

GREETINGS!



The holiday season is upon us again (a bit like the cat pounces upon the mouse, or the politician upon PAC money). As always, I'm overdoing it, because the winter holidays are my favorites--the old pagan ritual, with an overlay of Christian veneer, and a good dollop of Mithraism, druid ritual and solstice joy.

The weather certainly helps to engender the holiday spirit. As I look out my study window, I can see the lake completely frozen over, and a few young skaters trying their luck. The sky is a wintry, icy blue, and snow covers the ground here and there. It is really and truly cold out; the weather guys on the TV are tossing around the phrases "wind chill" and "below zero" with abandon and glee. It puts one in the mood to start a big fire in the hearth and curl up with a bit of Charles Dickens. Mulled wine, anyone?

The family is doing well; it's nice to have good news to write of, rather than the latest medical tragedy. It's been a good year--I've been blessed by the addition of a nephew to my family. Nicholas James (named for both his grandfathers), was born January 10 of this year. He weighed only 7#7oz, but has made up for it since. I've never seen a hungrier child. He thoroughly fits his Chinese zodiac sign (the pig). He is, nonetheless, a very happy and smiley child, as well as a curious and fearless one. In short, he's a good baby, but a dangerous one.

My niece has been living up to her sign as well, as she was born in the year of the monkey. She's as evil (read: mischievous) as ever, which is due at least in part to her age--she's passing through the "terrible twos". It's a bit like having a miniature teenager around; she's often obstinate, surly, and antisocial. Luckily, she's just turned three, and has once more become human.

It's fascinating to watch as children grow from small, drooling bundles of protoplasm to sentient beings; the acquisition of speech has a lot to do with that (and potty training sure doesn't hurt)--smiles are nice, but communication is better. Last year I was excited when Kalyna voiced words I could actually understand; this year we carry on conversations, read books, and play with the computer. She and I have entered the computer era almost simultaneously; sometimes I think that the major difference in our skills is that I'm allowed to insert my own CD-ROMs, as my hands are usually clean, so I don't leave and sticky, disruptive fingerprints. Kalyna has mastered her Sesame Street ABCs and numbers, and is working on Reader Rabbit; her perennial favorite, of course, is still "Just Grandma and Me".

The rest of the family is well. My parents continue to thrive in their retirement and grandparenthood. Their house is baby-safe (unlike mine) and contains more toys and baby supplies than those of many people with children. They still play the role of yard fairies frequently and well, performing their horticultural magic.

Bill and Laurie continue to cope with the joys of parenthood--drool and diapers, teething and toilet training, sleepless nights and childhood viruses; but also hugs and kisses, first words and first steps, utter dependence and unconditional love.

Our country continues to stumble on; the radical republicans and the head amphibian have interpreted the victory handed them by a disaffected electorate in the mid term elections as a

mandate to gut the entire government at the expense of the middle class and for the benefit of the rich. Who actually needs Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, food stamps or Head Start? Not those who contribute large sums of money to reelection campaigns. Better to increase the military budget, slash capital gains taxes, enlarge tax loopholes, and build expensive boondoggles in key congressional districts. When Pat Schroder quits the Congress in disgust with the current mean-spiritedness, it says a lot about the current state of the governmental soul (or lack thereof).

But on to more pleasant things (which is just about anything, including axe murders and airplane food). I've got the tree up, a lovely blue spruce fresh from the woods and mudfields of Michigan. It's been hosed off (you can't tell an old farmer that dragging trees is only an appropriate practice when there's snow on the ground), trimmed a bit and set up in its heavy-duty LLBeane tree stand. The house smells nicely of evergreen, the furniture's been all rearranged to accommodate the said tree, and my domestic life has become a shambles. I sit surrounded by eighteen large containers used to store my various Christmas ornaments. Some are full (creches, snowglobes, nutcrackers, wrapping paper), others empty (ornaments, tinsel, wreaths and lights). Yes, I've gotten the infamous tree set up-- a multi-stage procedure it is. This year I've taken careful note and documented it all for you. These are the stages:

STAGE 1: The setting up of the tree. This year it was a much more involved procedure than usual because of the stubbornness of an old farmer. Dragging a spruce through the mud not only shakes off loose needles and breaks branches, it also cakes mud into the branches. The mud had dried when the tree stood outside, and I thought my dad and I had knocked off most of the old mud. We got it into its stand and carried it into the house, and stood it in place. My mother took one look at it, yelled at us, and made us take it back outside and scrub and hose it down properly. Only then could it assume its rightful place in the corner by the bay window.

