it was definitely time to leave. We're told that summer hasn't arrived yet here in Auckland (pronounced Oakland) but it seems just fine in the low 70s and partly cloudy.

We were 30 hours traveling from the time we left home to drive to Las Vegas until we touched down in Auckland, and it seemed longer. We had 4-hour layovers in both Los Angeles and Fiji which meant we didn't have to worry about connecting to the next departing flight, but it made a long trip even longer. For the longest leg we were in our

seats for just over 11 hours! — and our long legs objected. Our butts too — it's hard to squirm in a seat only 20 inches wide (or however wide they are).

But enough complaining — we were met at the airport by a gentleman with a sign “Mosley - Foster” (very nice way to arrive!) and shuttled to an especially nice hotel with a large room (a suite) and view overlooking the harbor. It's now Sunday evening (we crossed the dateline) and we'll be here two nights to give us a free day to recover from the flight, the sleepless night, and four time zone changes. Our actual tour begins on Tuesday morning (and it begins with a tour of Auckland!). But we don't like to rush and we do want a breather between the flights and the tour. So we tomorrow is a rest day.

We walked around the pier (saw an interesting use of a shipping container) and are about to have nice seafood dinner in the restaurant immediately below our window. A bonus is free wifi — our hotel wants \$13 per 24 hour period or \$3/hour -- and nuts to that!

Our goal is to stay up until 8 tonight and then sleep 12 hours. It's about 6 pm Sunday when I send this as dinner is about to be served.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

The harbour (sic) as seen from our 3rd floor hotel window. It's a great place to walk around.

A lending library in a shipping container on the dock — how neat! Our hotel is behind the red container at left.





#####

02: Auckland Free Day

Hi Friends,

Today was a rest day — a day to recover lost sleep and make a first stab at adjusting time zones — and we did that with flair. There’s nothing like 11 hours dead sleep to start a new day and a new adventure.

Our hotel is just blocks from the main downtown shopping district, so in the morning we walked around and window-shopped for several hours and I got a well-deserved massage on the spur of the moment. The New Zealand dollar is worth about 66¢ US but things are priced roughly the same, so — in direct contrast to London where the ratio was reversed — it’s an inexpensive place to visit. For example, \$20 NZ is \$13 US while 20 English Pounds is \$30 US; huge difference.

Today was a day of rest — but there’s a museum across the street! Apparently we’re not museumed-out from London where we must have visited 30 times, so we checked out the New Zealand National Maritime Museum for an hour or so, and it was moderately

interesting. There have a few canoes, an America Cup racer, items from Capt'n Cook who was the first to map the islands, and similar. Then I read on a bench outside while Barbara watched TV. For some reason she's been watching the channel Tōku Reo — a Maori station; she can now count to three and say hello - goodbye in Maori.

Barbara is terribly impressed by our hotel room. It has a small but full kitchen; bedroom with queen bed; large bathroom with both shower and giant tub; and spacious living room with couch, table & chairs, easy chair; a view.

A nearby restaurant had a Monday special on mussels, so we had 1 kg mussels (!) Barbara and squid with New Zealand wine for me. Seafood is local here, a few hundred feet from the ocean. We expect to have plenty of seafood the next three weeks — and lamb (saw lamb pizza today — we've never seen that before).

The high was 73 and we were happy with that. Rain may be the way, though.

Tomorrow adventure begins. Our luggage is to be outside our room at 7:30 for pickup and we meet our guide at 8 and hit the road.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Whaling exhibit; New Zealand was a center of whaling in the 1800s (Queequeg in Moby Dick was a Maori) although they've given it up and are now pissed off at the Japanese for continuing. (<https://www.national.org.nz/news/news/media-releases/detail/2015/11/28/NZ-deeply-disappointed-by-whaling-decision>)

A short video from a Maori TV station (won't appear on this pdf file).





#####

03: kauri trees

[Day 2: 1st December: Auckland – Matakoho – Waipoua Forest – Omapere, Hokianga
We depart Auckland for Muriwai Beach on the West Coast where a short walk takes us to close up views of a gannet colony. We skirt the shoreline of the Kaipara Harbour, one of the world’s largest inland tidal estuaries. There are elevated views of the harbour as we drive to Wellsford and on to the Matakoho Kauri Museum. North of Dargaville we enter the primeval forest of Waipoua (translated as water falling at night). We accompany Footprints Waipoua, a group of young Maori dedicated to preserving the traditions and culture of Ngapuhi, the northern Maori tribe, to visit Tane Mahuta, the God of the forest, (51 metres tall, girth 13.8 metres) and gain a deeper understanding of this unique forest. This evening we dine at our hotel on the harbour’s edge.]

Hi Friends,

I’ll begin these emails with the day’s description from our itinerary, partly because it helps me get the names right. These emails are to share our adventure with you, but they’re also our trip diary.

Our van holds 18 but there are only six of us total: one fellow from UAE, three ladies from GB, and us two. Eight others will join us next week, but until then we’re a very small group, and that’s fine.

So our adventure began on “day 2” (“day 1” being yesterday, totally on our own — sheesh). It was a long driving day and all of us were nodding off at one point or another. The scenery resembles the eastern states with lots of green and rolling hills (occasionally steep) and just the odd-looking trees to tell us we weren’t in Pennsylvania.

Our first brief stop was to admire a gannet colony on the scenic west coast.

Our second was at a tree museum. We've never been to one — didn't know there were any. The kauri is the second largest tree in the world, and they're amazing. They're huge, have great texture, are useful for many things, but the most amazing thing about them is they remain wood when they should fossilize even after millions of years. They find kauri wood in 30 million year old coal beds — and they can carve it, shape it, and work it into bowls or whatever. For sale in the gift shop were little wood boxes made from wood that had lain buried for 45,000 years and the wood seemed fresh. And the sap resembles amber after a few hundred thousand years, with trapped insects and all. I'll give the museum 5 stars on TripAdvisor.

Fish and lamb shank for dinner — both local.

Now it's late and we're in our hotel on the beach listening to waves crash from the Tasman Sea. Almost romantic. It's about 9:30 and the stars are beginning to appear — but they seem to be in the wrong position! There's too much light to stargaze, however.

Tomorrow we continue exploring the North Island for two more days.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos

30,000,000 year-old wood — not fossilized — that can be worked like regular fresh-cut wood, although it is very hard. The sap preserves it so.

Part of their amber collection from hundreds of thousands of years ago.

Our hotel on the bay cannot be seen but it's at the end of the short pier at left.





#####

04: Oldest house in New Zealand

[Wednesday 2 December: Omapere – Bay of Islands: This morning we cruise out onto the Hokianga Harbour with the MV Hokianga Express. This beautiful waterway is a significant and spiritual place for Maori, something that is made evident to us as we cruise this great harbour. We have a chance to explore the sand dunes and, if you are adventurous, ride a body board down the dunes. We then travel onto Kerikeri and the beautiful Bay of Islands – the jewel in Northland’s crown – to visit the Waitangi Treaty House, a symbolic place in New Zealand history where Maori signed a treaty with Queen Victoria’s representatives in 1840. Enjoy watching the sun set over the Bay of Islands from our waterfront hotel, our accommodation for the next two nights.]

Hi Friends,

Again more time in our small van than we’d prefer, but it’s comfortable (at least compared to an airplane) and we did make three interesting stops.

The first was to take a motorboat cruise in the harbor shown in the yesterday’s last photo — a good ride for an hour.

Then to the oldest (European) house in New Zealand, built by the first missionaries in 1822. That wasn't old to the British members of our tour but it's considerably older than any structure in St. George.

And on to the Treaty House where England negotiated sovereignty over New Zealand by getting the tribes to sign a document they couldn't read. (This document is still a point of contention and the government is making restitution tribe by tribe — Google Waitangi Tribunal.)

Our tour guides have given us quite a bit of history which we're happy to absorb.

Tomorrow is a day off and we're looking forward to that — we're at a beautiful resort on the sea on the east side of the North Island with a high tomorrow of 75°.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos

We saw this newsletter in a cafe in a very small town on the North Island. A news item: the town is the size of Plummer, Idaho, but 60 people (1/10 the population) turned out this week to demonstrate their support for policies to address global warming. Even the most remote places we can think of feel affected.

The oldest house in New Zealand.

The view outside our present hotel room of the Bay of Islands.



Hauora Hokianga

Pouaka Poutapeta, Kaikohe

Waea: (09) 4057 709 Waea Whakaahua: (09) 4057 329

PANUI-A-IWI RUA RAU, TORU TEKAU MA ONO

Tihema 2015

E tūhia ana tēnei pānui kia noho mohio ai te iwi whānui ki ngā whakahaerenga o Hauora Hokianga. Mehemea he whakaaro ōu, he pātai rānei, he awhina rānei, me whakapā mai ki a Kirihī Wiremu i te Hohipere o Rāwene; nama waea (09) 4057 320; me whakapā atu rānei ki te tarahiti o tōu rohe kainga noho.

NGA RA KIRIHIMETE MO NGA WHARE HAOURA A ROHE

E noho kapi ana nga tari hauora a rohe, mai i te Paraire 25th tae noa atu ki te Mane 4th o Hanuere. Ka mutu, ka puaretia mai ano nga mea katoa a te **Turei 5th o Hanuere 2016**. E noho puare mai ana te Tari Hauora i Rawene (09 405 7709) mo te wahanga katoa o te Kirihimete me nga raa hororei mo nga aitua, me nga mate puta oho whakarere.

E whai naahi ana nga whare hauora o Omapere, Taheke me te Kohukohu a nga rā o te Turei, te Wenerei me te Taita o te tau hou. Mehemea ka paa te mate korokoro mamea ki te tamariki, me haere tika mai ki te kite i te rata, naahi raanei.

Kia maharatia ake, me waea tika atu ki te nama 111 mo nga tino mate, raruraru ranei kia tae tika atu te awhina o taua tari ki a koe.

RUNANGA O HAUORA HOKIANGA HUIHUINGA 2016

E ahei noa atu ana te tangata te haere ake ki nga huihuinga o te Runanga, noho ai, whakarongo korero ai. E watea ana te huarahi, aa e puare ana te kuaha ki te katoa o Hokianga kia tae ake ki enei huihuinga a nga Turei whakamutunga a ia marama ki te whare Matauranga i te hohipere nei. Mea nei ngaa raa me nga marama mo te tau hou 2014 - Hanuere 26th Pepuere 23rd Maehe 29th Apereira 26th Mae 31st Hune 28th Hurae 26th Akuhata 30th Hepetema 27th Oketopa 25th Noema 29th Tihema 20th

I oti i te hui a tau o te Runanga inanahi nei te poti teetahi heamana hou, ka tuu, ko Frank Herbert hei heamana mo te Runanga, ka tuu, ko Hiku Cherrington hei heamana tuarua.

E watea ana te pukapuka a tau ki te iwi, no reira waea mai ki a Gina on (09) 4057 347 mo teetahi kape, ka whakapaa atu raanei ki te ipurangi o te hohipere: www.hokiangahealth.org.nz



TIRA WAIATA KIRIHIMETE

E tuu ana tenei huihuinga tira kaiwaiata a te Mane 21st o Tihema, ka tutaki ki mua i te Taari Whakatau 5.30pm i te ahiahi. No reira, nau mai, haere mai e te iwi ki te waiata haere me te kawae i te rongomau o te Kihirimete me te Tau Hou ki nga wahanga katoa o te hohipere.

