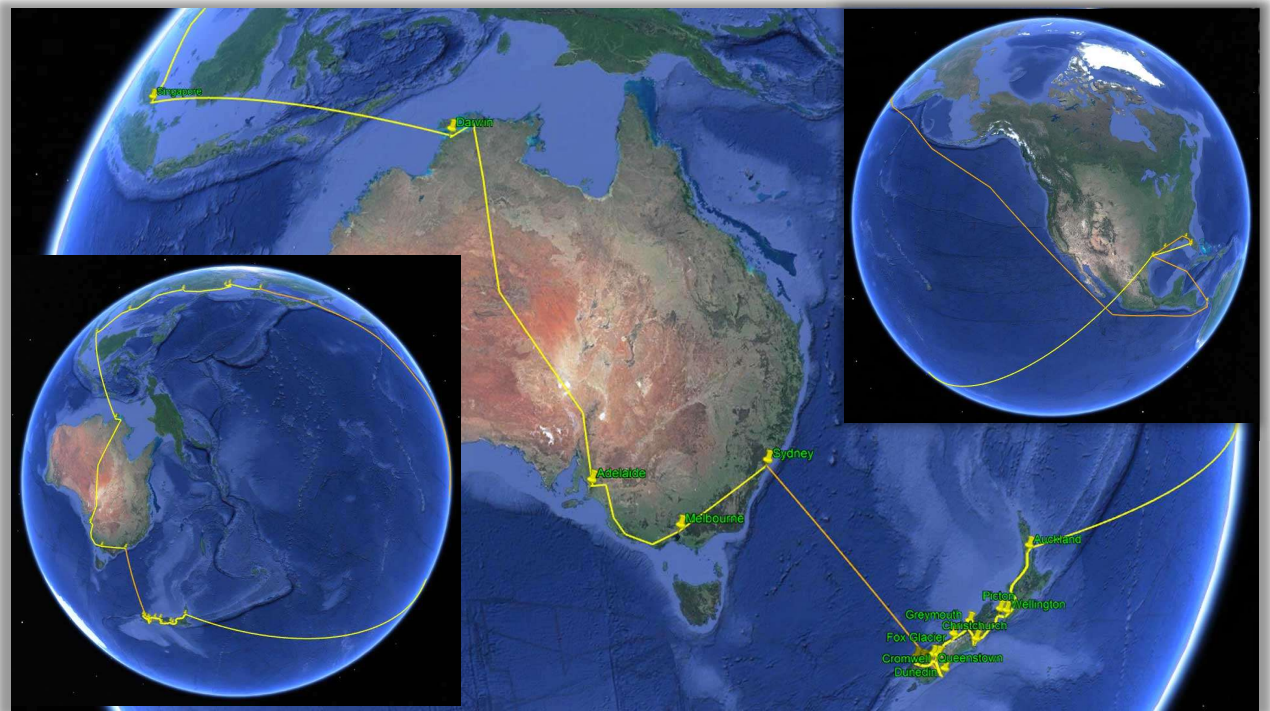


Our Trip Leah & John



Upper right: Western hemisphere showing the exit from Florida in yellow and the return in orange.

Lower left: South Pacific with New Zealand in foreground, Australia to left, Singapore and coastal China along top.

Center: From right, south through New Zealand, north through Australia and off to the upper left to Singapore.

January 19, 2019 – by the bay in Devonport

Starting our four-month journey, we enjoyed getting into the one day at a time mode by meandering within the seaside village of Devonport, a short ferry ride from Auckland.



January 20 – Downtown Auckland

Sometimes coincidences magnify life. Leah and I were both fascinated that the central business district of Auckland has an indoor swimming pool that has operated continuously for the last 104 years. We went in and the nice people there told us about the place. That same afternoon, when we were tired of walking in Devonport, we went to a French Movie called Sink or Swim (La Grand Bain). It's a comedy about men's synchronized swimming. Very funny but moving and award-winning. It wasn't until we were watching the movie that we realized that almost all the action was in la piscine (swimming pool),



January 21 – Onetangi Beach, on Waiheke Island

A very layered photo of Leah. The layers, from bottom to top, are: (1) The sand from the beautiful 2 km long Onetangi Beach, on the north shore of Waiheke Island, 40 minutes from Auckland by ferry. (2) A large igneous rock, covered in barnacles. (3) Leah, without a single barnacle. (4) A large rock formation bordering the east edge of the beach. (5) Flowers, which may or may not be agapanthus blossoms. (6) The greenery along the front edge of the property of a very lucky owner. (7) The sky.



January 22 – along the Tasman Sea west of Auckland

When you go west from Auckland, and cross the Waitakere mountains toward the Tasman Sea, you enter into a world that is much different and wilder than Auckland. At one point on that trip, while still in the mountains, we were able to see both the Pacific Ocean and the Tasman Sea from the same lookout. I searched for a photo that could capture the wonder that we found along the coast and in the “bush.” But I’m not good enough as a photographer. However, Google compiled a movie from some of the photos that I kept, and I kind of like it. If you watch closely, you can probably identify two rock formations, shark’s tooth rock and lion rock. The audio is not my choice.

(Note: I was not able to include the movie here, of course. But these are the photos. I was happy to lose the music.)



January 22 – Auckland city.



Today, as Leah and I investigated the campus of the University of Auckland, we came upon the "speaker's corner," a place where an individual can carry a message to the general public. It was open to anyone, as it should be, especially on a university campus. Leah took the opportunity to express her inner Demosthenes. The entire populace of Auckland was convinced to pursue only good from now on.

