

Greetings!

Several summers ago, I used an early 13th century poem that I'd enjoyed in college as the message on my answering machine. Those of you who called then may remember "Sumer is icumen in..." by Anonymous. Recently, while glancing through a book of quotations (it gets really quiet at work some days, and we don't have internet access to *really* waste time effectively), I found an early 20th century response by Ezra Pound, which I felt would be an apropos way of starting this letter.

Winter is icummen in
Lhude sing Goddam,
Raineth drop and staineth slop,
And how the wind doth ramm!
Sing: Goddam

Let me start this year by saying that it was really hard to get in the proper mood to write a Christmas letter when it was sunny and sixty degrees¹ out, as it was until about two days ago. It's now gotten quite a bit colder and wetter out, sort of a British winter (see above). My alyssum is still in full, fragrant bloom, and the primroses are budding and flowering. La Niña, and her older sibling, El Niño, have wreaked havoc with the normal progression of seasons here in Michigan. Last winter, for the first time in my memory, the lake never actually froze. Bits of it iced over, but it was never the proper sort of ice that one could walk, skate, or snowmobile² on. On the plus side, there were no unsightly ice-fishing shacks out on the ice all winter. Spring came early, with most of my bulbs and perennials blooming up to a month too soon. Summer, as predicted, was quite hot and quite dry, a fairly severe drought. The lawn resembled the Sahara in areas, making croquet difficult.

On the positive side, I seem to finally have gotten rid of the moles. Last year's mild winter caused a huge increase in the mole population and, by the time I returned from Ukraine just after Labor Day, they had taken over the entire yard. I could no longer walk about on the lawn without sinking into their tunnels. My annuals were being pushed out of the ground, and bulbs failing to grow. I tried caster oil spray, but it just moved them around a bit, causing production of *more tunnels!* Enough was enough, so I finally called in the mole terminators; they came, they saw, and they kicked some serious mole butt. The moles are gone, not only from my yard, but from Carolyn's next door (they had tunneled under her driveway and invaded her yard). We can now play croquet and picnic in peace.

This fall has been absolutely gorgeous—sunny, warm, and colorful. It's supposed to be bitterly cold, wet and gray, and it just hasn't been. I don't want to complain, but it's just really hard to get in the Christmas spirit when it feels like spring. The meteorologists predict that soon all this pleasant weather will end, and we will have a bitterly cold and particularly snowy winter. I won't mind—my Jeep's got 4WD and I've got lots of firewood stacked and ready for the fireplace. Bring on the cocoa and the Bailey's³! What's the point of living in the Midwest if you can't

¹That's sixty degrees Fahrenheit; for those of you living in the metric world, that's 15°C+. Not the sort of temperatures that connote Christmas for most of us, except maybe New Zealanders.

²I must add, though, that it was not necessarily a bad thing not to have snowmobiles roaring outside my bedroom window at all hours of the night, going to and from the lake.

³And I've plenty to spare. Every Christmas I mix up about seven to eight gallons of the stuff to consume and give as gifts. For those of you who have asked, or who might be interested, this is the recipe. I got it from a UP cookbook. Those yoopers sure know a lot of drinks recipes!

Bailey's Irish Cream

1 can sweetened condensed milk (14 oz.)
1 cup whipping cream or half-and-half
4 eggs
2 Tablespoons chocolate syrup
2 teaspoons instant coffee
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

experience the proper progression of the seasons?

If this impeachment process goes on much longer, I may need something a lot stronger than the Bailey's, say, perhaps a liter or two of Absolut. Part of the advantage of travelling extensively this year (I was away from home some thirteen weeks) has been avoiding "Monicagate". While in Ukraine this summer, I spent two weeks at a camp in the Carpathians where there was no radio, television or newspaper. It was heaven! Those pundits who say that this "process" has made us the laughingstock of the world may be right. In Ukraine, at least, they would gladly trade us their president for ours⁴. The main question they had for me was this: "What's wrong with your President? He's the most powerful man in the world! Couldn't he find someone more attractive than Monica?"

Yes, Gus, I know, the Republicans claim that this process is not about sex, but about lying to the American Public. Goodness me! A *politician* who *lied* to the people! Say it ain't so! But the Republicans *would* have to say so. After all, they *are* the party of family values; that is, if you consider infidelity, divorce and trophy second wives to be family values⁵. I think it's touching how concerned they all are about poor Paula Jones' sexual harassment suit, and I'm sure Anita Hill is particularly touched by all this concern. And don't get me started on Ken Starr, but what ever happened to Whitewater? Travelgate? Filegate? Iran-Contra? (Oops, sorry....that was a Republican scandal. But then how could selling arms to Iran, funnelling the profits, in contravention to American law, to the fascists in Nicaragua, and then lying about it to Congress and the American Public possibly be as serious as oral sex in the Oval office? I mean, *really*!) And what does a twenty five year old land deal have to do with a twenty one year old intern? And who really killed Vince Foster?⁶ Hasn't he strayed from the original focus of his investigation just a

1/2 teaspoon almond extract
Vodka

Place all the above ingredients except the vodka into the blender and blend. Pour 1 cup of vodka into a quart mason jar, then add the mixture to it until full. (The original recipe calls for whiskey, but I find the vodka gives the Bailey's a much more pleasant, mellow taste. Use whichever you like. It's not worth using any premium brands; the cheapest off-label your local liquor store sells is fine.) Please note that Mason jars are not mandatory; I use them because they come free with my favorite brands of spaghetti sauce. Use expensive fancy bottles if you like; it'll taste no better, however.

Although the alcohol content should fully chemically cook the ingredients and preserve them, I've had a few bottles go bad when left unrefrigerated for extended periods of time (read: months), so I would strongly suggest refrigerating until fully consumed. Serving suggestions include straight, over ice, with coffee (decadent) or with hot cocoa (really decadent) and whipped cream (trés decadent!).

⁴They'd probably settle for Hillary. She came to Lviv last summer, and there was a huge reception for her at the Opera House. According to a witness, she received numerous standing ovations, the loudest coming when she spoke part of her speech in Ukrainian. Apparently that is something Mrs. Kuchma, a Russophile, and the Ukrainian President's wife, couldn't be bothered to do. Hillary was also much more tastefully dressed, according to my informant. She's been on enough stages to learn that one doesn't wear short skirts when seated on the dais.

⁵Consider the record:

Henry Hyde, Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, currently perse...er prosecuting Clinton: 5 year affair with a married woman; her marriage ended in divorce.

Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the House: divorced first wife, presenting her with divorce papers while she was in the hospital recovering from cancer surgery. Also rumored to be stingy with child support.

Dan Burton, Representative: was the loudest voice calling for Clinton's resignation before knowledge of his illegitimate son became public record.

Bob Dole, would-be President: divorced his first wife, the woman who nursed him through his long recovery from WWII injuries, to marry a wealthy socialite.

Ronald Reagan, former President: divorced, various children in rehab and/or prison.

Bob Livingston, the almost Speaker of the House. *How many infidelities did you say there were? Too bad about that job!*

⁶Ken Starr's current theory is Colonel Mustard in the Library with the Dagger.

little bit? I, personally can think of many better ways to spend forty seven million dollars than to prove that a politician lied about having sex⁷.

But enough of that. Let me just add that I applaud the people of the great state of Minnesota for voting in Jesse Ventura, as their new governor. What do you want to bet he doesn't get many arguments from his legislature? If only we here in Michigan could trade in Jeff Fieger (trial lawyer and defender of Dr. Jack Kevorkian) or John Engler (career politician and shill for the religious right, who would sell our natural patrimony for a mess of pottage) for a libertarian, conservationist, pro-choice former Navy SEAL, professional wrestler and radio talk show host. It certainly couldn't get much worse than a passel of Republicans running wild in Lansing.