RAWHARA O TE HOSPITAL AUXILIARY

1st \$100 Countdown voucher - Tangaroa Herbert, Pawarenga;
2nd \$100 Petrol Voucher:- Megan & David Bawden, Whangarei
3rd \$50 New World Voucher: - Doreen Beer, Kaikohe
4th \$50 Warehouse Voucher - Tor Suttcliffe, Gorge Rd.

Mihi nui atu ana ki nga kaitautoko mai - G.Freese, Pirihitini

TUKU TONO WHAI MAHI

E karanga ana ki te hunga kamura hanga whare kia tukua mai o koutou hiahia mo nga mahi hanga whare me te mahi tiaki tonu ai i nga whare o te hohipere mo nga tau e heke mai nei. Waea mai ki a Harmen Hielkema 4057 727 ki te korero.

KUA MUTU TE RATA A PAORA

I te tau 1977 i tae tuatahi mai a Paora raua tahi ko Lis me waa raua tamariki tokorua ki Rawene, no muri mai ka whai tamariki ano raaua ka eke ki te tokowha te tini. Mai ano i nga tau 38 i tuu Paora hei poutokomanawa mo te hohipere o Hokianga, ka mutu hei poutokomanawa i roto i te iwi mo te hauora o te tangata.

I tuu nga hui whakanui i a Paora i Horeke, Waimamaku me te marae o te hohipere Pou Kara Ariki. I whakanuia a ia e te hohipere me te iwi ki nga tini koha me nga taonga whakamiharo, he tokotoko whakairo, he pare whakairo. (Whakaahua o Paora/Lis me taaua tamahine a Sarah)



HOKIANGA HIKOI - OMA ROA O TE COPTHORNE

Putu wawe nei te whakamohiotanga atu ki a tatou katoa mo tenei paanuitanga mo te **2016 Half Marathon - Rawene to Opononi** - Rahoro 9th Apereira 2016. Tikina atu nga huu takahi huarahi, whakapakari te tinana mo te wero nei, kia taea e koe te hikoi, ko te oma ranei i te katoa o te huarahi i Rawene nei ahu atu ki Omapere tutuki ai. Taaria te waa mo te roanga atu.

WHAKAMIHIA ANA

Ka nui rawa te mihi ki te wharekai o Boatshed Café me te whareto Gallery i Rawene, kua raahuitia nga whare e rua i te mahi moki hikareti. Mihi nui atu ana.

KAUPAPA HAUORA NIHO Ka mutu tenei kaupapa a te Turei 22nd o Tihema. Ka timata mai ano e te Northland DHB tenei kaupapa a te Turei 26th o Hanuere 2016. Ka rehitangia nga tamariki kura nohinohi me nga tamariki kaumatua e nga kaimahi o te DHB, ka rehitangia nga hungahunga e nga naahi kohungahunga. Hoi ano raa, mo nga mate puta whakarere mai me waea atu ki tenei nama 0800 MYTEETH.



NGA KUPU WHAKANUI O TE WAA O TE RAUMATI

E tuku mihi nui atu ana e te Runanga o Hauora Hokianga ki te katoa e noho kainga mai nei i te Hokianga huri noa kia noho pumau ai ngaa manaakitanga o te raumati, kirihimete me te tau hou ki a koutou katoa. Tiakina teetahi i teetahi, atawhaingia nga tamariki mokopuna, manaakitia nga kaumatua me nga whanau, aa whanaunga katoa, kia whai whakaaro ano hoki ki nga manuwiri. Kia tau te mauri o te ora, te pai, kaha me te rangimarie ki a koutou, aa tatou katoa.

Meri Kirihimete me nga manaakitanga o te Tau Hou
www.hokiangahealth.org.nz



#####

05: day off

Hi Friends,

We skipped the optional activities today and took the day off. We're at a fancy resort, so why not enjoy it! And the activities were ones we could skip.

So Barbara walked a mile into town to window-shop while I read by the pool. The pool area is beautiful — this is a classy place — but the sea breeze made it a bit cool. Barbara returned with zero souvenirs, as expected.

After lunch we strolled on a groomed path through the nearby forest. We were searching for a trail to a mangrove forest but didn't find it, but did enjoy a 100-minute hike. We kept hearing a very strange bird that we'll have to identify one day. It was quite warm away from the sea. Afterwards I put a long-sleeve shirt on and read more on our balcony with its great view of the bay and the ocean beyond.

Now we're in the bar (too cool to be outside) that overlooks the pool area, waiting for dinner time.

Being in a small (very small) group has worked out well. We've enjoyed having company at meals and in the bar, so that has been great.

Tomorrow we return to Auckland for part 2 of our adventure — the South Island.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos

The pool area. Note the small waterfall just left of center. The sea breeze made it too chilly to swim or even to sit outside in the shade. We may save swimming until Fiji.

We kept hearing a bird that went "bink-bink-yeow" — very distinctive. We never saw it but recorded its call. Listen to it on the 10-second video but don't look for it in the trees — it's not there. [neither is the video in this pdf]



#####

06: glowworm cave / kiwi

[In the Waiomio Valley the Kawiti family guides us through their Kawiti Glowworm Caves just as they have done for many generations. At the Native Bird Recovery Centre in Whangarei you will meet some of New Zealand's cheeky and unique native birdlife. The centre provides rehabilitation for injured and sick birds, including New Zealand's iconic flightless bird the Kiwi. We then return to the heart of Auckland where you have the evening to explore.]

Hi Friends,

We clocked 5.5 hrs on the bus and 2.5 hrs doing things, so the ratio is tipped heavily toward sitting and looking out the window, but we did make two interesting stops.

First was the Glowworm Caves. Visualize a narrow cave several hundred meters long with a boardwalk running thru it and thousands of luminous glowworms stuck to the ceiling where they troll for flying insects. With the lights out it closely resembles the Milky Way. Most impressive and something new. They wouldn't let us take photos so the two snaps are from the web.

Then past more green rolling hills (lush and pretty) to the Native Bird Recovery Centre where injured birds are brought for rehab. I'm not especially into birds, but the unique feature here is that they have two injured but healthy (feet damaged in traps) kiwi birds that the guide brought out one at a time; he told us about them while showing them — and let us pet them! We're told these are the only two kiwis in New Zealand that it is legal to touch; otherwise it's like messing with eagles in the US where you can't even pick up a lost feather. The little fellows are living in active retirement except for field trips; New Zealand Airlines flies them and their keeper around the country for free so they can visit schools etc. and be presented. We're told that very few New Zealanders have ever seen a kiwi outside an aviary, let alone touched one, because they're rare, nocturnal, and hard to see in the dark. So that was special!

I still don't get why New Zealanders picked such a bird for their identity — it's flightless and eats worms at night. They are cute, I'll give them that.

Now we're back in our Auckland hotel where we have a room with a full kitchen, table for six in the dining room, huge living room with two couches, separate bedroom, bath, laundry room (we'll use it after dinner), and patio with table and chairs overlooking the harbor.

Tomorrow we head south on leg two of our New Zealand adventure.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

The Glowworm Cave and the little guys glowing on the ceiling. [From the internet.]

Barbara petting a kiwi, who seemed to not mind. We have some great video of this.





#####

07: out of Auckland

[We head south from Auckland over the Bombay Hills and into the dairy farming heartland of the Waikato ("full flowing water"). From here we drive the scenic western side of the Peninsula to our special lunch at Rapaura Watergardens where you can wander through native bush to a cascading waterfall and lily ponds. Travelling further north along this picturesque coastline, we arrive at Coromandel where the town's gold mining past is visible in the restored wooden buildings lining the main street. This afternoon we cross the ranges to visit the stunning east coast beaches of Whangapoua (Harbour of Shellfish), Matarangi (Headland in the Sky), Kuaotunu (Young of Eels) and Otama (of my son). No wonder this beautiful coastline is a favourite holiday playground for Kiwis. We stay the night at Buffalo Beach, Whitianga on Mercury Bay.]

Hi Friends,

This morning we picked up eight new passengers, which now makes a total of 14, and headed thru more farmland with two notable stops and a few shorter ones.

The first major stop was in the small town-that-fine-forgot of Thames to window shop and watch the Christmas Parade. Unlike the US with its "War on Christmas", this was a Christmas and not a holiday parade, and it was reminiscent of what might have happened elsewhere in the '50s in a small town. Old cars drove past, the several schools marched, and local business (the pet store, a nursing home, the pharmacy, the real estate shop, etc.) all had a lightly decorated car of some sorts, along with fire trucks and a seniors band (in a truck). Quite quaint. The irony is that New Zealand is basically secular like northern Europe, but they've kept the Christ in Christmas.

The second was to a garden in the hills that has several paths in the forest, one leading to a set of waterfalls, and a lodge for dining where I had creamed mussels on toast and brandy cake. We enjoyed the peaceful walk in a deep and strange forest. We've concluded that New Zealand (at least the northern part we've visited) is awfully similar to Hawaii — the vegetation and scenery is about the same, just substitute Maori for native Hawaiians and transplanted English for Americans. Otherwise not much difference. (But we haven't been to the South Island.)

Now we're in a 3-room suite (!) in a motel (!) on Mercury Bay, not far from where James Cook observed a transit of Mercury in 1769. I hadn't known he did that — which is part of the reason you travel, to learn new things. We had a quiet evening. Barbara went to bed early and I took my binoculars to a relatively dark area nearby and observed the exotic southern sky for an hour, taking in the Clouds of Magellan and foreign

constellations never visible from home such as the Southern Cross. I'll be out with binoculars every clear night.

A few things we've noticed about New Zealand:

There's a lot of lush green countryside filled with cows. Haven't seen so many sheep.

There are a few freeways near Auckland but nowhere else; almost the entire time we've been on two-lane roads, often winding and with many one-lane bridges.

A few American fast-food chains are common: Subway, KFC, McDonalds — all to be avoided! No Starbucks either.

Haven't seen any slums or graffiti.

Many public signs, especially interpretative signs at historical sites, are in English and Maori.

The "paper" money is made of plastic and doesn't feel real.

The sky is upside down and has unfamiliar star patterns.

- John (& Barbara)

-

Photos:

The Christmas Parade in Thames, NZ. One car had a banner on the side "Jesus is the reason for the season." We non-believers thought it was axial tilt. Note that the newest building in town was built when I was young.

A walk "in the bush". Lush and green.



#####

08: day on the bus

[Sunday 6 December: Whitianga – Hot Water Beach – Rotorua: Our adventure continues with a visit to Hahei Beach and the nearby Hot Water Beach, where naturally heated thermal waters bubble beneath the sand close to the edge of the Pacific Ocean. If the tide permits, you can dig your very own hot pool. Alternatively, visit the picture-perfect Cathedral Cove and the surrounding marine reserve via a glass bottom boat cruise (optional activity). Afterwards, we continue down the coast to Whangamata beach and the gold mining town of Waihi before heading on to Rotorua, at the centre of Maori culture.]