STAGE 2: The placing of the miniature white lights. First, all the little lights from last year have to be inspected, and any dodgy sets thrown out. Then replacement sets have to be purchased and tested. Only then can the stringing begin, which involves carefully wrapping the branches with some thirty strings of lights. It is done wearing rubber gloves and protective clothing, as the needles can get quite vicious. It requires a lot of patience, so this is the point at which the menfolk are sent outside with errands to run and other chores to do. It also takes the better part of a day and some knowledge of electrical systems.

STAGE 3: The birds. This is, to me, the most important part. My various birds, at least a hundred of them, have to be wired to the ends of the branches, perched as naturally as possible. The pheasants and swans go near the bottom, those in nests near the middle, and the little tiny wrens and doves near the top. Places of honor are, of course, reserved for the various flamingoes.

STAGE 4: The placing of the icicles, apples, pears, walnuts and pinecones. These are very traditional (to my tree at least) and go on first in places of prominence. The walnuts and pinecones are real, albeit painted gold. These I crafted in my youth and have used since. The icicles have to be placed at the ends of the prominent branches, and the fruit (acquired in a dime store in the UP ages ago) a bit more towards the interior.

STAGE 5: The placing of the glass ornaments. This is the most fun, but even it is hierarchical. The old, faded ornaments from my youth get hung first, then the fancy ones, then the simple, colorful glass globes fill things out. At this point, the branches are groaning under their bounty. But am I done? Not yet.

STAGE 6: The miscellany. These are the odd bits I've acquired throughout the years and just don't fit any other category. These include my embroidered ornaments from Beth; the little clothespin cossacks we made years ago; the sea shell from Ocean City adorned with rhinestones and sheltering an angel as if she were Venus arising from the waves; a few Chrysler stars from my uncle's tool-and-die days; several small wooden penguins; the last surviving nut-and-pinecone elf; the straw ornaments from Finland and Guatemala; the wooden ornaments from the Caribbean; and the candy canes (after all, it's not a proper Christmas tree without candy canes, is it?).

STAGE 7: The snowflakes. Over the years I have cut out several hundred small paper snowflakes, small enough to fit two abreast in a checkbook box. These I've starched; I hang them all over and throughout the tree to provide a bit of lightness and delicacy. They dance about in the smallest draft, making the tree come alive.

STAGE 8: The tinsel. This is also not for the menfolk. I have found, through several informal surveys, that most men either avoid tinsel altogether, or throw it on in big handfuls. I'm not of the single strand school, but I do believe in placing no more than three to five stands at the end of each reachable branch (this year I used some 2500 strands, if you believe the claims of the tinsel manufacturers). The final effect is of shimmering and sparkling, making the tree seem somehow magical.

And that's it-- all so simple yet so time-consuming. Now you may understand why this letter is so late in coming.

As I sit back and enjoy the tree, I can look back at the last year. It's been fun. I've now reached the age where one's age becomes much less important; so much so, that I have to calculate it when someone asks. I'm not sure what this says about my simple math skills, but I went through the last year under the misapprehension that I was a year older than I actually was. I might still be confused, had Beth not corrected me on our last birthday. As she is a year younger and less senile, she must be correct. It's a good, thing too, this age business, as it gives me an extra year to plan for my drive down the Pan American Highway, which I plan to do when I turn forty. I figure It will take about half a year to do it, what with sailing around the Darien Gap and all. And I still haven't decided whether to start in Alaska or at the Mexican border.

I am beginning to feel my age, though. It's the gradual changes that take you by surprise--the increasingly achy bones and joints in the mornings, that tingling in your fingers and hands when you get up, the inability to party (or work labor and delivery) all night, the inability to "name that tune" until some twenty minutes later, and the general slowing down (but not diminution) of various mental and physical processes. As the old Ukrainian saying says, "starist ne radist" (old age is not happiness). But we're all still young, so that doesn't apply to us, eh?

I've travelled a bit this year, and managed to add a significant number of pins to my map of the world. In early spring I visited Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands with my friend Susana; in late summer I visited London and the Lakes District of England; in the fall I travelled 'round China, Hong Kong and Macau.