January 26 – Wellington on the Cable Car to the Botanical Gardens

The Wellington Botanical Gardens is a cable car ride from the middle of town. When I was here 8 years ago I went up on that hill four times and I took countless bad photos of trees and ferns. Both are tough subjects to photograph unless they are isolated, but these are all in their natural habitat – a diverse and dense forest. The Southern Hemisphere trees are strange to the eyes, for the most part, and the Gardens have been here long enough for the trees to grow large. The park was founded in 1869. Attitudes were different then, and many imported conifers were introduced in order to assess whether new species might contribute to New Zealand's economy. It seems silly now because New Zealand has 20 conifers that are unique in the world. These were the most interesting, although Leah was delighted to find several of her beloved California Redwoods, a tree that she knows from living for so long, as she did, in Humboldt County. The paths are steep at the Botanical Gardens, and so we came back down to town without visiting a good deal of the park. We may take that cable car again tomorrow or Monday.

(Note: And we did.)



January 27, 2019 – Mount Victoria, Wellington



Leah and I spent a great afternoon hiking in Wellington's "town belt" or "outer green belt." When Wellington was settled, its European immigrants came mostly from crowded cities. And so it was decided by the town council that Wellingtonians should always have access to green spaces. In 1840, a green belt was set aside around the town where buildings were prohibited. The area was to be common property, and it has remained so, although some land has been lost to the botanical gardens and a hospital. Leah and I chose the hiking area on Mount Victoria. We didn't go to the lookout at the peak, preferring to save our energy for a meander along a

ridge. It is summer here and the walk was amazing, even the fragrances. Along the way we learned that scenes from Lord of the Rings were filmed here. I have many pictures but most I will add to my collection of bad photos of trees and ferns. So, I include only two. The first somehow captures the day. The second a nod to the Lord of the Rings crowd and those who meander.



January 30 – Zealandia, outside Wellington

On our last day in Wellington, Leah and I went to Zealandia. Frankly, I didn't think Zealandia was a good idea. The idea was to fence off an entire valley and exclude all mammalian predators (except man, of course). The area is huge, almost a square mile. It is not hard to figure out how the idea originated. During the evolution of New Zealand's various eco-systems, there were no mammals. It was a paradise for birds, many of them flightless. There were predators, of course, but they generally hunted by sight. And so, defenses developed like camouflaged plumage and freezing in place. But these defenses are useless against mammalian predators who can hunt by the sense of smell. And many mammals (including us) eat eggs. Man and the introduction of mammals led to the extinction of about 40% of the endemic species of birds. And so Zealandia was built to try to save some of the species that are endangered. Cats, dogs, rats, goats, possums, stoats, weasels, hares, and the like were all excluded. Leah and I walked for miles, keeping to the most obscure trails. It was beautiful and lack of predators made a noticeable difference. The sounds of birds were everywhere, and we saw several birds on the ground, foraging, as well as in the trees. The idea is considered so successful that there are four other such projects in New Zealand.



January 30 – Cook’s Pass

Leah and I left Wellington on a large ferry bound for the South Island. It is called The Interislander and it makes the trip in three-and-a-half-hours. There was a morning fog and I sat inside behind large windows facing the rear, but I could barely see the water below. I was having fun tracking our progress between the islands on my phone. Google would put one of its red markers just exactly where we were, and then my little blue dot, which marked my location, would tick forward, marking the way toward our destination. I hadn’t noticed that the fog had lifted until a large green mountain arose into my view. We had reached the sounds. Leah was begging me to come out on deck where I was met with a remarkable shade of blue. The Pacific waters, I guess, mixed with those of the Tasman Sea. I had never seen anything like that particular shade of blue. I think maybe our eyes are especially fitted to it. I can’t describe a color, of course, but I hope my photo will give a hint.



February 1 – Christchurch

Leah and I have spent the last few days in Christchurch. In many places, particularly along the meandering Avon River, Christchurch looks just like you would expect it to look. However, in a major way, the city is still under repair from the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes. The picture below of the Cathedral that is the heart of the City (in more than one way) shows the serious damage. We spent a couple of hours today at a “quake museum”, where there were, as expected, a number of remnants of the disasters. But, what was unique is that the events were recreated in the words of the people of Christchurch. It was more like a library of stories, presented in a variety of ways. It was quite fascinating, very moving, and even a little terrifying. The arbitrariness of the death and damage was imprinted on the speakers. In the aftermath of the second quake, the city simply bought a large portion of the private property in the city and started to rebuild. Maori wisdom from te ao hurihuri (a collection of Maori wisdom about the permanence of change) was tied in nicely. From the Maori myths and from the people of Christchurch, the attitude emerged that the disasters created an “opportunity to make the city the way we want it to be.” An enlightened approach, but isn't this just an



apt description of any democracy at any time and in any set of circumstances?

February 2 – Greymouth

Leah and I took the train from Christchurch to Greymouth today, a four-and-a-half-hour trip. For the final part of its route, the train follows the Mawheranui River, a glacial river that empties into the Tasman sea just beyond the town of Greymouth. The Mawheranui is also called the Grey River (Hence: Grey-Mouth, also the pronunciation). After lunch we hiked a couple of miles to a place called Shipwreck Point, where the river meets the sea. The blue river roiled at the sea's waves. It was very beautiful. However, we were distracted by a small beach that we at first thought was inaccessible. There were large white rocks, worn smooth by the waves, along with granite boulders and a lifetime supply of driftwood. One of the rocks looked remarkably like a chair. So, instead of pictures of blue waves crashing against a rocky shore, you get a picture of Leah sitting on a large white rock that looks like a chair. Good choice!