I, a former Luddite⁸, continue to explore the wonders of modern technology. This year I not only acquired a fax machine, but went on line! Whew! The pace of change is just exhilarating! My fax machine, which is on the same line as my telephone, is connected with a fancy switch box that can immediately tell if an incoming call is fax or voice, and route it to the proper instrument. This *usually* works. I get most of the faxes sent me; occasionally, though, I still get messages on my answering machine that sound like a whale with laryngitis. If you should feel the need to fax me, you can do so at the following number:

248-360-4929

As long as you're updating your address book, check to see if you have my correct address. Judging by the Christmas cards I've received so far this year, not all of you have its most recent and final incarnation. Although I have stayed put the last nine years, my mailing address has changed some three or four times (just more government efficiency). I still get letters with two-changes-previous mailing addresses or zip codes. My correct mailing address is

2401 Burleigh Avenue

West Bloomfield MI 48324-3623

The post office is very particular about the address being exactly correct, especially if it is on a piece of important mail (like a paycheck or season tickets to the symphony), and will return the mail to sender. Of course, if it is really, truly junk mail, it somehow *always* makes it into my mail box⁹.

This year I continued to explore the fascinating world of computers. I, personally, am quite ready for Y2K, as I've always only owned Macs, which have no Y2K problem. This year I realized it was time to upgrade from my trusty old Performa. It was reliable, but was just getting too slow to run my new CD-ROMs, and the hard drive was always full. After visiting Kwabena's house, I developed a case of G3-envy. A few days later, while "just looking" at the CompUSA, I surrendered to the inevitable and became the proud owner of a kick-ass 300MHz, 8 Gb G3 with a built in Zip drive and 64x CD-ROM drive. Wow! It really cranks! While in such a modernizing mood, it seemed only natural to buy a modem and get on-line, so I did. My ISP is Earthlink, and my e-mail address is

lubap@earthlink.net

If you are on-line, please e-mail me a short note, just to say "howdy", so I can add you to my address book and we can communicate rapidly, frequently and efficiently; that is, if I can remember to check my mailbox! On the downside, this does mean fewer pretty stamps to collect.

There were no new additions this year in my immediate family, but I've become an auntie again several times over. My friends Jamie and Paul had a little boy, Benjamin Kipp Ellenbogen, this past summer, and we bonded well during our ne meeting. Uncle Pam and Scoey also had a little "Fighting Irishman" this summer. He's Patrick Joseph Reilly (PJ for short), and his room is all decked out in Notre Dame memorabilia. He is a generous soul, and loves to share his food with everyone, especially after he's eaten it. If nature runs true to course, and he has a serious bit of

⁷Of course, that all depends upon how you define sex. I've spent enough time with enough lawyers to know that Paula Jones' lawyers (which set?) did a piss-poor job of defining sex. As I have been told by countless lawyers, it is not one's duty to help the opposition lawyers if they screw up; and it is most certainly not a crime to be evasive in answering lawyers' questions as long as one does not actually lie. In fact, it is mandatory.

Then again, maybe the Republicans are just jealous because their scandals *don't* involve sex?

⁸The Luddites were organized bands of rioters in the early 19th century in the North of England. They were led by a Ned aka "King" Ludd, and were opposed to the Industrial Revolution, as they felt that modern machinery would put craftsmen out of work and lower the quality of goods. It did. Their solution was to destroy the factories and the machinery. They did. They lost anyway.

⁹The only exception seems to be Christmas cards. Maybe the Grinch who works there has the season off, or maybe they're just too busy to get obstreperous, but your cards do seem to arrive. Of course, if they didn't, how would I really know?

adolescent rebellion someday, he'll end up as a liberal Democrat and U of M fan, who's selected Bill Clinton as a political and moral role model.. One can only hope....

But scariest of all, Garry and Loraine had a child this year, a little girl named Elizabeth Victoria (not Shauna) Jones, and whom we all refer to as Lizzie (as in Borden). This child will probably grow up to be a modern-day Marilyn Munster. The bags of chicken bones in the garage, skeleton lights and a full suit of armor in the family room, a fish pond in the basement, and concrete corpses, graveyard and Easter Island heads in the back yard will all seem quite everyday and normal to her. She'll consider white bread, finished kitchens, and sofa paintings to be incredibly exotic. She might even grow up to be a moderate Republican!

Bill and Laurie's kids are doing well. Kalyna (age six), aka "Miss Barbie", is in real kindergarten this year, and Nick (almost four), aka "Destructor" is in Preschool. They are also spending their Saturdays in Ukrainian School with Tyotyta Vera, their third most favorite person in the world (after Baba and me, of course). Unlike their male parent, they *really* love Ukrainian school, and can't wait to go every week. Kalyna even passed on having a sleepover party for her sixth birthday, because she didn't want to chance missing Ukrainian school the next day! They are learning the alphabet, know their numbers and body part names, and have picked up a few songs.

Fuzz (aka Maria) is growing by leaps and bounds. She is 18 months old, fully ambulatory and quite opinionated. The child has a temper; although still largely preverbal, she makes her opinions well known. It's amazing how much she can do with a few well placed "uh-uhs" and a piercing shriek or two. Her vocabulary is growing; besides "uppa" (lift me up), and "bupup" (I want my juice bottle *now*), she can also say "tyotyti" (auntie). In the words of Scrooge, "An intelligent (girl)! A remarkable (girl)!" She is also nature girl and always wants to be outside. She'll stand at the doorwall and scream until she is let out. I think she learned that bit from the dog.

My parents are well, too. My mom had foot surgery in early November, and just had the cast off. She's stuck with hobbling around for the moment. The grandkids have adapted well, all three of them practice their gymnastics on her walker. Baba waited until the growing season was done, so the surgery wouldn't interfere with her yard work, but I've missed her being around to help with decorating the tree¹⁰.

I, on the other hand, am now officially "over the hill", having turned forty¹¹ this year. It was fairly atraumatic, even if Rick and Lorrie gifted me with the black over-the-hill rose in honor of the occasion¹². My family shocked me, though, with a surprise birthday party. I had absolutely no idea that it was in the works; having it six weeks after my birthday certainly added element of surprise. I almost didn't go because I was scheduled to work that Sunday, and didn't understand why my Mom was so upset that I might miss a barbecue at my brother's house.

As you may have guessed, I haven't yet set off on that trip down the Pan American highway. I still want to travel it, from Alaska to Patagonia, but have decided to wait a few years. Quitting my job last summer (1997) put a crimp in my plans, and I've decided that driving it alone would just be too difficult at this time. Is there anyone out there who wants to take some six months to a year to do this trip with me? I have the Jeep..... Let me know.

I have done a good bit of travelling this year, in between working at Huron Valley Hospital as a house physician (glorified resident). Since leaving Ford, I've been able to take enough time off to really enjoy my travels, and not just do rushed little trips with huge amounts of overtime (unpaid) prior to leaving and upon return. What's the point of working long hours and being absolutely miserable and not getting a chance to stop and smell the freesias? There's more to life than a large paycheck. Or so I keep reminding myself.

INDIA

I spent a part of last winter in the south of India, learning about tropical diseases, public health, and vegetarian cuisine. Last October, when I was visiting Jane in Brisbane, she asked if I'd be interested in going on a travel medicine

¹⁰And I've *really* missed her. Without the help of my folks, the putting up of the tree became a week long process, instead of the usual three to four days. My Dad usually tests and fixes all the strings of lights (I used some forty this year, ranging from 35 to 100 lights long, this year on the tree). My Mom helps me wrap the lights on the branches and hang the ornaments (some 1000 or more) and the tinsel (3600 strands, I you trust the count on the box).