ECUADOR AND THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

I must admit I had some initial misgivings about this trip. I'm not the fully escorted guided tour sort of person, and I had signed up for one. I had done this partly because of time concerns (by going on this tour I was attending a medical conference, rather than using vacation time), and partly for practical considerations (it was already January, and Sue and I planned to travel in March). I was afraid the group would consist of lots of ugly American doctors, and I would be embarrassed and bored by the group. I was quite pleasantly surprised. The other docs and their spouses were all very knowledgeable in nature and birding, fairly liberal (we passed around a copy of the Flush Rush Quarterly), and had a wealth of life experience not centered on suburban America. We ended up having fairly lively conversations and enjoying each others' company immensely. The fact that is was the smallest group our guide had ever taken to South America (there were only eight of us all together) certainly didn't hurt.

QUITO Our trip began in Quito, the capital of Ecuador. There was a war in progress between Ecuador and Peru at the time; it was the annual border skirmish (Peru had taken advantage of America's preoccupation with other matters during WWII to annex a large chunk of Ecuadorean territory, and Ecuador is justifiably still upset about it) down in the south of the country. Untypically, casualties had mounted and the UN had been called in to broker a peace. (Really, I don't cause these things to happen; it's just a coincidence that civil unrest breaks out whenever I set my sights on a country as a travel destination.)

Quito is an ancient city by American standards. The Spaniards made it their capital after their conquest of the Incas, and built lots of churches in their effort to "civilize" the natives. Many of these still stand (quite a few well restored), and are beautifully if baroquely decorated with transformed Inca gold.

Quito is located high in the Andes mountains; I got to experience altitude sickness for the first

time. Every muscle in my body ached, any exertion was painful, there was a mild but persistent headache and a constant shortness of breath.

We also went out into the nearby countryside, and got to see a bit of Ecuador's natural beauty, including mountains, volcanoes, and lakes. We stopped along the Pan American highway to view the marker for the Equator, and get our photos taken with one foot in each hemisphere. Along the way, we stopped at several towns, each with its own craft specialty (bread dough sculpture, leather goods, wood carvings), as well as Otavalo, a market town renowned for its woolen weavings. I found some really nice things, and put the bargaining skills I picked up in Guatemala to good use. I got voted best shopper by the group (and had to buy additional luggage--in this case, beautiful woven duffel bags).

GUAYAQUIL I've wanted to visit Ecuador for many years because of a book I once read called The Panama Hat Trail. True Panama hats are actually made in southern Ecuador from a special grass; the best come from the town of Montecristo, and are called *finos*. The weaving is so fine that it can take a master craftsman weeks or months to produce one. They can be rolled up and passed through a ring, repel water, and retain their shape despite abuse. I am now the proud owner of an "Ecuador" hat, which I can attest protected me well from the equatorial sun and probably saved me from sunstroke and third degree facial burns.

THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS These islands lie along the Equator over 1000 miles from the nearest mainland, and are volcanic in origin. They were "discovered" by a Spanish bishop whose ships had gotten blown off course, and assessed by him as being worthless. Charles Darwin visited them during his trip on the HMS Beagle, and they planted in his mind a germ that would become the theory of evolution and revolutionize our concepts of biology and the origins of the species.

The Galapagos Islands (named for the giant tortoises that reside there), are nature's living laboratory. As such, they've been proclaimed a UNESCO World Heritage Site and been made into a national park by the Ecuadorean government. A research station, named Darwin Station, was created to preserve the species unique to the islands and to train naturalist guides.

We toured the islands on the *Galapagos Explorer*, the largest ship cruising the islands, with a capacity of 99 passengers. It was not the Love Boat--decent food, friendly crew, but not a luxury cruise by a long shot. Cruising is really the only way to see the islands; they can only be visited from sunup to sundown, in the company of a trained naturalist guide. All visitors must stay on the marked paths, and it is forbidden to touch or bother the animals. No food is allowed on the islands, only water, and anything brought ashore must be removed.

Every evening we had a slide show and orientation session to prepare us for the next day's landings. There were wet and dry landings; dry, when the sea was relatively calm and there was a dock reachable by panga (a small motor boat for ferrying passengers to shore); wet, when the sea was rough and coast rocky (we would jump out of the boat and wade to shore). We were told what kind of conditions to expect, and what sort of flora and fauna we could expect to see. We usually had two expeditions per day, at eight a.m. and two p.m. It was too hot in the noonday sun to be out and about (remember, this was the equator), so we would lounge around on the deck, drinking beer and reading or catching up on post cards. One afternoon, as we were so occupied, a school of porpoises swam by, following the ship for quite a ways and performing for us. It was magical.