February 4 – Fox Glacier

Leah and I spent the last couple of days exploring the west coast of the South Island. We bused from Greymouth to Fox Glacier, leaving civilization, (in particular, cell coverage and the internet), and then reentering said civilization at the end of the second day, on a bus into Cromwell. Along the way, we saw waterfalls, mountains, glaciers, several glacial lakes, many teal glacial rivers, towns like Hokitika and Franz Joseph, and the Tasman sea many times. We were surprised that there were so few tourists. There is much to tell about the last two days. I will include only one picture, a photo of



Fox Glacier. We were in the town of Fox Glacier for only one night, so we didn't get very close to the glacier. When I took this photo, it was early morning and there was a mist over the glacier. Fox Glacier is the largest glacier in New Zealand. We were told that the glacier moves at a rate of 5 meters a day, and that one of the reasons is that snow is added to the head end of the glacier at a rate of 30 meters per year (90 feet!). Both of these numbers were so astounding that I tried to verify them. So far, the 30 meters checks out and I have read that Fox Glacier (and Franz Joseph Glacier) move 10 times faster than the rest of the glaciers in New Zealand.

February 5 – St Clair, near Dunedin

Leah and I took a bus from Cromwell to Dunedin today, crossing a good portion of the province of Otago. Elder son John lives and works in Dunedin and he is the reason we are in New Zealand. We arrived just after noon, but we have already seen much of Dunedin, thanks to having John as chauffeur and guide. Dunedin is on the Pacific Ocean with a long harbor created by high mountains extending out into the ocean and on to the north. John decided to prove to us that it is possible to ride along a narrow road on ridge of those mountains and see, at the same time, the harbor far below to the West and way out (and down!) into the Pacific Ocean to the East. I'm pretty sure that I am not emotionally constituted to drive that road. It seems that John has already absorbed the Kiwi love of adventure and affection for the beauty of New Zealand. We also drove through the University of Otago, where he is a professor. I will have more to say about the University of Otago when we tour the campus in more detail. Leah and I are staying in a place in St. Clair, a neighborhood of South Dunedin where John lives. The community is an old-style beach town, complete with long boardwalk, nice cafés, cottages with flower gardens, a heated saltwater pool, and the Pacific crashing against rocks. The apartment we found is great. It's on the third floor of a building that has seen its day with no elevators and plenty of steps. It's a little short on amenities, but all the windows look out onto the Pacific. As I type this, Leah is sitting at a small round wooden table just inside the window indicated by red arrow in the picture below. The second picture is the view from the window.



February 7 – Botanic Gardens, a short walk from University of Otago

After meeting John for lunch and visiting his office, Leah and I spent a few hours at the Dunedin Botanic Garden, where there was an outstanding New Zealand Plant collection. It is a short walk from the campus. 82% of New Zealand's plant species are endemic (occur naturally only in New Zealand), some similar to plant fossils common on Gondwana. Since it was 85 million years ago that the land mass that was eventually New Zealand split from Gondwana, and 55 million years since Australia has been close enough to share species by natural means, many of New Zealand plants evolved in unique ecosystems. What first sparked my interest is that many of the indigenous plants seemed to have tiny leaves. So I researched a bit and it turns out to be true. There is a form of growth called divarication, where the branches grow in a tangled way and the leaves are tiny, many of them inside the protective tangle of branches. This is said to be a device to protect a low plant from browsing animals, including flightless birds, like the Moa. The collection also lacked showy flowers. Small white flowers seemed much more common. This could be because New Zealand has pollinators that are not attracted by color, but by scent: moths, crawling insects, lizards and small bees. Large showy flowers are unnecessary. However, the most interesting characteristic of many New Zealand plants is that they can have vastly different juvenile and adult forms, including differences in their leaf-forms, habit, branching, etc. It is almost like metamorphosis in the insect world. It is a fine world out there.



February 11 – Lake Dunston, near Cromwell

Early on, Leah and I thought we could be brave enough to drive a rental car on our trip through New Zealand, even though they drive on the left side of the road. But we decided against it, instead opting for a series of bus and train rides. We are very glad we did. Each city has its own bus/ferry system, and they are very easy and convenient to use. There is also a national system crisscrossing the entire country, called the InterCity. The drivers on this system seem to be a breed apart. They wear a headset which they can switch on, and they can and do share their thoughts with the passengers. Leah and I can remember and discuss each driver. They all have a sense of humor. This was illustrated again today on our way from Dunedin to Queenstown. Our driver was describing our route, which took us alongside Lake Dunston for quite a while. Now, Lake Dunston is a man-made lake formed as a result of the Clyde Dam on the Clutha River. Filling was completed in 1993. Our driver noted that the dam was built right over the major fault line — the boundary between the Australian and the Pacific tectonic plates — that runs along the Alps on the South Island. And so, the engineers had to design flexible expansion joints for the dam, the driver explained, “which was a very nice thing to do for the people who happened to live below the dam.” I have included a picture of Lake Dunston looking upriver from Cromwell, where we spent the night about a week ago. A part of Cromwell was moved to higher ground to accommodate the rising waters.