¹¹ Although, by Republican standards I am a mere spring chicken and practically a saint. After all, Henry Hyde, that paragon of morals and family values, defined the five year long affair he had with a married woman, while married himself, and which began at age forty two, as a mere "youthful indiscretion".

¹²It is mine to keep until I find a suitable person to pass it along to. Guess what Beth's getting next June 11th? And, since Beth states she doesn't intend to ever get any older than forty, I guess she'll get to keep it forever.

course in **Madras** in February. It was being organized by friends of ours in Glasgow, and was part of the correspondence Diploma in Travel Medicine that Jane was doing. It sounded like fun, so I signed up.

I arrived in **Chennai** (the Indian name for Madras) at 3 am, several days before anyone else in my group. Winter is the wedding season in the South of India; thousands of expatriate Indians fly home to either participate in or attend weddings. (I know this, because any given day there were at least four of them in progress at our hotel.) It becomes difficult to book a seat on a flight in, and as I had done so quite late, I took what I could get.

After spending part of the day changing money (which requires visiting three desks and dealing with some six people at the bank) and shopping for salwars (those pant suits Indian women wear, they are quite cool and incredibly comfortable), I hired a car and driver, and went to visit **Vedanthangal**, a bird sanctuary some seventy kilometers out of town. The car was an Ambassador, which is an Indian-built Morris Minor. In the late 1950s, when they quit making them in England, the entire plant was packed up and the equipment shipped to India, where they are making them still. The car is huge, inefficient, and pollutes horribly, but every mechanic in India has parts and can fix it. It is thus an eminently practical vehicle. It can also sit six to seven adults comfortably.

All of the roads in **Tamil Nadu** state are under construction; this was true of the road I took out to Vedanthangal. It was the National Highway, but in many areas was down to two rutted lanes. I can honestly say that the roads here were almost as bad as the ones in Michigan under Engler¹³, and they have no freeze-thaw cycle¹⁴.

Vedanthangal has been a protected area (no shooting) for at least 250 years. The sanctuary is actually an old village "tank", a water pond built many centuries ago to collect water in the rainy season for use in the dry. It has become a huge rookery, with thousands of nesting pairs and young. These are not cute little songbirds, either, but large water birds—storks, ibises, cormorants, herons, egrets, spoonbills, pelicans and various ducks. The birds arrive in October, breed twice, and leave again at the end of March. As the adult birds fly out to find food for the young, their droppings fertilize the nearby fields where they forage. When the pond dries up in the summer, the remaining sludge is rich in guano and is used as fertilizer. Ecologically and economically, everyone wins.

I spent the afternoon observing the birdlife and sharing my binoculars with my driver and the rangers, all of whom were fascinated by them. I was amazed by the fact that they could identify the twenty seven different species we saw without them. We walked along the shady bund (the bank of the pond), and climbed several observation towers. Later, a few families and a school group showed up. Later still, the cows¹⁵ came home along the bund, which is also the path between two villages.

The following day, I attempted to visit the sanctuary in **Pulicat**, which is on the border of Tamil Nadu and Anhar Pradesh states. There is a huge lagoon with large flocks of flamingoes. As any seasoned birder knows, the best time to view birds is in the early morning, before it gets too hot out. In the tropics, morning comes very early, and the heat of the day comes quickly, so I arranged for my car to come quite early. It didn't. After several phone calls, the taxi finally arrived, but then he had no idea where we were going. Once he did, we headed north on the coastal road, which was slow, and I got to see the hovels of the fishermen up close and smell the garbage, reeking of dead fish. Further out of town, the urban sprawl continued, with no pleasant landscapes at all, only mud huts with thatch roofs and "factories". Everywhere there was red dust and exhaust fumes. Every now and again, on some scummy-looking pond, there would be the most beautiful looking fuschia-colored water lilies. After several hours of driving, and long after the sun had come up, we arrived in the town of Pulicat, whereupon the driver inquired to which

¹³John Engler, now three-time governor of Michigan, has always prided himself on not raising taxes while in office. Under his stewardship, the roads in the state of Michigan fell into such a state of disrepair, that we became the laughingstock of the nation. The voters finally got so mad that they passed a tax initiative to raise gasoline taxes (ours had been amongst the lowest in the nation) and designate all the money be spent on the roads. Engler then proceeded to spend it on construction of a new highway that nobody wanted. It wasn't until 1998, a gubernatorial election year, that any serious road repairs were begun. So many projects were started at the same time, that it was practically impossible to get anywhere in the Detroit area because of construction detours and delays. But he got re-elected, largely because he ran against Dr. Kevorkian's lawyer, after the Democratic political machine was unable to field anyone with a personality in the primary.

¹⁴Governor Engler's long-standing excuse for the poor state of our roads. Yes, that might explain why our roads are so much worse than Florida's, but what about Minnesota?

¹⁵I discovered, to my surprise, that, unlike their American cousins, Indian cows are quite political. They express their party affiliation by the color of their horns. There seemed to be quite a few Congress (I) cows about that afternoon.

address I wished to be driven. After he failed to understand what I meant by "sanctuary", he drove me to the local Catholic church, where the priest, who was apparently the only English speaker in town, dwelled.

I was cordially invited in, offered sweet, milky tea, and we discussed the situation. I was, we discovered after examining a map, in quite the wrong place. It was possible to arrange a boat to take me to the lagoon, but, after several phone calls, it was determined that it was too late in the day, as the flamingoes would have flown off by now. The priest graciously offered me an alternate itinerary. As I was already there, why not take a grand tour of Pulicat? A young guide, Michael, was found, and we were off. First to the Dutch cemetery; Pulicat had had a Dutch trading enclave here, much like the English in Madras, and many had perished here from tropical diseases. Next, we drove down to the river, took a boat across, walked along a narrow spit of sand to the light house, and then down to the Bay of Bengal and the huge wide beach or the Coromandel coast on the other side. It was quite pretty, and quite hot—there was no shade on the beach, only in the villages. We then retraced our steps, and back in Pulicat town, stopped at the market, which was mostly fish, and one quick glance was enough to make me a vegetarian. It is incredible how many flies can gather in one place, lured by the siren scent of fish. Back at the church, I was introduced by the priest to the members of the parish St. Vincent de Paul society, served more tea, and then said my goodbyes and went on my way. We drove back via a slightly different route; in many places the road was largely theoretical, piles of paving bricks and red dust, but we did avoid the fetid coast.

Once back, I washed the road dust off of me, cooled off a bit, and rested. Later that night, having donned my salwar, I greeted my fellow conference-goers at the airport (I had been asked to go along with our hosts, as I was the only one who knew any of the Australians and could identify them). It was an early morning thing again, but it's so nice and cool then that you just don't mind. The next two days were spent getting acquainted my fellow conference-goers, shopping and seeing a few of the sights. I was the token American, and Jane was one of two participants from Australia. Marlene, a nurse working in Saudi Arabia, was the lone Canadian. Jane 2, a former expat nurse now doing industrial medicine in the North of England, turned out to work for the Kendal Shoe Company¹⁶. There were John and Lorna, friends of ours from Glasgow (Lorna runs the department), Eric and Robin, two physicians and lecturers, and some other staff from the U of G. Also along was Anneliese, who was Robin's charming if forceful Danish wife, and kept him in line. (Robin, like many English men, was incapable of dressing properly or otherwise functioning in society without adequate female supervision. He'd much rather be off gathering moths or beetles or some such.)