Our guide was Samuel, a PhD candidate in biology whose favorite word seemed to be "amazing". Everything he showed us was amazing--the unique plants and animals that have evolved to fill odd niches in the ecosystem. A large percentage of the trees are descended from the sunflower family, and birds have evolved into odd roles & even use tools. Iguanas have even become marine creatures, and the tortoises have become absolutely massive.

I think that what I found the most amazing was how tame or, rather, unafraid of humans the animals were. The sea lions on the beaches looked up at us as we walked by, but didn't do much else (except the machos, who were just as territorial as males anywhere). They swam with us, and one of the small ones even played catch with a friend of ours. I found myself playing peek-a-boo with one of the little ones (my aunt training has come in handy). They were so damned photogenic, and let me get up very close to take their pictures, that I have some ungodly number of photos of the sea lions.

The birds were equally friendly. I could walk up to their nests and see the young, watch various mating rituals (the male frigate-birds have a red sac on their necks which they inflate and wag around to impress the females), and get a good look at their plumage. The frigate-birds looked

prehistoric when they flew, like pterodactyls in the sky; the blue-footed boobies not only have electric blue feet, but also very silly-looking faces ("bobo" is Spanish for clown); the flightless cormorants really can't fly, but swim and dance quite well; the penguins were cute and playful, and occasionally swam among us (they survive on the equator only because of a current that runs along the coast of South America and brings cold water north, washing the shores of the southernmost islands). I even saw flamingoes, but they were only part-time residents and shy.

The iguanas look like some evil creatures straight out of hell, but they are actually quite meek. They sit on the lava rocks looking ferocious, but if you get within three feet of them and they skedaddle. The iguanas occasionally swim out and catch a little bit of supper, but spend most of their time piled upon one another, soaking in the sun's rays and spitting salt. They're ugly but adorable in that Sharpei way.

The most amazing creatures of all are of course the giant land tortoises for whom the islands are named. There aren't many left, as most were killed off by sailors and settlers for food over the years. They are HUGE, and no one knows how long they actually live, although some reckon it may be hundreds of years. There is a program at the Darwin Station on Santa Fe to breed the tortoises and then release them into the wild. Their greatest enemy, besides man, is the rat. Rats, which are not an indigenous species, but introduced by man, have no natural enemies and have bred wildly. They prey on the baby tortoises; the station raises the tortoise hatchlings until they are large enough to fend off the rats, and then releases them. I'm not sure if they get the same sort of training that Elsa did, but the project seems to be working. Several species have been saved from the brink of extinction, and others are actually becoming plentiful again. I hope someday to return to the Galapagos and see them roaming wild again. Susana and I got to get up close to one named Pepe (when she saw the sign pointing him out, she initially thought it was a sign giving directions to the women's loo, but we soon sorted that out). Pepe is a pet, and lives at the museum on San Cristobal. For a nominal fee, we got to feed him bananas, and then he tried to take a taste of my sisal shopping bag. He may have been harmless, but he certainly didn't look it! He looked solemn and reptilian, and had dry warm and rough skin. It was like touching something truly ancient.

All-in-all, my visit to the Galapagos was an incredibly *amazing* experience. I look forward to returning. There are problems, however; poor people from the mainland have been moving to the few settled areas on the islands, lured by the false promise of easy riches. They're not getting rich, but are badly impacting the delicate environmental balance. The number of introduced species is increasing, and now goats are threatening the tortoises by devouring their food supply. Fishermen are overfishing the waters, catching sea cucumbers for the Japanese market. The government has shown little interest in intervening, especially the local authorities. The Galapagos are a valuable and important natural resource and need to be preserved; if you feel as I do, please write to Dr. Carlos Larreategui N., Secretario General de la Administracion Publica, Quito, Ecuador (FAX 011593 2 580-751). You may wish to mention the economic importance of the tourist industry, and the reputation of Ecuador in the world community.

ENGLAND

I love visiting England; it's become like a second home to me, and each time I visit I meet more people and make new friends. This time around, I became acquainted with my new little friend Tom, and his nanny Jasmina. Christobel's son is quite a charmer, and seemed to me to be preternaturally bright for a fifteen-month-old. Jasmina, who's up from Nicaragua for a year or so, had quite the time keeping up with him. The three of us spent a lot of time together, both in London and up in the Lakes district.