February 15 – Doubtful Sound

The story I am going to tell has little to do with my favorite photo from Doubtful Sound, the photo I've posted below. Doubtful Sound is one of the fjords that stretches into the Tasman Sea from Fjordland National Park. It was named when James Cook, peering in from the Tasman Sea in 1770, thought it was too rough to navigate, and he jotted down the note "Doubtful Harbor." It is not a sound, though, it is a fjord (formed by the action of a glacier, not a river). As Leah and I sat on the bus listening to the driver during the long drive, I was tickled by a description of Garston, a small town along the way. And so, I'd like to pass along what I know about Garston. Garston has a small population of people, a large population of sheep, and is protected by two mountain ranges. A key feature of Garston is that it is 119 kilometers from the Pacific Ocean to the east and 119 kilometers from the Tasman Sea to the west. To be more precise, there is a spot in town that is 119.44 km from each coast. A cairn has been erected at the point. Now, taking account of the fact that New Zealand is never more than 239 kilometers wide, the people of Garston use impeccable logic to claim that Garston is "the most inland town in all New Zealand," since, if you go one step further, you're not going inland anymore, you're going out to the other sea. It's not much; but it's a superlative. It seems that everywhere in New Zealand sports at least one superlative. It might be a way of thinking.



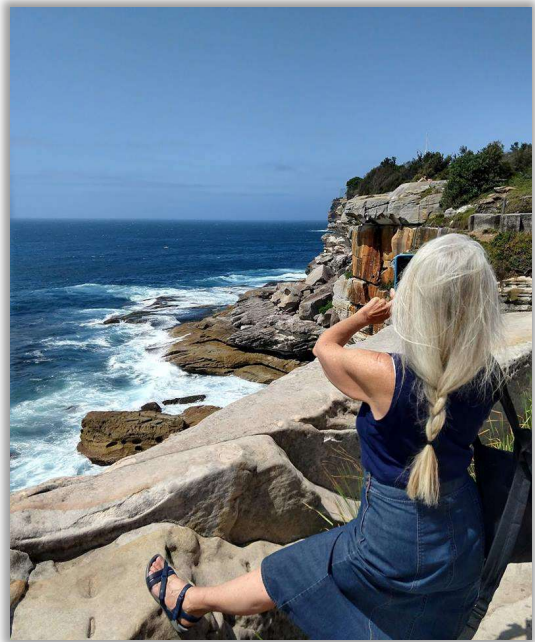
February 17 – Orokanui

Here we are earlier today, cozying up to a couple of 14 million year old volcanic rocks at Orokonui, an eco sanctuary twenty minutes from downtown Dunedin. Tomorrow we bid farewell to New Zealand and journey on to Australia. To lighten the mood I want to share something I learned today that really tickled my funny bone: in New Zealand auto body shops are called "Panel Beaters". Kia Ora – *Posted by Leah*



February 22 – South Head Point, Sydney Harbor

It was difficult to leave New Zealand and son John. But we pushed on to Sydney. Air travel is never fun, especially with a layover. Then the trip from the airport encountered traffic and we were suddenly swallowed up by a large city. We went to bed without a glimpse of the harbor; Sydney seemed noisy, crowded, and impersonal. But the next day, we got an Opal card to pay fares on local transportation and, as soon as we saw the harbor and the Opera House, our spirits were buoyed. On a whim, we decided to take the ferry to Watson's Bay. From there, it's a nice hike to the "South Head." The South Head is a point of land where you can stand and look to your left to see Sydney Harbor, look to your right to see the Tasman Sea, and look straight ahead to see the North Head across "The Gap" where the two bodies of water intermix. It is difficult to convey the immensity of the cliffs and waves, even with a photograph. But here Leah helps by leaning over the abyss to take a photo. She remembered later that I said at the time: "I beg you not to stand on that wall." She didn't, although probably not because of anything I said.



February 22 – Sydney Opera House

Sometimes an icon is an icon for a reason. The Opera House in Sydney Harbor is just a beautiful thing. In the evening when the sun glances off those white tiles, it's kind of awesome. Every ferry that leaves the Circular Quay, the wharf in the central business district, goes right by it. You can't miss it. She's the class of the city. Leah and I attended a performance of Turandot on the night before we left Sydney. Great performances, of course, by the singers and orchestra. But the production was flawless, and the lighting effects were the best I have ever seen on a stage. Entire objects were created and transformed with light and texture. Amazing to witness. Leah and I felt fortunate to witness something so grand and uplifting.



March 1 – Melbourne

Leah and I arrived yesterday after a four-day tour along the Coastal Highway from Melbourne to Adelaide. It was an amazing journey and we have a lot to tell. But before I get to that, I'd like to make a comment about Melbourne. Melbourne felt very comfortable to me because it reminded me of Pittsburgh. It turns out that Melbourne has the same reputation of being a blue collar city, that Melbourne had the same waves of Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants, that Melbourne was also once supported economically by union jobs, that Melbourne was abandoned by several industries and has fallen on hard times, that Melbourne has had to struggle



economically and spiritually lately, and that, like Pittsburgh, Melbourne has trolleys. Melbourne also has a nice river running through it. But only one. Further comparison could fill a book, I'll bet. But I have a more modest comment. Melbourne did a cool thing with their trolleys. They made them into a real transportation system. The trolleys have priority, and cars are not permitted into their lanes, even a little bit. They whiz through traffic. And God help you if you leave the back end of your car too close to the trolley's path. You will be showered with a clanging like you've never heard. But they went further. They drew a line around the Central Business District and made the trolley free within that space. So, people actually use the trolleys. It's cool when those in city planning come up with seemingly small improvements which change everything.