We shopped, getting to know most of the handcraft and book shops quite well. Our group had a mission-India Barbies. Mattel had come out with a line of ethnic Barbie dolls, wearing native costume and nose rings. We must have bought out the entire supply in a several mile radius of the hotel. By the end of our stay, shopkeepers were bringing them by the hotel for us to buy. The other women also followed my example, and bought salwars; by our final night, we all dressed in them.

We also, as a group, took a day trip to the temple complex at **Mahaballipuram**, which proved to me the old maxim "Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun." You would think a group of travel medicine professionals would be more attuned to sun safety and heat stroke. The temples at Mahaballipuram were of two sets—the beautifully carved stone temples in the hills, and the slowly eroding temples by the sea. There had once been a whole line of temples on the shore; now only one remains, fenced and walled and but a glimmer of its former glory. The rock-cut temples are quite intact, and the carvings quite intricate. Yet these were but a hint of the temples in the weeks to come, for we were in the Cauveri delta, the temple center of Tamil Nadu, the temple state. We spent the afternoon not contemplating philosophy or our navels, but seeking shade and water—it gets pretty hot in February in the south of India.

Then the work began. Over the next few days, we attended lectures in **Chennai** on the following topics:

"Water, Sewage & Environmental Health in Developing Countries"

"HIV/AIDS Scenario in India"

"Vaccines in India: An Update"

"Snake Anti-venin Production Techniques"

We toured the **water works**, most of whose buildings are pre-Independence, and learned about the catchment area and purification of drinking water for the city of Chennai. We also got to tour a **sewage treatment plant**. One of our most interesting field trips was to the **Vaccine Institute**, where we had lectures and got to tour the facilities. We saw the stables where the horses were kept (horse serum), and even got a demonstration of the milking of venom from the

¹⁶Christobel's in-laws live in the Lakes District, near Kendal, and I've been to the factory outlet store several times. Once we got talking, I found that she's even eaten frequently at the Rowan Tree, a restaurant in Askrigg (North Yorkshire, James Herriot country), that's owned by friend's of mine and Jane's. Incidentally the food is excellent, and I highly recommend eating there if you're ever in the neighborhood. One degree of separation!

poisonous snakes¹⁷ for the production of anti-venin. In the evenings, we attended a formal conference (filmed for local television), a dance exhibition (at a Budd-Chiari conference), and a private showing of a Bollywood flick¹⁸. We also got a tour of the city hospital, where we saw lots of interesting (to me) cases—tetanus, leprosy, spinal tuberculosis, primary syphilis, leptospirosis, Budd-Chiari syndrome and hepatocellular carcinoma¹⁹. I'd never seen actual cases of these before, only read about them. We also got to see the rabies room, where patients with rabies are securely locked away. Once the disease manifests itself, it is 100% fatal, and it is important to keep the patient from infecting others. (As you may have guessed, I'm now in the process of being immunized for rabies in preparation for my next trip to India.)

After our time in Chennai, we took the train to **Vellore**, home of CMC-H (Christian Medical College and Hospital), where we spent the next few days going to lectures and visiting their medical facilities. The college, which was founded earlier this century by Ida Scudder, the daughter of American missionaries²⁰, sits on a beautiful campus just outside the city with lots of birds, flowers, monkeys and trees. We learned about the health care delivery system in India, and about infectious diseases (water-borne and arboviruses). We visited the hospital (lots of relatives around to feed and minister to the patients, and monkeys in the rafters), several ICUs, and I had a chance to visit with the obstetricians. It was all quite fascinating. We also took a trip out into the field to one of the rural clinics, and learned how the majority of India's people receive medical care. I was quite impressed with CMC-H, and with the wonderful staff there. If all goes as planned, I will be returning there this coming January to spend two months working as a volunteer physician.

Vellore city itself was quite fun. We visited the fort and (surprise!) temple complex there, and wandered through the markets. One of our assignments was to visit a pharmacy, and note the easy availability of most medications over-the-counter, based on the recommendations of the counter help. Many Indians cannot afford to see a doctor, and depend on these clerks for their medication needs. When queried, they were helpful, didn't prescribe any dangerous medications, and referred more serious-sounding problems to a doctor. But then again, we were gringos. Robin and I spent one evening up on one of the hills near town, one of the **Eastern Ghats**, collecting moths. The locals were all quite amused, helped him set up his equipment (a light and a white sheet), and then invited us home for refreshments afterwards. It was an interesting evening.

All good things must come to an end, and we had to return to Chennai, where we spent one further day at conferences (learning all about the AIDS situation in India—dismal, and about AIDS education techniques), and then had a final gala evening at the MGM Beach Resort complex. There was a show put on for us by medical students, a dance interpretation of India's struggle for independence, followed by wonderful food and the presentation of awards, and a chance to go wading in the warm waters of the bay of Bengal at night. Most of the rest of the group left India at this point; Jane and I had a week left and set off to see Tamil Nadu state in our large (aren't they all?), dark, plush-lined Ambassador, complete with Surya, our driver. We loaded all our stuff in, and set off for Pondichery. Or so we thought.

We fought our way, through the ever-present traffic, south along Mount Road. About an hour later we stopped, in the suburbs, at his house. Surya invited us in; his wife served us drinks and biscuits, while he packed for the trip. She told us they were newlyweds, an arranged love match; they'd just married this past December (it was that wedding time of year), and that this would be their first time apart. She showed us their wedding album. We promised her we'd keep a close eye on her husband and make sure he behaved himself.

We set off again. We travelled quickly down the road to Mahaballipuram, as it was an incredibly good road

¹⁷The "Big Four" of poisonous snakes in India are the cobra, the krait, Russell's viper, and the saw-scaled viper. We got to view all four of these, and then the handlers quite flashily dropped one on the ground, causing us all to scatter quite rapidly. As the floor was quite slippery, the snake couldn't really go anywhere, and we were quite safe. Polyvalent anti-venin to all four of these snakes is produced at the institute in horses.

¹⁸ The film was titled "Gupt", ran three and a half hours, and involved a lot of singing, costume changes and sexy gyrations, but no kissing. It was amazing how much I could follow despite not knowing a word of Hindi.

¹⁹This is very common in India, and is a result of chronic infection with Hepatitis B, which is also very common in India. Have you been immunized?

²⁰ She was appalled by the poor quality of medical care available to women and children in India, and returned to the States and obtained a medical degree. She then founded, in Vellore, a medical College and hospital dedicated to the care of women and Children and run entirely by women.

for India²¹. We veered right just before Mahaballipuram proper, continuing along a particularly fine road through the Cauveri delta which was not on my map. There was coastline on our left, rice paddies on our right, and lots of rivers and fine new bridges. It was a beautiful and pleasant drive on what was obviously a brand new road.

As we approached **Pondichery**, the traffic grew heavier and the gringo count rose. With the exception of two temples²², this was the only other place on our travels that we saw a significant number of non-Indians. As Jane pointed out, this particular batch did not reflect well on us, as they were not practicing sun or motorcycle safety. Most were wearing minimal amounts of clothing (in the hot noonday sun) and not wearing any protective gear! Shocking! Absolutely shocking! The gringos were here because of Auroville²³ and the beaches. Jane was quite looking forward to Pondi, because it is a former French colony, and she is quite the Francophile. I think she had visions of chatting away with the locals in French and eating lots of lovely French food. Such are our illusions.

According to my guide book, the only French vestiges left in Pondi are the hats worn by the policemen. The book was wrong; we ate baguettes, had some decent coffee, and Jane managed to find a French novel in a shop. In addition, the service was generally atrocious. Otherwise, Pondi is about as French as Detroit (pronounced as "day-twa" by those in the know). Since Independence, Pondi has become quite Indian, and adamantly so. On the seafront, the French spent a lot of time and effort building a huge platform, the Place de la Republique. The Indians have placed a monumental statue of Gandhi on it.