LONDON I had a very nice stay with Chris and Neil at their flat on the Thames. The weather was nice, and I got to do some of the touristy things I'd never gotten around to before--visited the Courtauld Institute to see their collection of Impressionist masterpieces; cruised the Thames from Greenwich to the Tower; visited Canary Wharf; and took the evening Jack-the Ripper walk of the East End (Jasmina and I got to see where all the bodies were found, then had a nice drink at the Jack the Ripper pub).

The five of us visited the London Zoo, visited several Hawksmoor churches, and caught up on old X-Files videos. Chris and I visited the Saturday flower market, and bought a bunch of annuals, perennial herbs, and bulbs. These I planted on their balcony in various pots and planters.

THE LAKES DISTRICT Bob and Elsie had been kind enough to invite me to visit with them up in the Lakes District of England. I'd often read of the area in English novels, and read its praises in the poetry of Wordsworth, so I took them up on their offer. Tom and Jasmina decided to accompany me--Tom to visit his ever-doting grandparents, and Jasmina to see a bit of England. All of us had a lovely time.

Tom was cosseted by Bob and Elsie, and shown off to all the neighbors. Jasmina and I explored the north country--we sailed on several lakes, visited numerous small villages and towns, did a bit of shopping, rode on a steam railway, visited a stone circle, and OD'd on Beatrix Potter (if I never see another Peter Rabbit shop, it won't be too soon). I never would have thought that I'd spend my week in England speaking Spanish, but that's what I did with Jasmina. My Spanish may or may not have improved any, but I'd like to think her English did.

Elsie fed us all well with good, hearty Cumbrian food, much to Jasmina's delight, and I got sample the joys of Yorkshire tea and Kendall Mint Cakes (which accompanied Sir Edmund Hillary to the top of Mt. Everest). Bob was kind enough to chauffeur us around, and provide suggestions on itineraries. If not for his advice, we would have missed out on some of the sights in Kendall and quite a few good pubs.

CHINA

Last summer, I received a letter from Dr. Naftalin, inviting me to join him in a citizen ambassador visit to China, a place I'd read a lot about, and had planned to visit eventually. I hesitated a bit, but then decided to take advantage of the opportunity to visit China with a group of OB/GYNs from North America, to see the country and gain an understanding of the Chinese approach to western and traditional (herbs, acupuncture) medicine. I also decided to extend my trip by an extra week, a cruise the Yangtze River.

Our group met in Seattle, and stayed at the hotel with several hundred tattoo and body-piercing artists, most of whom were walking ads for their skills. They were having a convention at our hotel; I didn't get a chance to attend any seminars, but I did get an official tour T-shirt.

BEIJING Our first stop in China was the old northern capital, and seat of the Ching emperors. It was here that I got to know my roommate, Sharan, much better. We spent a lot of time seeing the local sights together, and being stared at by the Chinese (she's African-American, and I have red hair--they had trouble deciding whom to stare at more). We saw Tiananmen Square, toured the Forbidden City at length, and got to visit numerous Friendship Shops (official government hard currency stores with outrageous prices).

We also took a day trip to the Ming Tombs and Great Wall to the North. The Chinese are born capitalists; there were endless souvenir shops at all the locations plus mobile peddlers. Even at the top of the Great Wall, which is quite a strenuous climb, there are boys selling official certificates to prove that one had actually climbed it.

In Beijing we visited several hospitals, and were impressed by the general level of knowledge of western (and particularly American) medical practices. We met quite a few residents and students, and they were thrilled with my OB wheels.

According to people with us who had been to China before, much had changed in the last few years. The roads were choked with cars, many of them private, and lots of shops had opened. Foreigners were now allowed to use yuan, the local currency, rather than having to pay with FECs (foreign exchange certificates, a way of ripping off tourists officially). Also, Mao suits were fairly rare; almost everyone wore western-style clothing, which Sharan described as "tacky" and reminded me a lot of modern Ukrainian couture.

One of the more interesting cultural experiences I had in China was the Beijing Opera. If you've seen *Farewell, My Concubine*, you know of what I speak. It consists of men in very ornate costumes shrieking in a loud falsetto to the accompaniment of a loud percussive band. The story lines are very

traditional (we saw an episode of the Monkey King saga entitled *Havoc in Heaven*, which had to do with the theft of peaches and nectar), and mandatorily include scenes incorporating mime, acrobatics and swordplay. It's aggravating, loud, and lots of fun.