March 2 – Great Ocean Road



World War I is still an important memory for Australians. They were enthusiastic to support the crown before that war was even declared and from a population of fewer than five million, over 400,000 men enlisted. There was never a need for a draft. Australia and New Zealand joined together to form ANZAC, the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. ANZAC Day is still a national holiday in both countries. WWI was a savage war; over 60,000 Australians were killed and 156,000 were wounded, gassed, or taken prisoner. After the war, returning veterans were given the opportunity to work on the Great Ocean Road, billed as "The Finest Ocean

Road in the World." War-weary men returned home to Australia to live and work together in a spectacular and pristine environment. They were able to earn a salary while constructing a road that would serve as a memorial for their fallen comrades. Not just a public project, this was a way to heal for a generation of men, Leah and I signed up for a four-day journey from Melbourne to Adelaide along the Great Ocean Road. As luck would have it, nobody else did. And so, along with the driver, Steve, a native of Adelaide, we passed through the arch that is pictured here.

March 2 – between Melbourne and Adelaide on the Great Ocean Road

Just for fun, here are Leah and I at the beginning of our trip along the Great Ocean Road. I wish I could tell you what body of water lies behind us. I have asked and I have looked it up. I was told that it is the South Pacific, but that didn't ring true. Then I had a short encounter with an Australian woman who called it the Great Southern Ocean. I have also heard it called, colloquially, the Southern Ocean. It might also well be the Indian Ocean. Maps often call the sea just to the south of Australia the Great Australian Bight. The answer, possibly, is that we're talking about water here. Maybe you can't expect perfect precision in such fluid matters.



March 2 – Near the Twelve Apostles

As this photo indicates, all along the Great Ocean Way, there were spectacular rock formations and beaches without footprints, as well as bays where a small town might grow. We stayed in three such towns on each of the three nights that we laid over. They are Port Campbell, Port Fairy, and Penola. But we stopped at many more.

Their populations range from 1,000 to 9,000 and they are called satellite cities. Many are vacation destinations, or, perhaps we might call them beach towns. They also attract retirees from the farmlands. They were all very welcoming and very charming. One could imagine the easy living in each. Indeed, Port Fairy consistently wins the Victoria state competition for "most tidy" town. And indeed, it was very tidy, although, in Australian, that's pronounced "toidy." Penola is the town where St. Mary MacKillop, Australia's only canonized saint, taught her students and began the St Joseph order of nuns. I was



shocked a bit to see that the foot-pump organ that sat in the back of her classroom was much better than the one that was in the back of my fourth-grade class. The town of Portland was, perhaps, the biggest we visited; it is a busy port that sends three large shipments of wood chips to China per week. That is somewhat disturbing, as is the Chinese influence in Australia. But as we gazed out over the water, we also noticed a group of grade school children learning the art of sailing. Two to a boat – one on the sail, one on the tiller – they sailed around pylons and then lined up in a straight row behind their instructor (in a motorboat). They were young kids! We all should have been so lucky to have attended a grade school that taught us how to control the wind.

March 6 – Darwin

Leah and I traveled for three days and two nights by train from Adelaide north to Darwin through the heart of Australia. We stopped for short layovers three times, in Marla, in Alice Springs, and in Katherine. The outback, best experienced, perhaps in Alice Springs, is rugged, semi-arid country, not desert. But the short shrubs and less-frequent small trees seem endless. On a hike in

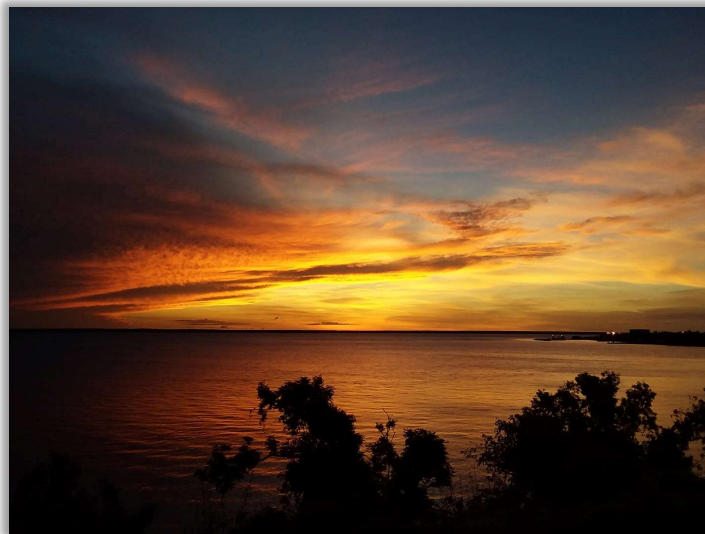


Alice Springs we did find some ground water. It was hidden between two cliffs in a pass through the West MacDonnell mountain range, at the end of a dry riverbed. It was the first ground water we saw on a trip that covered half of Australia. We were told that aboriginals carried a stick that was used to gouge a rut into the riverbed for water. Kangaroos know how to use their foot to do the same thing. Tales of the European exploration of the outback are filled with death, peril, and camels. In fact, the train we took through the center of Australia is called the Ghan, probably named after the Afghanistan cameleers who helped in the initial exploration of the outback. There are now over a million feral camels in Australia, although we did not see any. We did see three koalas, a possible kangaroo, two wallabies, and my favorite, a family of emus. I found it interesting that the male emu is responsible for rearing the young brood to be respectable emu children. The emus we saw had beautiful pale blue masks. A surprise awaited us in Darwin, where the semi-arid terrain gave way to palm trees and tropical breezes. We have traveled over half-way around the world to arrive in Darwin, which, I swear, is nearly indistinguishable from Florida!

March 7 – Darwin

The Darwin photo John posted was taken from our hotel room. Last evening after dinner we arrived at the park by the water moments before the sun set. So reminiscent of Anna Maria island.