From Pondi we continued our trek south through the **Cauveri delta** to Point Calimere, a bird sanctuary and wildlife refuge. It was a long, dusty, hot drive—the good road stopped at Pondi. We drove on a patchwork of roads, few of them signposted, and had a few fairly rough detours, and may have forded a river or two. We passed through small town after small town, all bedecked with electoral paraphernalia—streamers, posters, statues, flags and illuminations. Frequently we came across campaign vehicles, often colorful, highly decorated motor-rickshaws fitted out with a huge loudspeaker.

It was rice harvesting time, and the harvest was on in earnest. The harvest seems to be carried out, to a large extent, along the sides of the paved roads. First, the rice is scythed, then it is spread out on the pavement, several feet deep. All sorts of vehicles run over it, threshing the grain. The straw (which will be used for animal feed and fuel) is then piled into huge stacks, while the grain is winnowed by pouring it through the air, onto the pavement. The grains land below, the chaff blows away. The grain remaining is then spread out thinly on the pavement, with rocks and bricks demarcating its edges (this is most assuredly *not* meant to be driven on). Several people sit near the grain, watching it dry, and chasing away the ubiquitous house crows (which none-the-less seem quite well fed). Once dried, it is poured into sacks, which are then piled along side the road until the trucks come by to take them away to the cities.

On our way to Point Calimere, we stopped at the pilgrimage town of **Velanganni**. It is actually a fairly large city situated on the Coromandel coast, with a large, blindingly white cathedral dedicated to Our Lady of Good Health. People travel here from all over the country to pray for medical miracles. They light candles, have their heads shaven²⁴, and leave models of their affected bodily parts (those who've been cured often leave gold or silver ones!) There are many shops that cater to these needs (candles, medallions, flower garlands and other offerings) and several tonsure shops. The cathedral, although Catholic, attracts quite an ecumenical crowd—a miracle is a miracle, and affordable good health care is hard to find (as we had all previously discovered).

²¹ After spending two and a half weeks travelling around and being involved in various official activities, I've come up with a new national slogan: "India.....no sense of urgency". What do you think?

²² Madurai and Tiruchirapalli

²³ An ideal community founded by "the Mother" in the 1960s, Auroville was meant to be a planned town, peopled by international volunteers, who would live in harmony with nature, living off of the land and involved in sustainable industries, and spend a lot of time in contemplation. It had 5000 members when founded, and was meant to grow to 50,000. The central plaza/theatre was built, and it was meant to be ringed with satellite communities, in a sort of celestial design. Currently there are about 3500 hundred people living there, in a few sets of scattered buildings, and they've been bailed out by foreign governments several times.

²⁴ Somebody later explained the phenomenon of tonsure/head-shaving to me. It is done as a form of sacrifice, usually, but not always, in answer to a prayer. The one having the head shaven is not necessarily the supplicant, but could be a parent, spouse, sibling or child. The bright yellow sandalwood paste they put on their heads after shaving is not for cosmetic reasons, but to protect the newly-shaven skin from the sun and irritation.

Point Calimere itself is one of those middle-of-nowhere end-of-the-road kind of places. It is meant to be a wildlife refuge and bird sanctuary. The government built a forest department rest house, but then failed to maintain it. We found it, and although it looked remarkably deserted, we were informed there was no room at the inn. As we waited in the lobby with couple of guys from the RSPB²⁵, who had arrived just before us, for the arrival of the head man, we saw man washing sinks in the decorative fountain out front. Eventually, the head “ranger” arrived, and told us that there were no rooms available, because there was a convention arriving the next day—a delegation of his superior officers. In preparation for that, they had completely torn the place apart and were attempting to clean it and put it back together. Since we were only staying one night, they relented and gave the four us rooms; and, as Jane and I were putatively ladies, we got the room with a *door lock*. That night we explored the nightlife of the town of **Kodikkarai** and provided amusement to the local population as we ate at the only restaurant in town: wooden trestle tables, banana leaf plates, fried eggs and chilies and fresh roti. The eggs were “musical”—the cook poured the eggs and fried onions onto a heavy metal pan, and then chopped them with cleavers that made a bell-like sound. It was all quite tasty.

The following morning we went out with our guide, seven of us piled into the Ambassador. We watched the sun rise over a fishing village on the Bay of Bengal, and then went out to the lagoon to watch birds. We saw many varieties, although not in any great numbers. Many of the birds were vacationing Brits (according to our friends in the RSPB). Pt. Calimere is renowned for its huge flocks of flamingoes, but we could only spot a small, distant flock²⁶. We saw what we could, and then went on to the wildlife refuge, still in our Ambassador. There we drove on sandy tracks and observed many blackbuck, who were completely oblivious to us²⁷, at work and play. They are quite graceful creatures with dangerous-looking horns. Several of the males were butting heads, competing for the female—some things are universal, are they not? We stopped on the beach, wandered about and examined the remains of a Vijayanagar (14th-16th century) lighthouse. It was all quite pleasant. And then we were on the road again.

Jane and I then continued through the Cauveri delta region—quite lovely, with many rivers, fairly narrow, in wide, sandy river beds. They were constantly in use, for laundry, bathing, watering cattle. The landscape was that of rice paddies, in all their stages, from the planting of young shoots in flooded fields, to the lushly indescribable green of the young fields, to the mature fields in harvest. We were often stuck behind election vehicles or the ubiquitous rice trucks, so we had plenty of time to observe it all.

We learned a lot about the rules of the road in India (stop that snickering—there are actually lots of rules!). What appears to the casual observer to be complete mayhem is actually quite a complex system of signal and reply, of which the horn is an integral part. The drivers use the horn to communicate their presence to each other, ask permission to pass/overtake, be told when it is safe to do so, and just to say “howdy”. We also learned why they paint those lines down the middle of the road—sitting in the driver’s seat, you line up the hood ornament with the lines of the road, and can thus drive right down the middle of it! One is supposed to drive on the left side of the road, although it appears to be purely voluntary.

We made a short stop in **Thanjavur** (Tanjore). It appeared quite a pleasant town—very colonial looking, with wide boulevards and a much slower pace of life (and a population of only 200K). The temple²⁸ was quite attractive, and had at its center a huge statue of a “cow” (you may have seen it on postcards—it is the second largest Nandi bull in all of India, and was carved from a single huge stone, which was somehow dragged to Tamil Nadu from the Deccan Plateau). I learned why temples are fairly deserted at midday, though—the hot sun makes the pavement just too

²⁵Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

²⁶ The area around the sanctuary is used for making sea salt and brine; a waste product is somewhat desalinated water. According to our guide, one of the companies has been illegally pumping this water into the lagoon, raising water levels and decreasing salinity. Thus the scarcity of shorebirds—no shallows for wading, and no available food (their prey being salt-water creatures). The Republican party (aka Tories) must be in power locally!

²⁷ A birder friend of mine likes to go birdwatching in cars, because the birds are not afraid of them—cars just don’t register in their species memory. People and animals are a danger, and are fled from, but motor vehicles, being much more recent and not predator as such, are just ignored.

²⁸You may note that I mention a lot of temples in my letter. This is because there are an awful lot of temples in Tamil Nadu, which is the temple capitol of all of India. The temple complexes are quite remarkable, even in fairly small towns. The scope of it all reminds me of the Gothic cathedrals of Europe. I suppose one has to do something to keep all the excess population busy, besides the civil service.

damn hot to walk on. Jane passed, but I went in and had a look 'round. I accomplished this by running quickly, on my toes, from shady spot to shady spot. I was quite happy to provide this entertainment for the locals, all of whom seem to have shoe leather on the soles of their feet. I developed blisters later that night.