Two things which impressed me greatly about Beijing and China in general, and which I will not miss, are the car horns and the spitting. The horn seems to be the most important part of the automobile in China; I can't imagine how anyone could drive without one. It has completely replaced the turn signals and brakes; it provides a soundtrack to the experience of Chinese driving, which would make many a Hollywood producer of car chase movies green with envy. The spitting is ubiquitous, despite frequent signs disallowing it, and spittoons are not uncommon. The worst bit is that pleasant hawking sound that precedes the actual expectoration.

XI'AN Over 2200 years ago, the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang Di(221-206 BC), built a huge tomb complex near Xi'an, China's ancient capital. He also unified China for the first time, standardized Chinese writing, and oversaw completion of the Great Wall. In March 1974, peasants digging a well unearthed fragments of a life-size terra cotta statue of a warrior. Archaeologists soon rushed in, and discovered that this soldier was only one of 7,000 magnificent figures of warriors and horses, arranged in perfect military formation, standing guard several kilometers away from the actual tomb.

The terra cotta army has been excavated, the statues largely reassembled, and are on view to the public. They are, simply put, AMAZING. There are three main excavation sites, each now covered over with a building, and the figures are on view, most still in the pits where they were found, but some in glass cases so visitors can get a close view. No two figures are exactly alike; the soldiers all have different facial features and appear to be individuals. It is really something to see, and makes you wonder "just what was the point of all this?" (kind of the same reaction you get to the Pyramids and other grandiose examples of human vanity and the search for personal immortality).

Xi'an itself is now just a small provincial industrial center, its ancient glory pretty much gone, except for a few pagodas and the old city wall (which, surprisingly, wasn't razed by the Communists in their Great Leap Forward). In many ways, Xi'an is probably one of the more typical Chinese cities we visited. The market by the old mosque was great; I bought lots of wonderful Chinese peasant paintings, various trinkets and some putative antiquities. It was great fun. In China, one is expected to haggle and, though John and Paul may have their doubts about this, I've gotten quite good at this skill. Our guides were even impressed.

While in Xi'an we visited a traditional Chinese hospital, and got to view acupuncture, cupping, therapeutic massage and other traditional practices. Several of our group volunteered, and had stomach massage (for weight control), body and neck massage, and a form of acupuncture where metal beads are taped against pressure points on the ear (headache cure?). No one had cupping or, as I recall, needles inserted. We also visited the pharmacy--fascinating colors and smells. I brought home some dried red berries (haw?), which are supposed to be a good stimulant to the system, and have them steeping in a large flask of vodka. I'm sure the resulting brew will be quite invigorating.

SHANGHAI From my hotel window, I could see at least ten skyscrapers in various stages of construction, and many more completed ones. Shanghai is in the middle of a huge economic boom. It is in one of the Chinese free trade zones, and foreign capital (largely overseas Chinese) has come pouring in. There are fortunes to be made here. There are still some older, more traditional parts of the city, but more and more it resembles a European or American one. The shops rival those of New York, and the streets are at least as crowded with expensive automobiles. The Chinese, given the opportunity by those who govern them, could easily become the world's largest and strongest economy.

In the nineteenth century, Shanghai was the center of international trade with China, much against China's will. By military force, various European powers had gained "concessions" in the city, where their people lived and worked, unanswerable to Chinese law. They built impressive European-style buildings, especially on the waterfront, known as the Bund. Most still stands, and from the water, at least, Shanghai appears to be a European city. My friends Ernie, Al and I took a boat trip of the bay, and had a lovely, if windy time. The views were great, and the amount of industry was surprising. Afterwards, we had tea at the Peace Hotel, which is but a shadow of its former self, when it was the Cathay and everyone who was anyone stayed there.

The hospitals were interesting, and we not only learned about the successful integration of

western and traditional medicine (laser, not herbs, for severe dysplasias), but that the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well in Chinese medicine. We met a doctor who is all set to open a chain of weight loss clinics in the states based on the principle of stomach massage.

The shopping was good; I bought lovely silk scarves at the local equivalent of the K-Mart, and lots more books and postcards. Packing it all became a major challenge, and several members of our group were investing in new suitcases at this point.

HONG KONG This island city is not yet a part of China, but in 1997 the British lease runs out and it will revert to Chinese authority. There is a large digital clock on Tiananmen square which counts down the seconds until union. Hong Kong is, basically, an awful lot of skyscrapers set down on a few small islands. The shopping is supposed to be great, but I didn't really find it so. We rode up to the top of the highest peak, and even there it was hard to get away from the buses and souvenir shops. The view of the waterfront was pretty, especially at night, but otherwise the city didn't really make much of an impression on me, except for the garden of Chinese deities at Repulse Bay, and the floating city of sampans in Aberdeen. I enjoyed the evening cruise our group took, and even enjoyed the Star Ferry. I seem to have been on a great number of boats this trip.