Hi Friends,

It seems like we spent today in the bus. We did make several stops but by 5 pm I was very much ready to get off. Thankfully tomorrow is a bus-free day here in Rotorua.

Our first stop was a scenic overlook (photo below).

Second to Hot Sand beach, where hot water comes up out of the ground and if you dig in a bit you can toast your toes by the sea shore. They even rent shovels for people who want to dig in more, lie down, and get fried. But cool water at high tide ruined it. Oh well.

Further south the topography changed from rolling hills and forests to jumbled, angular, chaotic terrain — caused by recent volcanism and tectonic forces. We've arrived in a zone of activity on the Ring of Fire.

So this evening we're in Rotorua, the #1 tourist attraction in all of New Zealand, which is a center of thermal activity on the North Island. There are steaming pits all around, mud pots, etc., and tomorrow we'll explore. For now we've just finished dinner out and we're ready to read a book and hit the sack. The hotel charges an outrageous fee for internet so I'm writing this at our restaurant — where's it free. (I'll feature that on my TripAdvisor hotel review.)

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Cathedral Cove overlook — very scenic.

Hot Sands Beach. You'll see Barbara in yellow if you look closely.



#####

09: Rotorua and catamaran sail

[Monday 7 December: Rotorua sightseeing. Enjoy a leisurely day in Rotorua. One of the most relaxing highlights is a cruise on the serene Lake Rotoiti aboard “Tiua”, a 53ft catamaran perfect for exploring secluded coves and natural hot pools reached only by boat. Back on dry land share your experiences over an exclusive lunch at Pounamu Lodge with hosts David and Karen, Rotorua locals who have many stories to tell about their historic ties to the area. After lunch, explore Rotorua at your own leisure. Rotorua’s vibrant museum will give you a unique insight into the rich culture and the town’s significant impact on New Zealand history.]

Hi Friends,

We skipped the optional activities in the afternoon and evening, so today was a one-event day for us. After adding two more to our group for a present total of 16, we hopped in the bus and headed to a lake near here for a 3-hour ride on a catamaran including a 45-minute stop at a place where hot springs have been channeled into pools, and those of us who wished could take a hot dip. Sailing on the catamaran was great — they raised the jib one way and the mainsail the other and we actually got to sail, which we seldom get to do but enjoy when we can. I’m not big on motorboats — it seems they’re best for getting from point A to point B but they don’t compete with being under sail.

Then a fancy lunch and back to the hotel early. After a nap we went for a walk along the lakeshore. Now dinner at a sea-food restaurant with free wi-fi so we can send this off.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos

A lot of people have asked to see a photo of our bus (well, no one actually) — so here it is. The novelty of spending hours in it has very definitely worn off. This is not a group of young people.

Barbara in hot water while our catamaran awaits us for the return.

Man the ropes! Barbara helps raise the mainsail while John mans the camera.





#####

10: Thermal Route

[Tuesday 8 December: Rotorua – Taupo – Napier: Explore New Zealand's most colourful geothermal park, Wai-o-Tapu (Sacred Waters), home to the world's largest mud pool. On the road into Taupo we view the turbulent Huka Falls, where the Waikato River thunders through a narrow chasm. From Taupo there are magnificent views across the lake to the three active volcanoes - Tongariro, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu (2,797 metres), the highest mountain in the North Island. The road winds over the ranges to Napier. Renowned for its Art Deco architecture, Napier was rebuilt in this style after an earthquake in 1931. On arrival, we take a guided art deco tour. Your hotel is right on the waterfront.]

Hi Friends,

We drove the Thermal Route today and saw some interesting things, including a few waterfalls I won't mention further. Volcanoes exist around the world and are hardly rare (there are some huge dormant ones in Oregon and Washington), but geysers *are* rare. We're told they're found only in Yellowstone, Iceland, New Zealand, and Kamchatka. So now we've seen three out of four — and number four may have to wait some time!

New Zealand sits astride the meeting of the Pacific and Australian tectonic plates, and signs of past vulcanism are everywhere. Ditto earthquakes — the town we're in tonight (Napier, on the east coast) was destroyed by an earthquake in 1931 and Christchurch was devastated only 5 years ago. I'm told there's not much thermal activity on the South Island, but today we crossed the zone on the North Island where there is the most activity. It doesn't compare with Yellowstone but it was well worth a look. We had a guided walking tour of a Scenic Reserve that included mud pots (the largest on earth, they say), hot springs, fumaroles, and a dozen geysers. One geyser is especially popular because they "soap" it — they add surfactant to cause it to blow and they put on a show at scheduled times. I'm a bit horrified because they've stopped doing that in Yellowstone and Iceland because it wrecks the geysers' plumbing, but perhaps this one is different — or they use an environmentally friendly geyser soap. In any case, it erupted to perhaps 40 feet and put on a good show for the assembled crowd. I will say I've never seen so many selfies taken at once when it began to erupt; half the people were facing *away* from the geyser looking up at their cameras. Barbara stood on a bench and got a nice video.

We arrived at our hotel on the beach in Napier at 2:30 and most of us (I skipped it) took a walking tour of the art deco architecture of the town. I was more interested in a cup of coffee. Great news: the hotel provides complimentary unlimited wi-fi! What you get at each hotel is really a crap-shoot. I'd rather have functioning wi-fi than a swimming pool.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

This cold spring, surrounded by hot springs, has a vivid color caused by particulate sulfur and arsenic. We were told to leave it alone.

The interpreter has just soaped the geyser and it's beginning to erupt. Barbara then switched to video (a file too large to attach); it erupted considerably higher than the skyline.





#####

11: to Wellington

[Wednesday 9 December: Napier – Wellington: We start the day with a drive to Havelock North and up Te Mata Peak for fantastic views of the region before heading south through Hawkes Bay’s pastoral landscape of orchards, farms and vineyards to the Wairarapa. At Pukaha Mt Bruce Wildlife Centre see endangered birds such as kiwi, kaka, kokako and takahe and the tuatara, a “living fossil” reptile that lived at the time of the dinosaurs. We finish the day by traversing the Rimutaka Ranges to Wellington, the capital city. Your contemporary inner city hotel is at the heart of Wellington's eclectic cafe scene.]

Hi Friends,

We’re in Wellington in a high-rise hotel downtown with a marvelous view — of other hotels adjacent to ours, which is a bit of a shame because the city is on a pretty site on

a harbour with hills all around. But we just see other equally tall hotels from up close, so we'll leave our drapes closed.

As we travel further south — now at -41° , the same latitude as Chicago — the vegetation becomes less tropical and more temperate, but it's still exotic to us. And there are now more sheep than cattle — don't know why. It's also cooler — the high today was 60° .

We pass through numerous small towns (like the one that had the Christmas parade a few days ago) and I'm surprised and pleased to see that their long downtown (1 block wide by a mile or so long) is alive and healthy with all business open, shops in good repair, and people in them. Our guide says the towns refuse to let big box stores like Walmart in their area, so the towns stay healthy. Truly amazing. What a concept. There are big box stores but only in the cities.

Today we made a stop at the Pukaha Wildlife Centre, which is largely a bird place. They protect and display endangered species of birds (and a few fish and reptiles). So we looked at birds and walked their trails thru the exotic forest, and had a snack. It was interesting to see two kiwi on display; they're nocturnal, so they're kept in dark enclosures with day/night reversed so if you look hard you can see them rummaging about for bugs and worms in near darkness. No photos came out.

And now we're in the capital, a city of a half-million, but all business are closed downtown so there's not much point in walking around. So a quiet evening in our 3-room suite with unlimited fast wi-fi again..

Tomorrow we cross to the South Island and continue our adventure.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos

The bird reserve. Don't bother looking for birds in the snap — they were hard to see. This enclosure housed the southernmost parakeets.

Wellington from Mt. Victoria. Actually the city extends far beyond this photo in both directions. Its reminiscent of San Francisco on several counts.



#####

12: Across Cook Strait to the South Island

[Thursday 10 December: Wellington – Cook Strait – Picton – Blenheim – Kaikoura: This morning we catch the Interislander ferry to cruise for three hours across Cook Strait into Tory Channel and up beautiful Queen Charlotte Sound to Picton. With our feet firmly planted on “Te Waka a Maui”, the South Island, we tour Marlborough’s premier wine and food region renowned for sauvignon blanc, we wine taste at renowned Allan Scott Vineyard. Leaving behind the dry hills of Marlborough we drive south to Kaikoura, a small hamlet beside the ocean and beneath the towering Kaikoura Mountains. We stay right on the waterfront. Seafood, especially crayfish, is a specialty in this ocean side town.]

Hi Friends,

We’re in a small room in a standard motel (but with a kitchenette) located under a stairway with a view on the patio side of the “garden” — a huge comedown from the spacious rooms, most with grand views, we’ve come to expect. But we’ll get no pity. We do have decent wi-fi and that’s big for both of us. The ocean is just across the street but it might as well be miles away from where I sit.

We rode a huge ferry (1600 people) across the Cook Strait from Wellington to the South Island, and that took the first half of the day. We were in the first-class lounge with spacious chairs and plenty of food for breakfast and then tea (* see “food-note” below), and I spent some time on deck watching the hills drift by. It’s always nice to be on the water.

Our first stop on the South Island was to a winery to taste samples. Barbara doesn’t drink and I can’t tell the difference (two-buck-chuck is fine with me) so that was a lost experience. Some marveled over this and that flavor and bouquet and I guess they weren’t just making it up.

Continuing down the coast we stopped briefly to look at seals, and if it wasn’t for that there would be zero photos today.

Then on to an inconsequential small town on the sea where we’ll spend two nights. We’re some distance from any restaurants so our bus stopped at a grocery store and we bought deli food to microwave. Not exciting but under budget.

It is predicted to be unseasonably cool tomorrow with a high of about 65, and we’ll be on the water most of the day.

- John (& Barbara)

* Food note: Unfortunately New Zealanders got their notions about food from the English, which was a terrible historical mistake. You know what I think about English breakfasts from posts last month, and in two centuries the New Zealanders haven’t

figured out a way to improve on it. Today's breakfast aboard the ship was horrid, to use the most accurate word I can think of. To wit: scrambled eggs (1/3 water, runny, and unseasoned — why?); beans (flavored only with a bit of tomato and no taste relation to the beans we enjoy in the Southwest); bacon (half-cooked ham that is half fat; not a crisp piece in the lot); sausages (85 percent sawdust and 10 percent salt and with less flavor than Walmart's cheapest hot dog — only the English could remove all the flavor from sausage); toast (Wonder Bread). Horrid! There was fruit which I very much enjoy, coffee (quite strong but that's OK; add milk and sugar instead of my normal black), and muesli (very good and what I'll have from now on). Often there are pastries too and they can be fine, but not today.

Photos:

Our bus stopped at an overlook to look over seals. Not exciting, but it was the highlight of the afternoon.





#####

13: Albatrosses, dolphins and whales

[Friday 11 December: Explore the Kaikoura coast: This morning join a two hour cruise out on the “Albatross Encounter” for close-up seabird viewing in the albatross capital of New Zealand, if not the world. There are up to 12 species of albatross, plus penguins, gannets, skuas, shearwaters, petrels, and terns. Later back ashore walk along to the seal colony or take an additional optional activity such as a seal swim or a whale watching cruise or flight. Your driver/guide has a day off today, a requirement of the transport regulations.]