All the books and everyone who we met told us that mad, mad, **Madurai** (“the largest, busiest and most aggressive of Tamil Nadu’s temple towns” according to Cadogan) was a must-see. It is a huge (1.23M population), very busy, very polluted city. I convinced Jane to let us stay at the Taj Garden Retreat, a quite posh hotel several kilometers out of town, on a hill overlooking it. There was quite a nice view of the temple, or what bits of it could be seen emerging from the dense smog. It was quite nice to breathe the clean, fresh air, and we quite enjoyed the decadence of AC, Sky TV, a bathtub with hot (running!) water, and clean linen sheets. It was a rehumanizing experience. Once cooled off, we descended back into town for a bit of shopping²⁹ and a temple visit.

The Sri Meenakshi (the fish-eyed goddess) temple is quite large, with nine gopurams (towers), all garishly painted, and a multitude of halls, shrines and colonnades. We were told that the tallest gopuram at Madurai is the tallest in all the world (although someone in Malaysia is threatening to build a taller one; those Malaysians just have to be number one in all things tall, don't they?). The temple is an active one, and is not the sort that would have been to J.C.'s liking—it is full of shops and vendors, and there's even an STD³⁰ booth inside. It's impossible to walk through without being constantly approached by touts for the various shops, both inside the complex and without (“you want postcards?”). The highlight of the temple is Shiva's nightly connubial visit to Meenakshi. He is borne, by his devotees, in a closed litter, from his temple to hers, all to the accompaniment of drums, horns and fire. It's all quite dramatic, and it is heartening to know that some marriages *do* stand the test of time.

Leaving Madurai, one enters the region of the **Western Ghats**, which are real mountains, not little worn-down hills like those bits of the Eastern Ghats near Vellore. They were beautiful, rising dramatically from the completely flat plains of the Tamil Nadu plateau. It was quite sudden, no foothills or piedmont. The juxtaposition of rice paddies and blue mountains was quite attractive. I spent most of the drive sitting quietly and watching the scenery scrolling by, all the while feeling quite ill³¹. We were on main highways here, which means the road was actually two lanes wide and reasonable well paved. Often there was even a line painted down the middle of the road. This did not mean that the traffic moved particularly fast—driving in India requires steady nerves, as most of your time is spent passing slower-moving objects, often on curves. Dogs, chickens, cows and pedestrians are constantly darting out into the road. (There must be a very strong belief in the inevitability of fate.) Jane and Surya got carried away with shopping at the roadside stands, and bought lots and lots of fruit. We ended up with masses of mandarins, bananas, pomegranates, chikkos, and custard apples, all of which were absolutely delicious.

We stopped in **Pollachi**, at the forest department offices, and booked accommodation at the lodge in **Ana Malai (Indira Gandhi) National Park** at Top Slip, and then headed up into the mountains. The drive was quite lovely, up winding roads through the woods. There was much birdsong in the air, and we could see the occasional langur hanging in a tree. No wild elephants, though. We got to the ranger station at **Top Slip**, passing several official (“urgent”) election vehicles headed out. (Considering the population of the park area, they must all have been

²⁹ There were many wonderful silk shops near the southern gate of the temple. Our driver said the prices were better in Chennai, but I found the difference to be minimal, and the selection here was fantastic. They had that wonderful two-tone silk. I bought several bolts of it for my quilter friends, and a gorgeous sari for my house. It covers the cushions of my once-ivory sofa quite well. I also learned a bit about saris. Wedding saris are the brightest, with contrasting color bands along the edges. Kanchi saris and cloth have a temple pattern woven into them; the trim resembles the towers of the temples. Most women wear cotton saris every day, and save silk for special occasions. You can also tell members of the Brahmin (highest) caste by how they wear their saris—most women drape them over the left arm so as to leave the right free for work; but the Brahmins drape them over their right.

³⁰No, not sexually transmitted disease. The ubiquitous STD signs indicate the presence of a small room with an attendant and a metered telephone, which can be used to make long distance calls in country and abroad. One of the speakers at our AIDS conference said that, about a year ago, they had a European AIDS expert visit and address their group. He had complimented them on the wonderful job of community education and outreach they were doing. "After all," he had noted, "I must have seen twenty STD clinics on my way from the airport alone!"

³¹ Caused by our Eric's favorite intestinal bug, giardia. Jane and I had recurring bouts of it, which we finally treated with that single-dose Australian wonder drug. It worked quite well, but definitely cramped my ability to enjoy the pubs back in England (tinidazole interacts with alcohol to make the user violently ill.). Nota bene: whatever my friend Christobel may claim to the contrary, cooking with wine does *not* burn off *all* of the alcohol!

carrying about two ballots each.) It took a while to get things sorted out (of course), but eventually we were settled into a deluxe suite (RS 12³² a night each) at the Bison Lodge, with two bedrooms, an entrance hall, another room, and a courtyard with toilet, shower, and sink area. We cleaned and unpacked, only to find that the lights out back didn't work. The rangers graciously moved us to another suite with lights, and stuck some late-arriving tourism students from Pondichery in our old digs. We strung up our mosquito nets (useful things, those) and went to bed to the sounds of the jungle at night and a large raucous party across the way (an engineers' convention). But, for the first time since we'd come to India, it was actually cool outside!

The next morning our guide took us out (later than planned, of course) on a forced march through the jungle. He was kind enough to point out some birds, but spent a lot of time showing us spots where animals had been seen in the past (tigers, bison, elephants). None, of course, graced us with their presence that day. We did, however, see wild chickens (jungle fowl) and hear a great pied hornbill flying away³³. At last we surrendered and, wilted by the hot sun, retreated to our cabin. Jane, having come down with my malady, spent the rest of the day sleeping. I took off with our driver and guide on a short trek to see the dam in Kerala (a trip they'd cooked up between the two of them).

The drive was pleasant—mountain jungle scenery³⁴, numerous reservoirs (these were built to help the wildlife survive the dry seasons), and a bit of languid wildlife. Surya got quite good at slowing down for birds and other sightings, and soon joined in the looking (not the best job for the driver). As there was absolutely no other traffic, this was not a problem. We spent some time at the checkpoint to Kerala, then got to the **Parambikulam** dam. It was a large dam. I took some photos (although I'd first not wanted to, as there was a "No Photography" sign, but the men seated next to it urged me to. I took a photo of the sign, as well.) Then, as we'd reached our goal, we headed back. It was a pleasant trip.

That afternoon we chartered the park bus and went down to the elephant camp, a village where wild elephants are trained. We got to see quite a few elephants up close, and one performed tricks for us (basic commands that all trained elephants are taught). We witnessed a feeding, and even got to feed a few of them their mush (their tongues are quite soft and smooth, unlike those of cows). At the end, as it began to grow dark, we got to play with a little one, shaking hand with trunk. Elephant rides did not seem to be on the itinerary that day, however.

The following morning, Jane slept in while I went off birding. I retraced our steps of the morning before to an observation tower I'd noted. I soon discovered why we hadn't taken advantage of it the day before—the steps leading up to it were missing to a height of about six feet, as well as most of the railing³⁵. Whether this was related to a pile of charred wood I'd seen on the rocks nearby, I have no idea. As this was the edge of a clearing in the forest, I wandered a bit till I found a promising-looking set of trees, then settled quietly in. The birds came, slowly at first, and then in greater numbers: wood pigeons, emerald doves, roseringed parakeets, hoopoes, bee-eaters, woodpeckers, racket-tailed drongos, tree pies, fairy bluebirds, red-whiskered bulbuls, sunbirds, even a few Malabar grey hornbills. I'd given up hope, and was getting ready to leave, when they flew in—two Great Pied Hornbills! They were magnificent—huge, graceful, and beautiful. I stood, dumb with astonishment, and watched them. It was a revelatory experience, religious in intensity, watching nature reveal her wonders to me. It was also quite cool. I then headed back, reluctantly, but knowing the search parties would be sent if I tarried.