The members of our group got to know each other quite well, and got to be friends. As Arnie said in a toast at our final dinner, it's unusual to have a group this large (over fifty people) and to have everyone get along so well. It's also unusual for a group of Americans this size to get fogged in at the airport in Xi'an for eight hours and not have anyone complain. It was a great group, and I was sad to see everyone go. I hope to keep in touch with them. Some of us plan to meet at a conference in Toronto next June, and Teresa and Larry have promised to try to come to my Christmas party.

MACAU The Portuguese answer to Hong Kong was Macau. It was never as large or as prosperous, and several times the Portuguese have tried to give it back to China. They finally accepted, and the two will be reunited in 1999. Quite contrarily, now that the Portuguese have given up on it, Macau is having a huge building and economic boom.

Macau is just a one hour boat trip away from Hong Kong, and is a popular day trip. Most visitors go there for the casinos; I went to absorb a bit of the old colonial atmosphere of the place. I visited the old fort that used to guard the city; it is now a meteorological station and has lovely gardens. Several older men were there, relaxing under the trees and drinking tea, while their pet birds in their cages got a bit of air. Down the hill, one could see the ruing of the old cathedral; only a few arched walls remain, but they're quite photogenic.

The city proper was a pleasant change from Hong Kong--much less hustle-bustle, busy but a bit more sedate, a lot more green. It seemed a pleasant Portuguese city inexplicably full of Chinese people. It seemed the sort of place that might still have siestas.

GUILIN I left my group in Hong Kong; they flew home, I proceeded on to Guilin, in the far south of China. Its landscape is that which comes to mind when most people think of China--rice paddies, and those strange-looking mountains. It is a very beautiful area, although the city of Guilin itself is largely industrial. The old city walls are gone, but the moats have been turned into a series of pleasant lakes in the city center. They are surrounded by cassia trees and small parks. There are walkways out to little islands, and floating pots of flowers, which slowly wander about the lakes. Unfortunately, they are also the lair of the self-proclaimed "art students", all of whom speak a bit of English and want to take you to the studio of their professor where you can buy good paintings quite cheaply. I demurred.

The Li river runs through town and through some of the most incredible landscape I have ever seen. I cruised the Li river for the better part of the day, rarely leaving the open top deck (and got quite sunburnt). The river runs through a range of karst mountains--strangely shaped, convoluted projections of limestone, all of which are named. We passed other cruise boats, farms, bamboo groves, and lots of small boys swimming in the water and begging good-naturedly for gifts. I took, as can be expected, an incredible number of photos, but then so did all the others on the boat.

YANGTZE RIVER From Guilin I flew to Chongqing, and there boarded the Princess Sheena, a German-built river cruising boat. It was large but largely empty. This boat, which had over 150 crew members and capacity for 250 passengers, was sailing with only the thirty of us. Needless to say, everyone became fairly well acquainted quite quickly, and we all learned to avoid the New Yorkers

(not just prototypical rich, ugly Americans, but loud ones as well). Most of us were there because we wanted to see the Three Gorges before the dam was completed and the area under 50 meters of water.

The three gorges Dam, when completed, will be the largest hydroelectric dam ever built. It will force the evacuation of over one million people, flood countless cities, and destroy one of the most beautiful stretches of river in the world. Estimates on the completion date range from 1997 to 2015 (take your pick).

We cruised for three days, taking in numerous sites:

FENGDU The ghost city, it is called locally. Up on the hill above town, there is a huge complex of temples, with all sorts of truly gory statues, in full garish colors, of various demons and devils. The temples have such upbeat names as "Between the Living and the Dead", "Bridge of Helplessness" and "Palace of the King of Hell". It was a lot of fun. The walk through the town was also quite nice, with lots of views of typical city life in China. It would have been even nicer, if not for the ugly Americans yelling "Look at this" and taking pictures of people without asking; it was quite embarrassing.

FENGJIE Stone stairs descend to the water in this ancient Yangtze town. It was the capital of the Kui state during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770-221 BC). It overlooks the QUTANG (first) Gorge. I found this one to be the most spectacular of the three. Mountains rise dramatically on either side of the river, which often narrows considerably, and whirlpools and rapids abound. Along the rockfaces, there are remnants of the paths the porters used when they dragged the boats against the current in pre-steam days. These walkways were precarious, and the lifespan of the porters short.