Hi Friends,

We were on the sea today, on two separate trips — one to see birds and the second to see whales. Now we’re back in the same conventional motel room, resting for the evening.

It was warm and sunny in the morning so we enjoyed a nice ride in a small boat out to where the albatrosses congregate, and by trolling a bag of fish livers attracted their attention and we got to watch them fight over it. A bunch of them were only 15 feet away for as long as we cared to look. A few dolphins raced us as we moved on.

Then we hustled to the second dock and waited an hour (a mixup in reservations) for a larger boat filled with Chinese to look for sperm whales. The wind had picked up so it was a bumpy ride and some passengers saw only the inside of a white paper bag. Male sperm whales live in the area and the crew knows where, so we found one and watched it breathe from perhaps 200 feet for 10 minutes until it dove, and then did the same with a second. I had a hard time bracing myself on a slippery deck to hold the camera still with both hands to shoot video, but it came out reasonably well.

Then a simple cafe dinner in town and now we're in for a long evening.

The sky cleared last night as I was climbing into bed, so I dressed, found a relatively dark spot in a nearby city park, and observed with binoculars and laptop — the laptop to help me orient myself under an unfamiliar sky. I saw a lot of interesting things but got to bed late and woke up very tired and was super-drowsy all day. The problem is that at latitude 42 S it doesn't get dark until 10:30. Such is the price of astronomy for a hobby.

- John (& Barbra)

Photos: Albatrosses, dolphins, and whales [for our edited video on YouTube go to <https://youtu.be/QoVAJ6pJwN0>].







#####

14: "magnificent alpine scenery" -- in the rain

[Saturday 12 December: Kaikoura – Akaunui Farm homestead – Aoraki/Mount Cook: The highway continues down the coast and winds inland over the Hunderlee Hills before dropping down to the Canterbury Plains. The fast growing wine district of Waipara is set on terraces above the river. Our special lunch destination is Akaunui Farm homestead where we enjoy the warm hospitality of Di and Ian Mackenzie, picking up farming tips from Ian and lunching on fresh produce from Di's bountiful garden. Sweeping vistas of tussock lands and mountains open up ahead. The small stone church on the edge of the aquamarine Lake Tekapo and a statue celebrating the high country sheep dog make irresistible photo stops. This evening we are surrounded by towering mountain peaks and magnificent alpine scenery.]

Hi Friends,

Today we were on the bus from 7:32 to 6:16 (except two breaks) and there's no need for me to editorialize. It won't be easy to make the day sound interesting.

We started off down the east coast, which was very scenic, and then crossed a lot of farmland to our first stop, which was for tea and toilet, at the Antarctic Center in

Christchurch. it's a bunch of warehouses and a museum we didn't have time to visit. This is where the bases in Antarctica are supplied from, and there are several flights a week non-stop to McMurdo Sound. The museum focuses on interpreting research related to global warming and it looked interesting, but we had to move on — past endless flat farmland (snooze time).

We had a terrific home-made lunch at a private estate set in enormous gardens — quite nice. The temp was in the mid-70s and we enjoyed the food stop.

Past more farmland! I shot a horse (photo, not rifle) wearing a blanket. We were puzzled why the blanket because it's not at all cold. It's to protect them from UV and keep them from getting skin cancer, and some horses wear UV hats. New Zealand has the highest per capita incidence of skin cancer and deaths and we're reminded repeatedly to wear sunscreen, which we do. Even the horses need protection! They don't cover the cows because they don't live long enough to need it.

And I shot a RV (again photo, no bullets); in two weeks we've seen two motorhomes roughly the size of ours and a big handful of vans and Class Bs (this is for our RVing friends). This one is larger than average.

Then we approached the mountains, climbed, and the scenery because interesting. Also quite chilly. We're now at a lodge at the base of the New Zealand Alps and the view would be terrific if it weren't foggy and pouring rain. We do get a glimpse now and then when the clouds lift briefly, and the snap below is the best we've seen.

Sir Edmund Hillary practiced climbing here before his assault on Everest, and his presence is everywhere, Hillary this and Hillary that — even stickers of his face on the windows. Our guide says he was god, a figure huger than life, and he was even on the \$5 bill while he was still alive (how often does that happen!). Anyway, we're at a hotel built on his base camp.

This is also an official Dark Sky Preserve and the hotel has a planetarium (how many have that!) and telescopes, and for a fee you can attend a presentation and see the southern sky. I'm glad I didn't sign up; I've seen plenty of planetarium shows and don't want to stand in line to look through a telescope. I had planned to stargaze with my image-stabilized binoculars which I brought for the occasion, but not tonight — they're not waterproof.

The restaurant is a buffet only at \$62/pp, so we had a drink in the Sir Edmund Hillary Bar and then granola bars in our room. (That's OK — it was a big lunch.)

Tomorrow we have the morning off before heading out. It would be nice to get in a walk in the sunshine.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Antarctic Center with our bus in front.

Typical “caravan” — RV. That’s an old Anglican church behind.

Horse with blanket. I guess they don’t have sunscreen for horses.

The view out our window. Note the several glaciers





#####

15: to Queenstown

[Sunday 13 December: Aoraki/Mount Cook – Queenstown: We awake in the valley at the foot of Mt Cook, at 3,754 metres New Zealand's highest mountain, known as Aoraki “the cloud piercer”. Take an early morning stroll or an optional helicopter or boat ride on the glacier lake before we head down the mountain rimmed Mackenzie Basin and over the golden grass hillsides of the Lindis Pass and through the Kawerau Gorge into Queenstown. On arrival we ride the Skyline Gondola to the top of Bob’s Peak for a scenic overview of this picturesque resort. Your hotel is just above the town with views to Lake Wakatipu and Remarkables Range. There’s a wide variety of restaurants and cafes and your driver/guide will let you know our favorites.]

Hi Friends,

The first half of today was to be at the base of Mt. Cook in the Alps. We hadn’t signed up for either of the two optional activities, figuring we’d just go for a hike (I brought my collapsable trekking poles) but it didn’t matter — we awoke to snow flurries and heavy fog. I’m sure the mountains would have been beautiful had we seen them. The optional activities others had signed up for were cancelled because of weather, so we all lingered over a long breakfast and left hours early at 10 to retrace our steps partway and then head to Queenstown.

It was not an interesting day and I can’t make it seem as if it was.

At noon we stopped in a tiny town for a cafe lunch, then to a fruit stand (not sure why), and later to watch people bungee jump off an old bridge. Apparently that’s a historic spot — we’re told it’s where the first bungee jumping happened 30 years ago. We drove thru some very scenic country — hilly but not mountainous — and stopped a few times to take in the view.

We crossed latitude 45° S. Maybe that’s why its considerably cooler, if not chilly.

We rolled into Queenstown at 4:00 and immediately took the cable car up to an overlook, and the scene truly is spectacular. Queenstown is on a lake at 2500 feet surrounded by mountains that top out at around 7000 ft and it all looks like a town on a fjord. There’s still snow on the highest peaks; it reminds me of the Andes this time last year. Very pretty. But cool — somewhere in the 40s — with stormy weather predicted. That’s what we get for going so far south.

We’ll be here three nights. Our hotel is 3 blocks from downtown (it’s a small town) and our room is a spacious multi-room suite with full kitchen, living room, dining room, large patio balcony, etc. Even a washer-dryer which we’ll use tomorrow evening. Best of all — free unlimited wi-fi! Yeah! Our view, however, is of an opposite hotel wall, so there’ll be no sitting on our patio taking in the view of the lake and mountains.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Bungie jumping.

Queenstown from the top of the cable car.



#####

16: Queenstown

[Monday 14 December: At leisure in Queenstown: A full day to experience this magnificent resort. Queenstown boasts adventure activities in all forms from extreme to relaxed exploration. Your driver/guide will be pleased to offer suggestions on the numerous activities available. We recommend an optional excursion such as a jet boat ride on the remote Dart River in the Lord of the Rings scenery or perhaps experience the thrill of white water rafting on an adventure down the Shotover or Kawarau River. If you prefer to take things at a more relaxing pace the Queenstown Botanic Gardens, lakeside walkways and selection of boutique shops are a perfect choice.]

Hi Friends,

Because of bad weather ahead they switched the activities for days 16 and 17, and this is our day off in Queenstown. There's not much to write about, and ironically this is the day when I have the most time to write. I was able to catch up on computer activities such as editing the many whale videos I shot a few days ago into one manageable and compressed file. The downside of shooting a lot of video is that eventually you have to do something with it to make it watchable. Part of the reason I travel with a laptop (Apple's smallest) instead of an iPad is so I can do that and not have it all waiting for when we return home and I'm no longer in the mood.

Of course, we're supposed to be off mountain biking, rafting, skateboarding, bungee jumping, jet boating, etc., but I was delighted to sleep in. We've both been under the weather with a head colds, and a day of rest was just fine.

We walked the main shopping district, which is only a few blocks square, and had wonderful seafood chowder by the dock. You'll find clothing in shops made from "merinosilk" — the best marketing term since Chinese gooseberry was renamed kiwifruit. You'll also find pure possum fur clothing, but that's too expensive for mass sale. The merinosilk feels awfully soft so I was gave in to temptation and made my only New Zealand purchase.

Souvenir shops sell guidebooks to where The Hobbit and Jackson's other films were filmed for people with 4WD vehicles and a taste for fantastic scenery.

Dinner was an expansive and tasty seafood platter at the same restaurant.

We notice that we anglos are outnumbered by Japanese, both yesterday at Mt. Cook and here in Queenstown. Most of the sales clerks, waitresses, and even some of the hotel staff are Japanese; apparently it's easier to hire English-speaking Japanese than to find New Zealanders who know Japanese. We're apparently close enough to Japan to make this an inexpensive holiday destination. They do take a lot of photos! Crick!

Tomorrow will be a full day with an early start.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Street scene downtown Queenstown — lots of souvenir shops and restaurants. The buildings date from the gold rush in the 1870s.

Merinosilk cap to keep my skull warm while observing on cold nights — my only New Zealand souvenir. (I only buy souvenirs I'll actually use; in this case it's about all I can carry.) Enlarge to read the label. It should work!





#####

17: Fiordland National Park

[Tuesday 15 December: Queenstown – Te Anau – Milford Sound cruise – Scenic Flight – Queenstown: We travel alongside Lake Wakatipu to Te Anau and Milford Sound deep in the heart of Fiordland National Park. The Milford Road is a panorama of high mountains and deep valleys studded with glaciers, waterfalls and mirror lakes. Cruise down Milford Sound, a majestic fiord lined with waterfalls and dominated by iconic Mitre Peak. Where the sound reaches the Tasman Sea, seal colonies lounge on the rocks. We return to Queenstown on a stunning scenic flight over the Southern Alps and Lake Wakatipu.]

Hi Friends,

Some days are perfect with much new to see and do and a joy to live. Some are a waste of time, and today was one of those. A nearly total loss.