Posted by Leah



March 15 – Katherine



Although Leah and I have been in Singapore for about a week, I would like to post one last thought about Australia and New Zealand, where we spent nearly two months. The two countries “down under” are very different, though I previously lumped them together. The contrast begins on the geological level. Australia is relatively flat because its mountain ranges are so old they have been eroded. For example, the MacDonnell Ranges, which we visited on a stop in Alice Springs, were formed over a billion years ago by a folding motion of the earth. This would have been at a time when Australia was still joined to Gondwana. The materials in the formation were up to 2.4 billion years old. That original mountain range was an amazing 4500 meters high. But today, there are two mountain ranges, one on either side of the valley that contains Alice Springs. They are called West MacDonnell Range and East MacDonnell Range, and neither is more than 1500 meters high. Water erosion, for the most part, has washed away the center. In fact, our entire four-hour experience in Alice Springs was spent in a space that was once inside a huge mountain range.

In contrast, New Zealand’s mountains were brought about by tectonic and volcanic activity and are much younger and much taller. The formation of the Southern Alps started only about 6.4 million years ago. Mt Cook is 3,724 meters high and still growing. In fact, the mountains on the South Island of New Zealand are among the fastest growing mountains on earth. New Zealand is on the “Ring of Fire,” and has many earthquakes in a year. Australia has a couple of earthquakes a year, deep in the interior where few live. They are largely unnoticed. We were told by an engineer whom we met that “there’s something comforting” about the lack of seismic activity.

It is thought provoking to me that Australia is geologically older, more stable, and flatter, while New Zealand is geologically younger, more active, and riskier. Leah and I have talked about this and we agree that it would be unfair to extend these characteristics to the respective cultures and inhabitants of the two countries. But it’s tempting.

For a visual, I have added a picture of the gorge outside Katherine, Australia, called Nitmiluk in the local aboriginal language. The gorge was cut through ancient rose and yellow limestone which looked hard enough to be used for gemstones. The stone had broken into regular blocks, some huge, some small. At times they looked like stacks of children’s blocks. However, the guide said that in 12 years, he had not seen a single rock fall.

March 17 – Singapore

Leah and I will leave Singapore tomorrow after 9 days in this city/state. It would take quite a while to copy out even a few of our impressions. I have chosen two photos that will get me started. I am going to put them in separate posts. This first one was taken from a narrow suspended walkway in the Gardens by the Bay. You can see the suspension cables in the upper left.

On the upper right is the edge of the canopy from a “supertree.” There are several. Supertrees are “vertical gardens that perform a multitude of functions, which include planting, shading and working as environmental engines for the gardens.” A technological wonder, although you are left wondering what was missing in regular old trees. Below you see the lush vegetation, something that also dots various neighborhoods on the island. (We saw wild monkeys and a large monitor lizard on a hike through one park.) On the right are a few of the many skyscrapers in the city. They are everywhere. But the ones in my picture happen to form the core of a powerful financial district near the harbor. Next, notice the sky. Singapore is an island one degree north of the equator. They tell us that the weather is in the eighties every day, with a rain shower common in the afternoon. Finally, along the horizon, you may see several cranes extending up from the busy shipping port, yet another center of economic energy. Tomorrow afternoon, Leah and I will be taken to that port to board the CMA-CGM La Scala, a freighter that will carry us on our long, slow, and restful journey across the Pacific, into the Gulf of Mexico, and back home.

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(After I wrote this I realized that the supertrees and the suspended walkway were confusing references. So, see the first comment below. The other post I refer to above is coming in the morning.)



First Comment: I provide this photo as clarification to the above post. It is a photo of Leah, in a nice Singapore breeze, on that narrow suspended walkway. The walkway curves its way through a "grove" of "supertrees,"



March 17 – Singapore

This second photo will, I hope, express the diversity to be found in Singapore. Singapore is a successful, technologically savvy, clean, and modern city. It is safe and apparently well run. The inhabitants seem to go about their respective businesses without obvious rancor or unhappiness. If anything, they seem to me to shop a bit much. There are large indoor and open-air malls everywhere and hundreds of cafes and restaurants. The MRT, a multi-level subway, is well-organized, clean, and with good signage. It is a breeze to use to go anywhere in the city for less than two Singapore dollars (= \$1.48 US today). I had hoped to convey some of this with my last post. But the most striking thing about Singapore is the diversity. Four languages are officially recognized. The people are rightly proud of their multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition. The city simply flows. Beyond all that, everywhere the eye turns, it is surprised by the visual diversity. From the monkeys in the parks to the bumboats in the harbor, to the Merlion (half mermaid/half lion) that graces harborside, it's all amazing. Imagine turning the corner to see one of the most beautiful examples of Art Deco architecture you've ever seen. Right next to it, there is a huge skyscraper of modern design with five or six curvilinear walls and an odd appendage cantilevered out into the space between it and that Art Deco building. It gets a little bizarre. Singapore has left me in a state of sensory overload. I am looking forward to the next step in our journey. I will be able to breathe sea air and stare at the starry sky at night and the blue waves during the day. (Just a side note. I must have taken 2 dozen photos in the large open-air plaza of that stunningly elaborate Art Deco building. It's an office building called Parkview Square.)