WUSHAN The Daning river joins the Yangtze just outside this town. Along the Daning are the Three Lesser Gorges, which although they are smaller, are as dramatic. We debarked in Wushan, took an exciting (some said terrifying) bus ride through the narrow, winding streets, and then boarded a small motorized junk for the ride up the Daning.

Our boat had three boatmen with poles and a small motor. The motor was enough to get us upriver, except on the rapids, where serious exertion with the poles was needed. There were cliffs and lush vegetation; we saw Yangtze geese and wild monkeys. There was an ancient tribe in this area whose custom was to place the coffins of their dead in high mountain caves; some have been recovered, and bronze swords and armor were found. Some of these coffins can still be seen from the river.

Near the end we stopped on a bank of rocks and allowed to look for attractive pebbles. Incidentally, there were several peddlers there, selling attractive pebbles, prewar coins and other gewgaws. The ride back down was faster and wetter, especially as the boatmen let me sit out on the front deck with them, giving me a marvelous, unobstructed view.

WU GORGE The second gorge is much longer (40 vs. 8 km), a bit wider, and somewhat less dramatic. We entered it at dusk, and sailed through it as darkness fell.

XILING GORGE The third gorge is much wider, as it has already been dammed. The water flows much more sluggishly, the cliffs are much less dramatic and it goes on for 80 km. At the end of the gorge is the Gezhouba Dam, where we went through the locks. It was quite dramatic--the water level falls thirty meters. Thereafter, the land becomes flat and the river wide. Unfortunately, in the dry season it also becomes shallow. Just as we'd passed the bridge in Yichang, all river traffic came to a halt--the sand bars had shifted, and it would be several days before a new channel could be dug. We spent the day relaxing, as the captain slowly recruised the navigable stretch of river. That night we docked in YICHANG, and got the official city tour from the local intourist guides. We saw all the highlights--riverfront park, depressing soviet-era architecture, electric model of the Three Gorges Dam (complete with trains, locks, and little cities which light up as the water pours through), and of course the China Sturgeon Research Center. (This was much more interesting than it sounds. Sturgeons are monstrously large fish, and we got to watch them up close and even pet them for luck. Unfortunately, there were no free caviar samples at the end.)

JINGSHA The following morning, we set off in a very nice bus; we passed through the industrial hub of Shashi, and then got on a modern toll road, the equal of any in the states (although much better landscaped). We soon arrived in JINGSHA city, where we visited the JINGZHOU museum. There we saw numerous relics of the Chu dynasty, as this was the ancient center of the Three Kingdoms. There were antique silks and lovely laquerwork, but most interesting was the naturally mummified body of an old alcoholic nobleman, known as the Western Han Corpse. It's stained bright red from the

cinnabar used to preserve it, and is displayed under glass with the internal organs artfully arranged next to it. There's a small theatre on the grounds, where a musical troupe performs a traditional Chu music show using gongs, lutes and drums. The show was wonderful, and we gave them a standing ovation.

WUHAN We ended up in WUHAN, and spent the night on the Princess Elaine, the sister ship of the Sheena. Captain Mao went all out with dinner, wine and even free karaoke that night. We had a memorable last night, singing bad pop songs until the wee hours. The next morning I flew out, and 23 hours later was home, thinking back on one of the most memorable three weeks of my life, and wondering how I could ever afford to develop 35 rolls of film with triple prints.

China was a marvelous experience, and I look forward to going back and seeing even more of that enormous country. I've now mastered the art of chopsticks, know basic etiquette, and am working on my car horn honking and spitting skills. I'm ready!

I hope everyone has a truly wonderful holiday season, and that those of you in the area get a chance to drop by my open house/tree viewing. As always, it will be held the last Saturday before Christmas (December 23), beginning at eight pm. The holiday cheer, vodka and Bailey's will flow! See you there!

In closing, I apologize for the length of this year's missive, but there's just so much to say. I regret having to leave out so many interesting things I saw and experienced this year. On the plus side, you must admit this letter is highly legible. And, when you get right down to it, you don't *have* to read this.

I'm signing this with my chop--the Chinese bit is supposed to be my full name transliterated into mandarin Chinese. For all I really know, it could say "foreign devil tourist we overcharged immensely".

Keep in touch!