A bit of breakfast and several bottles of cold water later, we set off back to Chennai. We drove back down through the mountains to the flat Tamil Nadu plains, stopping in **Palani**, a city with a hill temple dedicated to

³²The exchange rate at that time was 38 rupees to the dollar.

³³ The GPH is a truly immense bird, and sounds a bit like a helicopter taking off: whoosh whoosh whoosh! (According to my guide book, it is a bird much more often heard than seen.) There was a billboard at the park ranger station with its vital statistics: wingspan four feet, body only slightly smaller. The painting showed a magnificent creature with black and white body, toucan-sized yellow beak, and a huge red horn overlying it and the head. Quite a magnificent-looking creature!

³⁴ The scenery was reminiscent, as Jane pointed, of the Lamington Ranges of Australia near her hometown of Brisbane. Quite happily, though, it seemed to lack the ubiquitous leeches of the former.

³⁵ This was pathognomonic of one of the problems of most third-world countries I've visited: a lack of maintenance. All sorts of grand projects are built, but then they're not maintained. The government rest houses we stayed in were impressive looking from without, but crumbling within. Lights don't work, clothing hooks fall off the walls, nothing is fixed. It would have taken two men just a few hours to fix the stairs to the tower, but it hadn't been done. Meanwhile, there were half a dozen men hanging about the ranger station with nothing to do.

Muruga. We rode to the top of the hill on a quite fully packed car pulled by an electric winch. Once in the temple, we donned our socks (which, we had since learned, are permitted in temples, although shoes most definitely are not) and made our circuit. As always, the holy of holies was off limits to us, as we were non-Hindu, but there was still quite enough to see. There were temple monkeys about, as there was plenty of temple garbage about. Some sort of ceremony was in progress, involving clockwise processions, chanting, and feathered head-dresses. It was quite colorful and photogenic. As we were about to leave, a man came out of the temple office and requested that I come in. I thought I must have broken some temple rules (e.g., not paying for a photo permit), as did Jane, for not only did she not follow me in, she made herself scarce. I was asked to sit down, then asked "Where are you coming from?", "How do you like India?" and the like. I finally asked if there was a problem. "No" they replied. They were just trying to be helpful and see if we needed any assistance. Apparently non-Indian tourists are quite the rarity there.

Jane thought it would be fun to descend by the stairs, and I agreed. We descended through vendors, beggars, and curious Indians. The stairs went on and on; the closer we got to the bottom, the thicker the beggars became. At last we emerged, some distance from where we'd left the car. I found us a motor-rickshaw, we agreed on a price, and then he tried to tell us that it would be a long way round. Jane thought he was trying to take us on a tour, so she quite insistently demanded that he take us there the short way. Cowed, he did as she insisted, driving us straight through the construction zone, rather than going around it!

We continued on our way, listening to the tape I'd bought on the temple stairs—Tamil pop. We drove via Dindigul to **Tiruchirapalli** (Trichy); I spent my time studying my copy of *Tamil Self-Taught*. I began to make some sense out of the signs, but the written language is quite complex, as the symbols are syllabic rather than alphabetic³⁶. At Trichy, we got a room at the Ashby Hotel, a crumbling colonial remnant. It was quite pleasant, and there was a bakery that produced quite good French pastries (go figure!). Later that afternoon we drove to **Srirangam**, a huge temple on an island in the Cauveri River, a few miles outside of town. The temple complex has seven concentric walls and 21 gopurams, and is probably the largest complex in all of India. We drove through several gopurams and walls to get to the central complex, and then got guided about on foot. From the rooftop, you can see a progression of gopurams, much like the mountain progressions of Scotland. Within the various temples are lovely stone carvings, many fairly recent, as it was the practice in ancient times to use plaster over brick in the gopurams³⁷. Jane is quite right about the female goddesses—they all look as though they've had silicone implants done. It was all quite intense.

We hurried (if one can possibly use that word in India) back to town, but hit the rush hour, and it was dark by the time we returned. Jane and I decided we didn't really want to climb the 344 steps to the Rock Fort Temple in the dark. We didn't mind admiring it from a distance, though, and then returned to our hotel (which appeared to be the official gringo hotel, no doubt due to the glowing reports in all the guidebooks) and had a lovely supper on the verandah, at least until the mosquitoes got bothersome. We spent the night in our room with our fan, and were quite grateful that the ceiling didn't cave in on us (we were assured that it was entirely safe, but there were several areas of missing plaster over Jane's bed).

³⁶ The syllables are formed by joining one of the consonant symbols to one of the consonant symbols, except of course when the vowel is a short a or absent (a dot is placed). The resulting symbol does not necessarily resemble its parent symbols very closely. I do recommend the book quite highly, as it is full of such useful phrases as

"The ground is soft here, you'll need to lay down a plank"

"The white ants will eat that green wood—tar it!"

"From whom need I require permission to hunt here?"

"How many dogs will you let me have?"

"How do you arrange the bricks in this kiln?"

"Where are the iron pegs?"

"If a shower of rain falls, many of the tiles will be destroyed!"

And, of course, my personal favorite

"Hold your pole in a line with the theodolite and the other pole."

³⁷ There was a very interesting article in the *New Yorker* recently about the different attitudes Eastern and Western cultures have to art preservation. In the West, we do all we can to preserve the original materials, replacing them only when absolutely necessary. In the East, it is the patterns that are more important; the spirit rather than the actual material substance of the object. The current Forbidden City in Beijing is only about a hundred years old, some parts significantly less; it has been rebuilt numerous times, using the same patterns, as it is wood and has a tendency to burn. The Chinese, however, consider it ancient.

The next day was a mad dash back to **Chennai** on the main highway, a divided dual highway, no less. We left quite early, and made good time, arriving around noon. That afternoon we did a bit of shopping, then went out to dinner with John and Lorna (who'd just returned from Goa) and compared notes. They pointed out that my visit to the Coimbatore region seemed to have sparked election-related rioting, and there were 27 resultant dead. Such is my curse. After, John and Lorna were kind enough to share their Goan liquor with us, and we felt no more pain—at least until the following day, by which time we were all airborne, headed back to home and winter.

ENGLAND

Since I was in the neighborhood anyway, I decided to stop in and visit with Christobel and my friend Tom, both going to and coming from India. Although it was winter there, the spring bulbs were already coming up; the crocuses were in bloom in early February and the daffodils by the end of the month. We spent time just visiting, and I saw a bit of London and Kent. Chris cooked some lovely meals, and I made a large pot of my borscht. I also had a chance to visit with David and with Rita; she and I spent an evening in an *outdoor* cafe in Leicester Square drinking coffee.

I stopped in a second time on the way home from Ukraine and visited with Christobel, Tom and Simona for a few days. I ended up spending a day longer than planned, as I got caught in terrible traffic for three hours on the M-way and missed my flight. Luckily, I had accidentally booked my ticket for the wrong day, and was able to fly home the next day after all, despite the Northwest and Air Canada strikes (my BA flight, which had been pretty empty on the way over, was packed to the gills with displaced NW and AC patrons). I should note that, due to fog, I almost missed that flight, too!

IRELAND

While I was in England in February, Christobel came up with the mad idea that we should spend a couple of days in Ireland; she particularly enjoys Dublin. So we booked a flight and off we flew, with Tom in tow.