We departed our comfy hotel at 6:45 (grumbling sounds in the background) for a long drive to Fiordland National Park; 5 hours including a half-hour lunch stop. We ended up on Milford Sound (actually a fjord) which according to all sources is one of the most spectacular places on earth with snow-capped peaks and glaciers above a deep lake and waterfalls all around. I'm convinced it is from the photos we saw, but the fine print is that it is (they say) the wettest inhabited place on earth (9 meters/year) which means it rains almost every day. It rained today with fog and low clouds and we only saw enough to hint at what we missed. The photo will give the idea.

So following our 2-hour boat ride in the rain we were to fly back to Queenstown on — as they say — a “stunning scenic flight over the Southern Alps — one of the highlights of the entire trip. Our guide really talked it up. The rain was so bad they cancelled all flights and we drove back on the bus — another 4+ hours (no lunch stop). No one talked on the way back. Did I mention that our seats are about as spacious as the seats in airline steerage class? Why do I feel like I've been sitting on a bus in the fog all day! I would MUCH rather have stayed at our hotel and read a book.

Tomorrow we head for the West Coast which they call the Wet Coast — so we know what to expect.

So once back home we had dinner at a Turkish “restaurant” in the local mall's food court (fast, cheap, and good) and Barbara is doing our laundry so everything is fresh tomorrow.

A few more things we've noticed:

- * We passed ranches with sheep, cattle (often the two mixed), and deer. They've domesticated deer and you'll see fields of them grazing, just like sheep and cows. Venison is usually on the menu and they send the surplus to Europe. And we see goats and llamas now and then. And did I mention sheep — lots of them in this area. Barbara saw a pig.
- * There are no billboards on any road, period, and it's wonderful.
- * There doesn't seem to be much interest in water conservation. A toilet flush uses 4 gallons. That may be because they have no shortage of the stuff. How lucky! Lots of mountains and rivers and streams and not so many people (but lots of sheep).
- * They generate a lot of hydroelectric power from all those rivers and streams but haven't thought much about wind or solar. We've seen two small wind farms but almost no solar panels. Electric cars are not yet known. (Maybe they can figure a way to harvest the power of falling rain?)
- * There are no pennies (great idea!). Costs are rounded off to the nearest 5¢ if, say, you're buying fruit by the pound and the amount comes out odd. But even nicer,

everything is priced in even numbers. For example, meat pies would be priced at \$3.00, \$3.50, \$4.00, \$4.50 etc. In grocery stores items are priced more finely: \$3.80, \$4.10, \$5.30, etc. I understand that the only reason the US still has the damn things is the zinc lobby has bought congress on the issue; no one else wants them. Also, the smallest bill here is \$5 while there are \$1 and \$2 coins.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Barbara shot, so to speak, a kea, a virtually flightless parrot that lives as far south as the land of the glaciers. We're told they're extremely aggressive beggars.

One of the most magnificent views on the planet — on one of the few days when it doesn't rain. We did get a few glimpses of rock cliffs MUCH higher up but nothing that would photograph. We're glad we had clear weather in Norway — we can look at those photos and enjoy them again.

A deer ranch, shot from a moving bus. They look happy enough.





#####

18 Crown Range

[Wednesday 16 December: Queenstown – Cardrona Valley – Wanaka: Our first destination is the leafy village of Arrowtown where gold mining history comes alive beside the Arrow River. The road climbs over the tussock country of the Crown Range with expansive views of the Gibbston Valley. We call into the Cardrona Hotel, its history also traced back to the gold mining era, then continue on to your private lunch at a Wanaka homestead. After lunch you have free time to explore this lakeside town. From your hotel, you can take a leisurely bike ride, kayak or walk to the hilltop Rippon Vineyard for some scenic wine tasting.]

Hi Friends,

We were on the bus for only 3 hours today, which hardly seemed worth the trouble. But we made do.

Our first stop was a mining town from the 1860s turned into a tourist trap with an interesting walk off to the side to the Chinese area which has been excavated and reconstructed somewhat. The New Zealanders treated their Chinese miners exactly as poorly as we did ours, shunting them to a shanty town and restricting their opportunities and eventually expelling them (“yellow peril”). Now their great-grandkids are back as wealthy tourists reading the interpretative signs about how shabbily their ancestors were treated and lived. In the shopping district I bought a pair of fingerless merino-possum gloves to match yesterday’s hat.

Then lunch at a private home with a grand view of the lake and the mountains beyond. Our tour operator has found people willing to invite a small busload of strangers into their home, cook them a meal, and welcome them. It works well, and the view was indeed grand as the photo shows. The lunch was grand too.

Now we’re at our hotel — a standard motel room with a view of the lake. I took a needed nap (still under the weather and tired) while Barbara went for a walk.

Back to the Japanese tourists, which outnumber us Americans - Australians - Europeans combined by 4 to 1 or better the last few days. I’ve learned not to walk very closely behind one because it’s likely to stop abruptly, whip out a smartphone, and take a photo of nothing in particular while I walk into them. And boy do they photograph themselves and each other. I saw one group get off a bus, and I thought everyone was carrying a golf club and wondered why only one club each — but they were selfie sticks. It appears that the ideal souvenir photo is a close-up of your face with the background squeezed around the edges. And they must have huge memory cards — they shoot everything from the moment they’ve landed, but don’t seem to look at what they’re shooting other than to make sure they or someone else is centered in the shot. I told Barbara I saw a Japanese lady looking at some flowers — but not photographing them! But to each culture it’s own.

Our room overlooks a broad lawn that stretches to the beach and that would be a wonderful dark place to stargaze — but it's cloudy and looks like drizzle.

Tomorrow to the Wet Coast. I can hardly wait.

- John (& Barbara)

Photo:

View from our lunch spot. New Zealand sure doesn't lack for magnificent scenery. I wish it had been this clear yesterday.



#####

19: scenic drive

[Thursday 17 December: Wanaka – Haast Pass – Franz Josef: We drive beside Lake Hawea and the top of Lake Wanaka before heading into the pristine mountain and river scenery of the Haast Pass in Mt Aspiring National Park. Well-maintained tracks through native beech forests lead us to cascading waterfalls and clear blue pools where trout lurk. Leaving the mountains, the road winds along the edge of the river to Haast. We continue north through the primeval rainforest of Westland World Heritage Park stopping at Ship Creek for a stroll on the beach and through swampland rainforest. We

view Fox Glacier and Lake Matheson, famous for its reflections of the alps, before continuing on to Franz Josef.]

Hi Friends,

I put on shoes (as opposed to sandals) for the first time today figuring that I'd get my feet plenty wet on the Wet Coast — and it was a beautiful day with scattered clouds. Go figure. There's no point in planning.

We were in the bus for 8 hours total but with many stops and that broke it up. We drove thru wonderful mountain scenery thru dense rainforests and stopped to see waterfalls, then the coast when we reached the Tasman Sea. A few more stops in a World Heritage Park and we arrived at Franz Joseph Village where we'll spend two nights. Our motel room is huge and opens to a semi-tropical forest just a few feet beyond the deck.

I'm not writing more because the wi-fi barely works and fails frequently. I'll send the photos one at a time. You can tell by how far apart in time they are how long it takes to send each one. Maybe we should feel lucky to have it at all, and I'll be glad to have a book handy.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

The Tasman Sea.

My view in the bus — Barbara's head is in front. We lost a few passengers so everyone gets a window seat.





#####

20: G'laciers

[Friday 18 December: Franz Josef – Okarito Lagoon – Franz Josef: Today relax and enjoy the beauty of this remote World Heritage Park. We drive out to the coast to visit the tiny, isolated settlement of Okarito nestled between the Tasman Sea and Okarito Lagoon. Depending on your preference select a gentle guided kayak or step aboard a small boat to see the wading birds and wetlands on a cruise to the edge of the rainforest. The lagoon is a feeding ground of the rare white heron (kotuku) which breeds nearby in the Waitangi Roto Nature Reserve, a 1,000-year-old kahikatea rainforest. Later you may wish to try a once-in-a-lifetime glacier heli-hike (optional), a scenic flight with glacial landing over the Southern Alps to Aoraki/Mt Cook or a reviving soak in hot pools fed by pure glacial water (optional).]

Hi Friends,

First, a return to last night. After working up a good sweat and using up all my swear words trying to email photos, I noticed that the sky had cleared. That's not often been the case, and we're in a tiny town without many lights, so I read a book until dark. Sunset was at 9:17 and it gets dark s-l-o-w-l-y at this latitude (-43°). At 10:20 I was

outside with my binoculars, laptop (for starmap and observing list), and my new merino/possum hat and fingerless gloves, and found a relatively dark spot. Relatively is the word — there were many streetlights and lights on motels; a hazard of being in town. I looked at a bunch of star clusters near the Southern Cross but gave it up (too many lights, including the moon) after an hour. The moon will be too bright to bother stargazing for the rest of our trip (too bad — it could have been nice from Fiji).

Now to today. It's a good day when you spend only 40 minutes on the bus. I'm starting to tire of being on the thing. It takes no energy but it's awfully passive. The next time we contemplate a small-group bus trip I'll be sure to inquire into how much time is spent on the road.

On this chilly morning we drove to an estuary where we split up — half (Barbara's half) kayaked around on calm water for 2 hours while the other half (John's) rode in a small boat along the forest and up a river. The target was birds, and we all saw some, some of them extremely rare. It was most exciting to those who are into birds.

Once back in town we learned that a small fixed-wing scenic flight was about to depart, so we quickly signed up and off we went. We used our refund from the Alps flight we missed a few days ago and added a bit for twice the fun. It was a 50-minute loop over Mt. Cook and the other highest peaks (over 11,000 ft, and they start at sea level), passing over glaciers, snowfields, peaks, glacial lakes, etc. Most impressive. Spectacular! At 50 minutes we felt we had time to look and weren't back as soon as we started, and it was a highlight of the year. I won't gush over it any more — you can imagine what it was like. Or go to <http://airsafaris.co.nz/scenic-flights/grand-traverse> and look at the photos.

Now a project is to do something with the dozens of snapshots and 20 minutes of video I shot. That's this evening's project and I'll be glad to finish it tonight. If the internet actually connects I'll send a few photos; otherwise tomorrow. Ask when we're home to see the edited video — there's no way that will email.

So now off to dinner to gain strength — then photos and videos await.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos

The flight over the Southern Alps. Now on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/PZh7U5T5APk>.

A white heron. There are 120 in the world and most of them live in this lagoon. We were told virtually no New Zealander has never seen one.





#####

21: Pancake Rocks

[Internet just appeared again so will get this off QUICKLY before it disappears again.]

[Saturday 19 December: Franz Josef – Hokitika – Punakaiki: Leaving Franz Josef we journey to Hokitika – the setting for Eleanor Catton’s award-winning “The Luminaries” novel. Here, we visit artisan galleries filled with Pounamu (greenstone) carvings, glass blowing, wood and copper. Following a coastal road once frequented by Maori we continue to our hotel at Punakaiki, surrounded by beautiful coastal flora, including the southernmost nihau palms. A little further up the road is the leading local attraction - the Punakaiki Pancake Rocks, sculpted limestone sea stacks and towering cliffs. If the tide is right, blowholes thunder spreading clouds of spray. We celebrate our travels this evening in the hotel’s Jacob’s Grill Restaurant.]