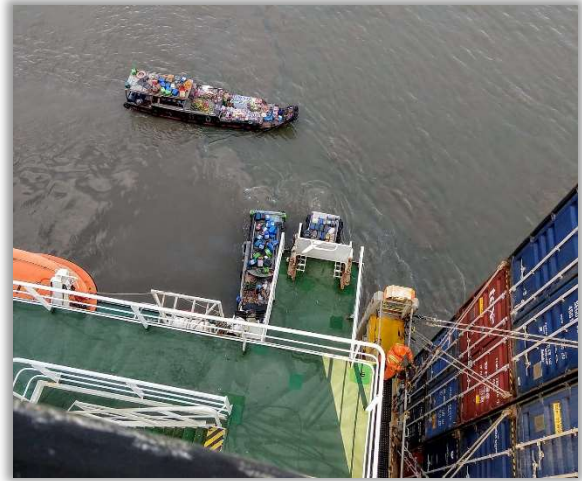
March 19 – Aboard CMA-CMG La Scala

Leah entering lifeboat during a safety drill about an hour outside Singapore.



March 21 – Vietnam

The vessel La Scala has made an unexpected (to us) stop today at a Vietnamese port, Vung Tau, located about an hour and a half drive south of Ho Chi Minh City. Leah and I watched as we passed mangroves and small craft until we docked. The stay is too short for us to disembark. The picture here shows 1) That we are on deck F, quite high over the water, although the other decks are easily accessible. 2) That the crew (in bright orange) was already working to remove supports from a few containers, probably to be removed or replaced. 3) Three small local craft selling fruits, vegetables, and souvenirs. The exchange is done in a 5 gallon bucket on a rope from a low deck and can be accomplished with US dollars.



March 27 – East China Sea

Leah and I enjoyed such pleasant weather in the southern hemisphere that I think we are a bit taken aback by the fog and rain of the last few days. We are back in the northern hemisphere at about longitude 30°N and we have entered early spring, first in the South China Sea and now in the East China Sea. We are just east of Ningbo, which is just south of Shanghai, and we have spent the last 36 hours in the Ningbo Anchorage enveloped by fog. It is Thursday morning here and the fog has lifted enough to expose the mountains in my picture and the silhouettes of at least 30 other freighters waiting for the word to move into the port. We have heard that our engines will start at 10:45. Still a lot to see and do. Besides, it's not like I've never been in a fog before.



March 31 – East China Sea

One of the most interesting and eye-opening things about being a passenger on a freighter is that you get a chance to watch the ship and the crew at work. Everything connected to the container business is not just big; everything is immense. I will give three examples. 1) It was very pleasing to discover that hot water for showers is always available, more available than in many hotels. Well, it turns out that a freighter will carry around 250 tons of water, and a desalination system that can produce up to 40 tons of water a day. As the Kiwis taught me to say: “No worries.” 2) The variable costs are immense: When we first looked into booking passage on a freighter, we were told that passengers are the absolute lowest priority for the crew. If we were ever late to board, for example, the freighter would not wait for us because they would lose \$50,000 for an overnight delay. The La Scala will use about 100 tons of fuel a day while cruising at about 18-19 knots. If you are in a hurry and want to increase your speed to 21.5 knots, then expect to use 160 tons of fuel, a 60 % increase. At a \$500 per ton, the cost of going faster would seem prohibitive. On the other hand, it might cost \$1,000,000 to pass through the Panama Canal. Being late for that one is really costly. 3) The revenues are immense: La Scala is 334 meters long and 43.4 meters wide. A football field is 109m x 48,5m, including the end zones. If you do the math, you get 14495.6 sq m and 5,298 sq m respectively. But beyond that, the efficiency of stacking, moving and removing containers is remarkable. I figure that there are, conservatively, around 5,000 containers on board at a time. I have been told that a good rough estimate is that each container generates \$5,000 revenue. That’s \$25,000,000. In summary, the ship is immense, and the subsequent costs and revenues are immense. There is very little room for error. All the decisions on board flow through that filter. The crew – from top to bottom -- works under a lot of pressure.

[Note #1: my numbers are very approximate. They were given to me verbally, for the most part, by the Polish chief officer whose last day (on a four-month contract) is today. We will miss him.]

[Note #2: The accompanying picture was taken just outside Buson, South Korea. When we leave tonight, we will cross the Pacific and we will be off the grid until we get to Panama, in about 18 days.]



April 19 – Somewhere in the Central Pacific

Leah and I have crossed the Pacific. We are in the first lock of the Panama Canal and going up. It is 3:39 AM CST. We will watch the descent into the Caribbean Sea tomorrow morning. It was an eventful uneventful crossing. Among other things, we have been without the internet (or sight of land) for 18 days. We could have had email service with a new temporary email address, but we didn't think the confusion would be worthwhile. I was clever enough to download a few apps and maps that allowed me to track speed, heading, and location of the ship based on the numerous GPS satellites up there. But I sorely missed Google. I had my usual storm of daily questions, but I had to rely on my own resources. I did not like that. My resources simply aren't as good as Google's. But I did clear up one mystery without Google. I would like to tell you about it. Read on.

When we left Busan, South Korea for the Panama Canal, the ship surprised us with a northward turn. We had to get by Japan to enter the Pacific and it seemed logical that we would go around the southern tip, which would require a southerly turn from Busan. But instead, we traversed a good portion of the Sea of Japan to the north (through the worst wind of our trip) and went through the Tsugaru Strait, south of Sapporo, Japan. Well, OK, that worked to get past Japan. Now could we aim for the Panama Canal? No, we continued on a sharp NNE heading that took us close to that big, cold peninsula hanging from Russia called Kamchatka. I expect no other personal reference to Kamchatka to occur for the rest of my life. When asked, the Captain (a laconic Romanian) told us that we were taking the quickest ride home. We did gradually bear east, but not until we cleared an immense underwater ridge extending south from the Aleutian Islands, the islands that enclose the Bering Sea! A couple of days later, I calculated that we were within 60 miles of an Aleutian Island (unnamed on my map. See pic). Our latitude was N50 degrees; Panama is N5 degrees, btw. At N50 degrees we experienced a couple of short, grainy squalls of hail, plenty of cold weather and we spotted several pelagic birds that we think are albatrosses. I wanted to catch a glimpse of the Aleutians, but I never saw them, even with binoculars. Eventually, our course pointed us toward the New World, first British Columbia (about 1200 miles out), Washington and Oregon (about 1000 miles out), San Francisco (700 miles out), San Diego (400 miles out), and we have been hugging the west coast of Mexico and Central America for the last few days within 100 miles. North of San Francisco there were long waves (22 seconds from peak to peak) amid relative calm that gave our room the feel of a cradle under control of an overzealous new mother. But since we reached the Baja Peninsula, the Pacific could not be more peaceful. If I were younger, I might look into the west coast of Central America as a place to live in retirement.