Hi Friends,

Today is easy to describe: off late, a two-hour drive to Hokitika, an old port for gold trade and now center of jade markets. Had two hours to walk the small town and have a snack. Barbara bought local jade earrings. Another two hours up the coast (saw the sea only occasionally) thru rain forest to Punakaiki Pancake rocks to walk the boardwalk and see the rock formations and then walk a different trail down to the beach. Then to hotel on the beach — with no internet in our room! Maybe next week, we’re told.

There was internet in the bar — for five minutes before it totally failed, never to return. I told the receptionist how pissed off I am at getting crappy internet service at hotels. But there’s nothing they can do except lamely apologize and shrug their shoulders.

So no photos. I’m tired of wrangling for a half hour or more to try to send some. Possibly at some time tonight simple text will get thru.

Back to this morning, as we started out we saw a few glaciers in the distance but soon the mountains were too far from us on the flat plain we crossed. BTW, our pilot/guide on our flight yesterday said the glaciers are “receding rapidly and alarmingly, especially in the last few year” due to global warming. It looked like they still have plenty of ice left, but that seems to be the story 'most everywhere. In Glacier National Park it’s catastrophic — a glacier I hiked to and walked out onto about 25 years ago had receded a full mile when Barbara and I returned there a few years ago and it was unreachable; its snout was replaced by a meltwater lake.

To other, miscellaneous things:

I feel embarrassed to be so unobservant, but the “Japanese” I’ve been commenting on are actually a mixture of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, eg orientals. Should have noticed the differences. I asked and was told that a few decades ago Koreans began coming here, then Japanese in greater numbers, and starting about 10 years ago the Chinese became wealthy and discovered the place, and now the ratio of orientals is more than half Chinese, then mostly Japanese, then a minority of Koreans. But they all have cameras. And selfie-sticks.

We’ve seen few Maori on the South Island — it was too cold for them. They did have settlements here and there (the fishing was good) and they named the major features (later renamed by the British) but they never were numerous on the South Island.

Enough for tonight. I still have the flight video to edit and that’ll keep me busy for some time. If this happens to get thru, great. If not, another day.

- John (& Barbara)

#####

22: to Christchurch / last day in NZ

[Sunday 20 December: Punakaiki – Arthur’s Pass – Christchurch: Retracing our steps down the coast we drive up the Otira Gorge on a spectacular cantilevered road through towering mountains to Arthur’s Pass National Park stopping at the lookout to watch the mischievous antics of the keas. Stretch your legs in the beech forests at Arthur’s Pass village and at the massive limestone rocks rising out of bare pasture at Castle Hill before we descend Porter’s Pass to the Canterbury Plains and Christchurch.]

Hi Friends,

This was our final day in New Zealand, and it was a good one.

First, though, I had another look at the Southern Cross and other southern constellations last night from a wonderfully dark field on the ocean far from any lights — except the bright moon. Had it not been for the moon it would have been perfect, but the moon compromised the view. And then fog rolled in. But it was good while it lasted.

Today we drove down the coast a ways, getting a final look at the rainforest, and then crossed the Southern Alps eastward, also seeing a final glacier (or snow patch) with just one lunch stop at a cafe along the road. It was drizzling and sweater weather (50s & 60s); we’ve gotten used to being cool but that will change tomorrow.

On arriving in Christchurch, back on the east coast, the drizzle lifted and we took a driving tour of town, looking at the remnants of the damage from the devastating

earthquake that destroyed much of the downtown area in 2011. It really did an enormous amount of damage and you can view YouTube videos of it. A few snaps are attached.

Now we're in our conventional hotel room for the evening after a fine dinner, not planning to do much other than read a book and catch up on email and Facebook (usable wi-fi for a change!).

A few final miscellaneous thoughts:

Gas (petrol) is about \$5/gallon for regular.

New Zealandish is very similar to British, the main difference being the "long e". The letter e is pronounced ee, so "deck" becomes "deek", "yes" becomes "yees", "seven" becomes "seeven", and so on. I can understand it but can't speak it.

I had initially thought that prices here are cheaper than in the US, but it turns out to be not by much. They are, but generally not enough to matter. Just for the record.

There are few Christmas decorations up anywhere. We see a few garlands and lights on streetlights, a tree with presents underneath in a corner in some businesses, Santas painted on windows, but not much. Very little, in fact. We do hear the old traditional Christmas carols here and there.

Tomorrow is a long travel day. We get picked up at our hotel at 5:10 and taken to the airport for the first of three flights, arriving at our boat in the late afternoon. I have little hope of an internet connection while we're in Fiji but will send what I can when I can — perhaps not until we return. Coming separately is a brochure as a pdf so you can follow our adventures. Note that our two trips — New Zealand and Fiji — overlap, a fault that I'm kicking myself for letting happen, and we miss the first day's shipboard activities. In fact, they're holding the boat for us.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Typical day — looking out the window of our bus at passing scenery.

Christchurch earthquake damage. Either this building can be saved or it is one the buildings yet to be demolished. The vacant lots in the foreground once held multi-story buildings.

Christchurch Cathedral. There are no funds to repair it, so it sits damaged.





#####

23: long transit to Fiji; the Tui Tai

Hi Friends,

Happy Solstice Everyone!

Our alarm went off at 4:10 for a ride to the airport (such transfers are part of the package and a benefit of working thru a travel agent). The driver explained that the reason 30,000 buildings were lost in the '11 earthquake is that the city is built on unconsolidated sediment and the ground isn't stable, so a major cost of rebuilding is stabilizing the ground. A major problem we didn't see yesterday is repairing all the underground infrastructure — water mains, sewers, power lines, etc. They'll be at it a long time.

Our first flight — Christchurch to Auckland — was completely uneventful; ditto 3 hours Auckland to Fiji. Sitting in those tiny airline seats seemed kind of familiar after so many dozen hours on the bus. Actually the Air New Zealand seats were about 2 inches deeper than on the bus! So a few hours in them was not a hardship. We were met at the airport in Fiji, given our updated travel vouchers, and walked to the check-in desk for the third flight.

First impression of Fiji: warm and humid! Not hot (around 80) but let me emphasize humid. But that's why you travel — for different experiences. Rain too! Rain is forecast for *every* day — this is the rainy season. Did our travel advisor who put this trip together remember to mention that this is the rainy season and it rains every day? No, but I share the blame for neglecting to check — that should have been on my list. But I rather fault her for forgetting to mention it.

Another 70-minute flight on a 20-seater (not much bigger than the one we took for our scenic glacier flight) took us to another airport, this one with a terminal half the size of our house and an unpaved gravel parking lot. A 70-minute taxi drive, half over dirt roads, took us to our ship the Tui Tai.

Our surprise on coming aboard is that there are only four guests total! A Canadian couple and we are it — plus a crew of a dozen or so. There is room for 24 guests, but it's Christmas and we're the only ones who booked. We feel quite outnumbered by crew. And they're all friendly and eager to help us. We got to visit during the evening meal on the main deck. Although the ship has a full schedule planned we may sit much of it out and just enjoy being on a ship.

A second surprise, although I had guessed it, is that the ship presently doesn't sail. We'll be motoring about, and that's a disappointment but not a killer.

So that's today. We're enjoying the gentle rolling of the ship and the temperature is perfect on the sea with a light breeze to keep down the humidity. We'll be OK.

I'll send a photo separately so if it doesn't go thru it won't jeopardize this email. I'm told internet access will be sporadic at best, so you'll hear from us when you hear from us.

- John (& Barbara)

-

Photos:

We'll eat meals (except when it's raining hard) up on this main deck. Our room is just behind Barbara.

A typical house shot from our taxi as we headed toward the ship. It's not a rich country but the few people we've met seem happy and friendly. Laid-back, even.





#####

24: at sea

Start your day with a snorkel or dive with 5-15 giant manta rays. These graceful creatures gather at a confluence of currents that bring them their breakfast. Watch as they glide effortlessly around you. Then, we head ashore to visit with Rabi's Micronesian people, hearing their stories, experiencing their culture and marveling at their elaborate and powerful dances. From their Tabiang settlement, hike up the island's gentle slope to visit schoolchildren while taking in sweeping vistas of the Tunuloa Peninsula and mouth of Natewa Bay. Relax on white sand beaches before we serve you dinner at surf's edge like a true Pacific Islander – complete with underground oven

- 7am Manta ray snorkel/scuba dive expedition
- 9am Snorkel/scuba dive "Little Rainbow Reef"
- 11am Hike to Rabi Secondary School to visit with children & teachers
- 2pm Sea kayak/stand-up paddleboard on Dolphin Bay » Scuba dive
- 4pm Experience Micronesian cultural Patele performance
- 6pm Night Dive "Dolphin Bay"

Hi Friends,

We were at sea today, and beginning to settle into a routine.

Fiji is a world destination for scuba diving and snorkeling, and our ship's activities are based on that. We passed up the morning session in favor of relaxing and orienting ourselves to the ship and the concept of being afloat in Fiji. I'll be happy to just be aboard a ship in a breeze, taking in the environment and the sights. We did go on the second trip, to Dolphin Bay, our first snorkeling in over 15 years — and it was great. The water is warm and the reef was right below us with much to see.

Our schedule doesn't follow the printed schedule. The trip to the village was cancelled; they're into Christmas and don't have time this week for tourists. Ditto the evening performance and the night dive.

We're served two breakfasts. First breakfast — local fruit, tea/coffee, cereal — is at 7, followed by scuba/snorkeling, followed by real breakfast — eggs, pancakes, etc. — at 9:30, and that's the daily routine. The fruit is local and it was a treat to eat a banana that was picked yesterday instead of 3 months ago. The papaya are great too.

The Tui Tai ship seems a bit old and could use some paint and varnish here and there, but that's not a complaint. We're on salt water and that's a harsh environment. Our room is spacious for a ship — queen bed, couch (which has our tiny suitcases), little "dresser" for our other stuff, and small bathroom with toilet, sink, and shower. We won't spend much time in it. If it's not raining we'll be on the main deck either at the table where we eat (to type away on the laptop) or on the huge cushions to read or nap. If it's raining there's the indoor lounge.

The ship has an upper deck for lounging only, a main deck with our cabins and eating/lounging area, and lower deck with indoor lounge and more cabins. Engines and crew quarters below. Note that lounging is featured.

So far the food has been plentiful, fresh, and excellent. I'll need to drastically change my eating habits when we return to civilization.

The island that we've been anchored off of all day was taken over by a group of Micronesians from near Guam whose low island was being inundated by sea level rise, so they bought a village here and resettled; we could wave to them if they were paying attention to us. We're told that Polynesians from another low island did the same not far away; they abandoned their old low island and everyone moved. Fiji is starting to be affected by sea level rise on a few similarly low islands. The main effects of global warming here are increasingly severe typhoons and coral bleaching. Our companions say the bleaching is obvious and tragic although not where we were today; that reef suffered from the last typhoon. Fiji is also experiencing a mini-drought from El Nino, but that will pass and they can tell the difference between weather and global warming. Meanwhile they've created plenty of their own problems with over-fishing, sewage, and general developmental problems of 3rd world countries.

I asked our host what he thought about the government. and he said it's a military dictatorship and they prefer not to discuss it. They can't do anything so they try to put it

out of their minds. There hasn't been a coup in three years, and the politics is largely divided along racial lines with at least one party stirring up nationalistic sentiments against the minorities who then become resented and blamed for many of the problems. It's a familiar story; humans can be manipulated the same way everywhere.

Tomorrow we go ashore.

- John (& Barbara)

Internet is good so I'll try four photos:

Barbara doing what Barbara does best.

Snorkeling. Actually coming up for a breather.

What we saw snorkeling. These last two were taken by the other couple who have waterproof cameras. Must get one.

Our ship, the Tui Tai.







#####

25: Snorkeling at 180 degrees

After breakfast, we hike along the coast to the frontier-like outpost of Somosomo, crossing over the International Dateline en route to Waitavala, where you'll slide down a series of naturally occurring waterslides and pools. Divers, explore Rainbow Reef, where byzantine coral gardens of The Farm and Nakawa Point will amaze. Take your lunch onboard Tui Tai as we sail across the Somosomo Strait to Kioa Island, visiting the island's master craftspeople and fishers before they present a traditional "Fatele" performance, showcasing Polynesian ancestry.

7am	Snorkel "Nakawa Point" » Scuba dive "Great White Wall"
10am	Scuba dive "Rainbow's End" » Explore Waitavala waterslides and International Dateline
1pm	Snorkel "The Farm" » Scuba dive "Jerry's Jelly"
2pm	Sea kayak/stand-up paddleboard on Dolphin Bay » Scuba dive
5pm	Experience Polynesian cultural Fatele performance
6pm	Night dive "Black Magic"

Hi Friends,

There's something nice, which we virtually never get to experience, about sleeping on a very gently rolling ship.

I forgot to mention the weather yesterday, surprising after complaining about it so much the day before. Yesterday it was warm, partly cloudy, with a beautiful sea breeze that killed the humidity until dinner-time, when it began to drizzle for the night. Today there is no breeze so it is miserable outside (think Florida in the summer); maybe no rain. There's no chance of seeing stars even if the bright moon were out of the way.

We motored into the port of Taveuni at sunrise, tied up at the one pier, and enjoyed our two breakfasts. Again the fresh fruit is wonderful. Between breakfasts Barbara went snorkeling at the local reef, and after the second we all went ashore in 2 taxis to see an 1860s Catholic church, the 180° meridian (the Dateline is elsewhere), and to hike to some waterslides and slide down them (Barbara and Robert). After lunch we went snorkeling — saw a meter-long shark but couldn't catch it.

It's hard getting used to being outnumbered by crew by 4:1, and the crew is extremely polite and deferential. We're treated like royalty, to coin a term, which makes me realize that I wouldn't enjoy life as a celebrity. I'd rather just fit in and go relatively unnoticed.

The Fijians are modest. The men don't go without a shirt, even when swimming (shades of my grandfather's youth). I had planned to go shirtless on the boat but gathered that's not done, but I am the one (only one) who snorkels w/o a shirt. Barbara brought a bikini and 2-piece suit and quickly decided on the 2-piece, and she wears a shirt and wrap around that. Both sexes used to go topless and roughly bottomless so presumably we have the missionaries to thank for this. (The missionaries did stop them from eating each other; at one time these were the Cannibal Islands.)

John (& Barbara)

Photo

On the 180° meridian. We'd be in different days except the dateline is offset to the east for such practical reasons.



#####

26: last dance on Christmas Eve

With the main islands in our rearview mirror, we anchor among the Ringgold Atolls, surrounded by a barrier reef that creates a tranquil lagoon teeming with life and vibrant color. On Cobia, hike to the volcanic island's summit along natural tree root steps, then explore the crater's mystic lagoon on kayak or stand-up paddleboard. Throughout the day, you can dive in waters with visibility exceeding 120 feet, picnic on remote island beaches and savor a massage in our mobile island spa.

7am	Snorkel "Wall Street" » Scuba dive "Kokoda Point"
9am	Hike to Cobia crater summit
10.30am	Explore caldera interior by kayak, stand-up paddleboard, or zodiac
2pm	Snorkel "Canyons" » Scuba dive "Wall Street"

[Again the formal schedule isn't closely related to what we actually did.]

Hi Friends,

A note on yesterday's email: As we returned from snorkeling I was told the ship would depart soon and understood that we wouldn't have wi-fi again until tomorrow, if then. So I rushed to complete it and get it off, which is why it arrived several hours earlier than normal and probably with some typos.

To finish yesterday evening, the high yesterday (and I think everyday) was 82 (both humidity and temperature) and again it began to rain at dinner time, so dinner and following activities were inside. Dinner was taro leaf soup (never had that before) and a slab of tuna, and we were serenaded by crew with guitars singing old Fiji favorites.

Now to today — Christmas Eve:

The tides forced a change in our schedule (can't they predict them in advance?) and we departed the ship at 7 to hike to the top of a crater that's now a bay. I was told it would be doable for me and took my trekking poles, but it was a nightmare (for me), and even Barbara fell. I had two Melanesian "sherpas" help me up a steep slope of crumbled lava held back only by numerous roots, slipping only once that I'll admit to. Then along the rim over infinite roots and down a reasonable slope back to our boat. I chewed out the entertainment director on our return; he'd seen the trouble I have getting around and in and out of the boats and should have advised me to sit this one out. But it was a nice (not grand) view and I didn't get hurt. I guess what's true about an airplane landing — any good one is one where you don't get hurt — is true for a hike.

That was followed by a late breakfast, and I ate mine like I'd earned it.

Then the day's snorkeling adventure, which was great. We saw two eagle rays and two sharks; one shark swam right under me but he wasn't scared. We both returned with sunburned legs.

Lunch was the worst pizza I've ever had. I think it was a salad pizza on some sort of bread. They should stick with native recipes they do well, like curry.

Then one of the highlights of the entire trip: a visit to a village with a welcoming ceremony. This is by special arrangement with the Tui Tai and we were given the impression that it's not common, that few tour operators do it, and we were privileged to be part of it. The village was certainly real enough; about 20 homes on the water's edge and quite isolated; access is by boat and there are no roads out. The houses were made from simple materials (all except the wood is imported by boat) and there were no defined yards — it was just a cluster of houses with chickens and dogs roaming about.

They have a little presentation area where they do their welcoming ceremony for Tui Tai visitors. We all wore a sarong (loaned by the ship) because that's what the villagers wear (at least that we saw), were seated, and the village turned out to sing and dance for us. First came the kava ceremony which we've heard about. Kava is a slightly narcotic beverage made from the root of a tree and it's the rage in Fiji, supplementing alcohol (and marijuana, I presume); in the cities there are kava bars. We all were given two shells worth, even Barbara!, and got a tingling on our tongue and lips. (I think the locals split a few gallons after we left.) Then the dancing and singing — all quite charming and clearly not a Hollywood production. I shot a lot of video which can't be emailed, and we all thoroughly enjoyed it. It was a really nice Christmas present from the village to us (and the ship left presents for them, which is why we keep getting invited back).

So we got to see a real village, and that was a treat. Fiji has a few small cities which we didn't get to see and lots of isolated villages. You can't enter the villages by yourself (you have to be invited) so we appreciate the chance.

As a side, I was invited to dance by a young lady, and it would have been bad form to decline, so I "danced" with her and the others. I'll leave it to you to imagine how well I dance; I have enough trouble just balancing while standing still, and dancing is well off my list of ways to embarrass myself. But now I can decline to dance with the thought that my "last dance" was with a young maiden in Fiji. I'll keep that as my memory of my last dance.

We noticed that among all those kids there wasn't a slightly chubby one among them. Ditto yesterday when a dozen or so boys were diving off our dock and playing in the water — zero body fat on the lot. And yet they looked healthy! Travel doesn't necessarily make you think better of where you came from.

No rain today!

Dinner was so-so steak. Again, I do wish they'd stick to what they do well, and I'd be delighted to have a different fish every evening.

So that was our Christmas Eve. Most unusual. And not a Santa or snowman in sight.

No internet connection in our little harbor on the evening of the 24th, so this will go when it can.

John (& Barbara)

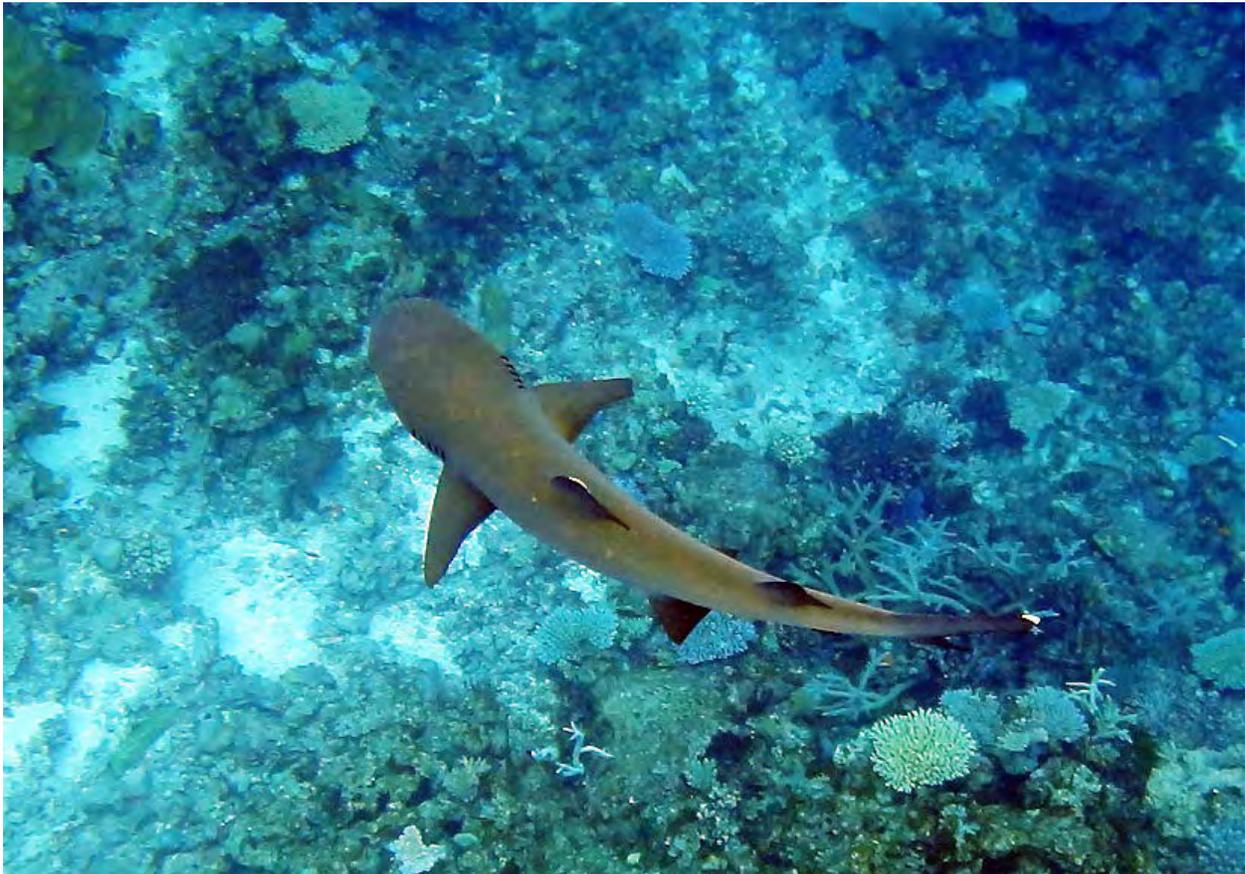
Photos:

The bold shark that swam beneath me (photographed by our friend with a waterproof camera).