So, why did we take such a roundabout route to the Panama Canal? I wasn't able to ask Google, but I still had Kindle. I found the following paragraph in an ebook about Albatrosses that I had read a couple of years ago:

"The North Pacific Current itself originates in the western Pacific, spawned where the warm Kuroshio ("Dark Blue Current" in Japanese), coming north along Japan's coast, collides with the cold Oyashio ("Mother Current") flowing down from the Bering Sea. This tangled mass of enriched water then heads eastward as the North Pacific Current. Where the North Pacific Current crashes into North America, the portion deflected north becomes the Alaska Current, flowing up along British Columbia and then curling west along the Gulf of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. The part turning southward becomes the California Current [which] keeps the coastal ocean chilly all the way down past San Francisco. Near the equator, the water turns back westward, re-crossing the Pacific Ocean, and when it hits Asia the part of it that turns north along the coast becomes the Kuroshio all over again. The round-trip takes about five years." ("Eye of the Albatross" by Carl Safina).

April 29 – Bradenton, Florida

Leah and I have returned home.

After we left the Panama Canal, we crossed the Caribbean Sea quickly, but then slowed to 12 knots after we entered the Gulf of Mexico. Then we stopped altogether in Houston's anchorage about 30 miles south of Port Houston and sat for 72 hours. It didn't help that the first 48 hours of that 72 saw overcast skies and intermittent rain. We heard rumors that we might experience further delays at other US ports, and we still had Mobile, New Orleans, and Miami to go. It began to get stressful because we have a lot to do before leaving for Jerome's wedding in New York state. We decided to disembark in Houston, rent a car and drive home. This will be my last post in this series. Thanks to all for your many kind comments about these posts, and thanks especially to Leah, who edited all of them and made each of them better. She is the most meticulous editor I have ever met.



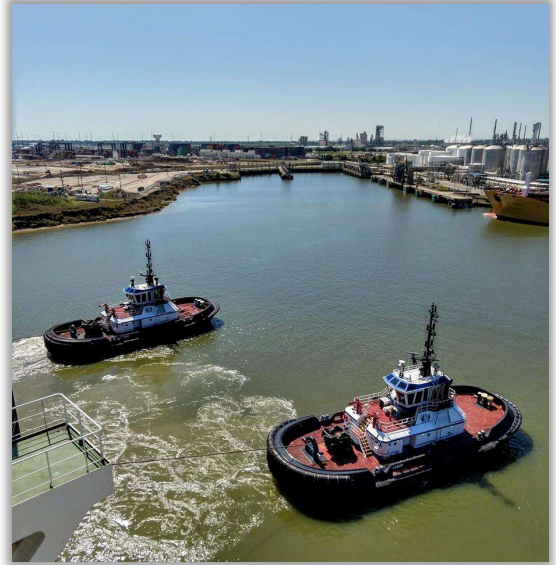
I want to post a few photos here for my own sense of completion. I have a couple thousand of them. There are 2 sunset photos, both taken on the Pacific after we passed the mouth of the Gulf of California (Baja Peninsula). I post them because I was so impressed with how peaceful the Pacific remained, all the way to the Panama Canal.



I'm also including a photo of a tower on a parked freighter that we passed in the Port of Houston. It is very similar to the one we were on. If you find the orange lifeboat and count up four levels, to where the railing extends the entire length of the tower, you will be on Deck F. That's where we were, right under that extended part of Deck G, which was handy for its shade. The balcony was not off our room, it was out a door across the hallway. We could walk down the hall and go out another door onto the starboard balcony whenever we wanted. (*continued below*)



The picture of tugboats is one instance when they turned the freighter 180 degrees, along a vertical axis through its center. You can see the lines attached to the front of the freighter and there was a third tug pushing along the rear. These two tugs from Port Houston tickled me because one was named THOR and the other LAMAR.



The last two photos were taken at the Panama Canal. We went through the newer canal, built to accommodate ships too wide to fit through the older canal. I think I first felt the desire to go through the Panama Canal when I was in grade school. The canal was almost new then. Now, having gone through the new canal, and having seen the old locks from a distance, I would like to go through the first canal. Some people are never satisfied. The small building has a sign that reads “Cuarto de elevador del cruce bajo camara.” I don’t know Spanish, but I think it means “Room with an elevator to get you down where you can cross under the chamber.” Thus, you can apparently cross under the chamber where the water is pumped in and out to raise and lower the ship. You can also see two of the three reservoirs to hold the water. There are three such locks to get you up to the lake to cross Panama and three to lower you back to sea level. The other picture is just a bridge as you leave Panama. But it is remarkable how often we saw bridges with this design, especially in China, but nearly everywhere. This is interesting to us because our own Skyway bridge across the mouth of Tampa Bay is, I believe, an early example of a similar design.



The end