The village that welcomed us.

Barbara chugging a shell of kava. (A 'shell' is a unit of measure when drinking kava out of a section of coconut shell.) It tastes rooty.

Singing and dancing.







#####

27: Christmas Luau

[The printed schedule was entirely irrelevant.]

Hi Friends,

Merry Christmas to all our friends who celebrate Christmas. Happy Holidays to everyone else. We hope you're having a great time.

'Twas a rather unconventional Christmas for us. We didn't open presents — the trip is a present to each other.

Following an early light breakfast at sunrise to get us going we headed across the bay to kayak thru a mangrove forest. The water was still so the paddling was easy and our guide led us on a route between the trees which are weirdly spaced. The birds were awesome in their noise — quite a riot. The temperature was somewhere in the upper '70s.

Barbara pointed out that we've seen virtually no bugs the entire trip — just a few house flies — which is remarkable when you consider how humid and green the place is. Very strange once you think about it, and completely counter-intuitive. But fine with us!

Then back for a real breakfast: omelet & hash browns for me, banana pancakes and papaya for Barbara.

I mentioned that Fiji is a destination for scuba and snorkeling, and we went out for the first snorkeling of the day, off a reef that is quite far from land. These reefs must have given the early sailors quite a bit of grief since they lie just below the surface. I guess sailors got good at spotting them (and those that didn't had fewer children to grow up as sailors: natural selection at work).

I have a bit of sunburn on top of my head. No one has ever seen me outside without a hat, but we could not wear hats with our mask and snorkel, so I'm a "sorehead". The AANR-endorsed sunscreen has kept us from getting burned elsewhere.

We noticed (I noticed) at lunch that the sun was virtually straight overhead — a most unChristmassy position.

After a fish salad lunch the others went snorkeling again while I went "fishing". It was a long (really long) ride in one of the shuttle boats while trolling two lines behind. The best part was turning around to head back — I think it's more exciting when you actually catch something.

Then two more hours to relax on deck (everyone but me had their nose in a book) and watch the islands slip by (unless your nose was in a book) and enjoy the beautiful 80s temperature; the motion of the ship generates a very welcome light breeze.

While we were off snorkeling and "fishing" the crew went ashore, dug a pit on a beach, put in food and hot rocks, and cooked dinner underground. It's called a "lovo" which sounds similar to the "luau" that we know it as. We had thought we might eat it on a beach, but at 5 we set sail (so to speak) for Taveuni which is where we need to be in the morning, so dinner was served on deck. Our Christmas dinner defies description, but it began with raw fish and coconut soup (delicious), taro, some wrap made of taro leaves, chicken, pork, and other things, and I don't know what else (most of it dry and unseasoned). Not traditional but interesting.

[We have an internet connection again so I've just sent yesterdays email. I'll send this in the morning before we depart the ship.]

We ended our evening on a big soft pad on the upper deck watching the full Christmas moon drift between clouds while a pleasant breeze swept over us and moonlight glinted on the water while the crew drank from a kava bowl on the deck below — quite a nice Christmas.

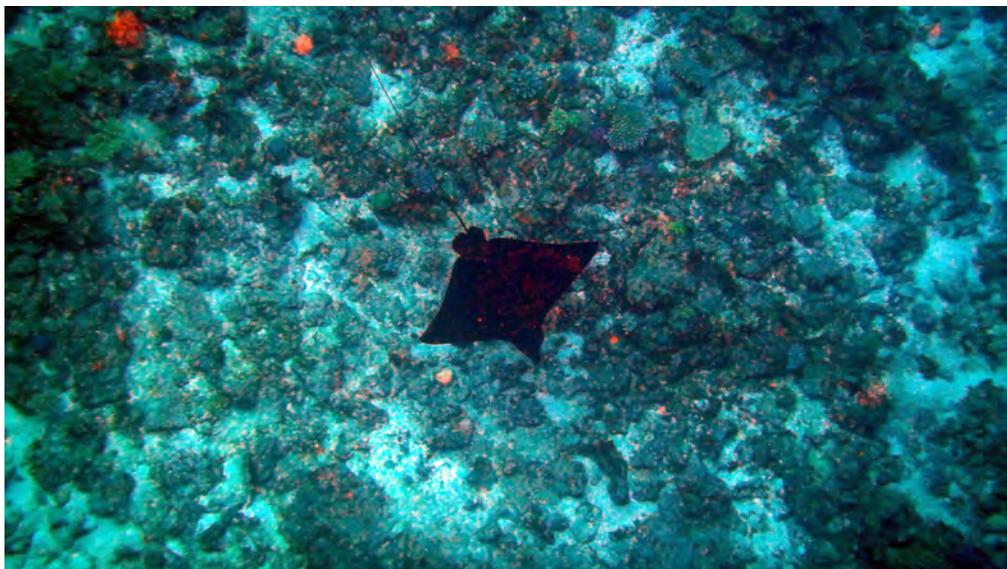
John (& Barbara)

Photos:

Kayaking in Fiji on Christmas morning.

An eagle ray and some colorful little fishes, photographed by our friend with a waterproof camera.

Barbara wanted to try a wetsuit, and here she is in one — swimming with the fishes.





#####

28: At a resort on Fiji

Your journey wraps up in Taveuni. The Tui Tai crew sincerely hopes you come see us again. We bid farewell by serenading you with, “I levu tu na ua...mai na Tui Tai, nanuma tiko ga,” or, “Soon you’ll be sailing far across the sea, but please, sometime, just try and remember us and remember the Tui Tai.” (And trust us — no one ever thinks they’re going to cry at the end of the trip. Almost everyone does.)

7am	Tui Tai crew serenades you with the “Farewell Song”
8:30am	Hot breakfast
9:00am	Checkout guests depart and transfer to Taveuni airport

Hi Friends,

it’s Saturday, and after a farewell song by the crew we departed our ship at 9; our small transfer motorboat landed us on a sandy beach to step in the surf — nothing as fancy as a pier. We flew 70 min to Nadi, where the international airport is, in a 20-seat prop with only 5 passengers aboard over islands, reefs, ocean, and mostly clouds.

BTW, it’s good we’re wearing sandals because the custom of going ashore by stepping into salt water and wading up the beach would be rather hard on shoes. But we haven’t seen shoes since New Zealand. In fact, we’re the only ones with sandals that wrap

around out feet — everyone else, including taxi drivers — wears flip-flops. Flip-flops are the national footwear and we feel over-dressed in Keens.

We were treated especially well on the ship and will give it its 39th 5-star review on TripAdvisor. They have no 4-star or lower reviews, so we're not alone in thinking it was a great experience. First class and memorable. I don't know what we'll do to top this Christmas next year.

Once landed we were shuttled to our beachfront resort where we'll rest for a day after all that snorkeling, eating, fishing, kayaking, reading, watching the islands drift by, hiking, eating, and watching clouds.

We have a little cabin on the beach (on a mud flat bay, actually, with the sea beyond) with palm trees just off our porch, so it is a nice tropical setting. The room is big and comfortable and the resort has two dining areas (restaurant and pizza bar) so we don't need or want to go into town. We drove thru it on our way here and it is a familiar 3rd world town; we've seen enough of those that we don't need to seek out another, especially in this heat and humidity (both in the 80s or so). Barbara has her book and I wish I had my Kindle (I do have my travel laptop).

[Note added later — the tide was out when we arrived, and when it rose during the afternoon that mud flat in front of us entirely disappeared and became sea, so we are 150 feet from the water at high tide.]

So we're stuck here until Sunday evening when we are shuttled back to the airport's "international terminal" for our overnight flight back to LA and then on to Las Vegas. Due to the miracle of the International Date Line, we depart Fiji at 9:40 pm Sunday evening and arrive in Los Angeles at 11:25 am Sunday morning. Then a l-o-n-g lay-over — good for going thru immigration and customs and changing terminals. We arrive in Las Vegas at dinner time on Sunday. Our car is waiting at a Best Western next to the airport, and we'll drive home Monday morning. So today we'll just hang around, reading and watching videos in a warm and humid atmosphere.

Wi-fi is \$2/hr (!) which is outrageous. We could decide to afford it but don't want to assist them in robbing us, so will buy one hour only to get this off and quickly take care of business. We'll send a final short email from our hotel in Las Vegas on Sunday night.

— — —

Sunday morning: We had a nice dinner last night and watched a movie (Dead Lands — about the Maori in New Zealand). We've checked out of our room and are just lounging around. We had to leave our room by 10 but can stay on the resort all day with our bags in storage and take a shower and change before we're shuttled to the airport at dinner time. So it's hanging around time. I bought an hour of internet to send this and check up on the world.

John (& Barbara)

Photos (coming separately — no confidence at all they'll go)

Our farewell song on the Tui Tai.

A reef as seen from the air.

The view out our porch at high tide Sunday morning; visualize 500 ft of mud for low. I've already gotten used to the porch not rolling back and forth.





#####

29: Home again

Hi Friends,

Our final day on Fiji was low-stress: relax on the beach, check email for an hour, get a massage on the beach (John; only \$22 plus tax and tip for an hour in a thatch gazebo), and read and watch videos. A tropical rain kept us indoors in the bar/lounge from lunchtime until departure time and raised the humidity to at least 100 percent. With the temperature at 85 we were grateful that we could take a shower before leaving for the airport (and in fact I confirmed that we could before booking the room).

We were shuttled to the airport and had an uneventful wait until, a half hour before boarding, Fiji (or the part we are in) lost power, including the airport. We boarded by emergency lighting and all several hundred of us got seated and seat belted in — to be told that they couldn't fuel the plane with the main power off. We sat at the gate, still belted in, while they hooked up a generator or something and fueled us, and we got off after an hour-and-a-half of twiddling our thumbs. Some of us wished they had let us remain in the terminal, which made the time jammed into our little almost 2-foot square space 11+ hours instead of 10, but it used to take several months by ship to California so maybe it wasn't so bad. I will admit that the novelty of sitting immobile in such a small space for half a day has worn off.

After a 5 hour layover in Los Angeles our flight to Las Vegas was delayed by 70 minutes, so we didn't arrive at our Best Western at the airport where our car awaits until 7:20 pm. That's 22 continuous hours of travel since we were picked up in Fiji with perhaps 5 hours sleep, so it's good to spend the night in Las Vegas rather than drive home 125 miles in the dark. We have several errands and some shopping to do tomorrow so we won't arrive at our cold and dark house until late afternoon on Monday.

So our latest adventure has come to an end. I hope you enjoyed my attempts at creative writing.

On Friday morning we drive our motorhome to Borrego Springs, California, for the rest of the winter.

Happy New Year All!

- John (& Barbara)