Ireland is not called the Emerald Isle for no good reason. It is along the path of the Gulf Stream, and is much warmer than geographically warranted and quite lush. Dublin, which is at the same latitude as Winnipeg, has palm trees. It also has a lot of pubs, which we had to visit to sample real Irish Guinness.

We did a good two day walking tour of the city. We visited the zoo, which was small but quite nice, and Tom (who was going on four at the time) quite enjoyed it. Back in town, we stopped into shops and museums, and visited Trinity College. I finally got to see the Book of Kells, which had been created on the isle of Iona (which I had visited last summer) by Celtic monks. It was quite beautiful, and could almost make one believe in the usefulness of a religion that can inspire the creation of such items. While we were there on the banks of the Liffey, the weather turned cold and it snowed, an unusual sight in Dublin, and many Dubliners put up their umbrellas to fend it off.

Unfortunately, there were mechanical problems on the airplane on our return home; I had to find another flight, and missing my return flight to the States. I got to spend a night at the airport motel. Charming.

THE U.P.

I made my annual trip to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, to watch some birds and visit with friends. I went in the first week of May, which is normally still winter up there, but was quite warm this year. The ice on Lake Superior had all broken up by this time, and the trees were leafing out. This was not normal, and the migrating birds were quite confused. I spent a few days in Paradise, which is just down the road from Whitefish Point, the site of a large raptor and waterfowl migration. Birds prefer to fly over land while migrating, and WFP is where they jump off across the lake to Canada.

I saw hundreds of raptors, including huge kettles of broad winged hawks, many sharp-shinned hawks, and lots of other more solitary raptors. There were quite a few sandhill cranes flying in formation (they do look a lot like emus, don't they?), and lots of ducks and loons. It was quite good fun, and not too cold. The bird counters were quite helpful, pointing out the species to me, sharing their scopes, and not making me feel like a total dunce.

I stopped in at Seney Wildlife Refuge, but it was still closed for the winter, so I drove on to Calumet, where I stayed with the Barons and visited with friends. It was nice to see everyone again, and to note how much the kids had grown. I drove up to Brockway Mountain a few times to try to see some raptors there, but the winds were blowing the wrong way and they just weren't around. Joel, Kara, Maddy and I did drive up on Mother's Day; the scenery was

nice, we had lunch³⁸ and did a bit of shopping in Copper Harbor. I even had a chance to visit with Kim Rinkinen (one of the HVH nurses) down at her cabins in Chassell. It was all nice, but, as always, much too short.

CANADA

When you live in the Detroit area, visiting Canada is not a big deal, as it just entails crossing a bridge or going through a tunnel. I went birding at Point Pelee twice this spring. The Point, which is Canada's southernmost tip, is quite renowned among birders, and is on the top ten birding sites list for North America. There is a huge warbler migration that occurs in early May, and is said to be quite incredible. For those of you who are not birders, warblers are tiny but brightly colored (lots of yellow) birds with pretty songs. Normally, masses of them come through all at once and are quite easy to spot on the bare branches of the trees. Because of el Niño, the trees leafed out early, many of the birds migrated early, and it was hard to spot much of anything. Thanks to some good guiding, I was able to see quite a bit, but it was a challenge. I'm looking forward to an unseasonably *cold* spring next year!

UKRAINE

Or "How I Spent My Summer Vacation". Last winter I promised my cousin Vera that I'd go to summer camp with her this year in Ukraine. I kept my promise. As long as I was travelling all the way to Ukraine, though, I felt I should spend some time and visit with the relatives I haven't seen a while.

It was interesting to visit Ukraine again after an absence of five years. Ukraine is still in a pretty sad state economically. The communists have changed their name, but have held onto power and have resisted most real free-market reforms. Most state-owned industries are not competitive in the world market, so they compensate by carrying on much of their business in barter, and keep costs down by not paying their employees. Most of the people I talked to hadn't been paid in six to twelve months, but kept going to work in hopes of eventually getting paid something. Occasionally they are given goods, either produced by their company or obtained by it in trade with other companies, which they then sell or trade for what they need. Most people simply don't pay the state for their rent or utilities. It's a vicious cycle. Luckily, the government is still paying pensions, and that is what many families are living off of, the pension of a grandmother or grandfather³⁹.

I visited my Dad's side of the family in **Eastern Ukraine**. I flew into **Kiev**, where I stayed with my cousin Tamara. I visited with her and her family, saw the new baby (Elizabeth), and my nieces' new husbands. I did a bit of sight-seeing in town, and marvelled at how they'd fixed up Kreshchatyk (the main street) for the seventh anniversary of Independence. I went out to **Zolotonoshe**, the town where my father grew up, and saw my Aunt Lidia and other relatives there. It was a nice, laid-back country visit, with lots of good food and good vodka. My Aunt and I visited a nearby abbey which had been recently rebuilt; we met the nuns, toured the church, and then one of the evil old nuns accused me of being a heretic!⁴⁰ I also visited the Petrusha family estate in **Antipivka**, which I am happy to note was planted in potatoes this year (all one hectare of it).

I then travelled to **Lviv**, in **Western Ukraine**, where I met up with my cousin Vera and the rest of the camp contingent. Vera is involved with the organization "Help Us Help the Children" (she runs the Detroit chapter), which has as its mission providing support to the orphanages of Ukraine. There are many thousands of children in the orphanages of Ukraine, living a Dickensian existence. The children are either true orphans (having lost both parents) or wards of the state (having family members either unwilling or unable to care for them). Many come out of

³⁸And I got a Mother's Day flower at lunch for being out with three kids.

³⁹Pensions can run from 25 to 50 hryvny a month (8 to 17 dollars).

⁴⁰It all had to do with the recent split in the Orthodox Church in Ukraine. Under Russian rule, the Kievan Patriarchate, which had been founded in 988, had been eliminated, and the Moscow patriarchate had taken control of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Since Independence, a new Kievan patriarchate has been formed, but many churches have remained under the control of Moscow. The Kievan church worships in Ukrainian, the Russian in Old Church Slavonic (which is actually 10th century Bulgarian, the Eastern equivalent of Latin). When the evil old nun ascertained that I worshipped in Ukrainian, she loudly decried me as a heretic. My mother raised me to be polite and not shout in church, so I just quietly bowed out rather than getting into a theological argument with her. Needless to say, I didn't leave a contribution.

environments of parental abuse, alcoholism and drug use. Quite a few have health problems related to their parents' alcoholism, or to the poor conditions at the orphanages.

These children live in institutions where the food is bad and scant, and medical and dental treatment poor and rare. Many of the children have only one change of clothing; in some orphanages, three children may share a single pair of shoes (and these may be a pair of flimsy sandals, even in the winter). Appropriate winter clothing is often lacking, in a country that is located at the same latitude as Maine. Soap is scarce, and proper hygiene is unattainable. The children often suffer from skin problems (including boils and cellulitis), foot problems (related to inappropriate or no footwear and poor hygiene), lice, malnutrition and dental problems—and these are the healthy ones! The children abandoned because of retardation or congenital anomalies have it even worse. Medications are expensive and often just unavailable in Ukraine.

HUHTC ships clothing and medications to the orphanages twice a year, accompanied by our volunteers (to avoid pilfering and to make sure that the goods actually reach the orphans in the orphanages). They also run an annual Summer Camp in the Carpathian Mountains, to which they invite 300 orphans from some thirty orphanages around the country.. The children, ages 12 to 16, are invited to spend two weeks in the mountains at our camp. The thirty or so counsellors who run the place are volunteers from the US and Canada, and were helped by several Ukrainian counsellors this year

Most other summer “camps” in Ukraine resemble warehousing of children—the children go to a hostel, are fed three meals of kasha a day, and spend their time “resting⁴¹”. Our camp was quite the opposite. Our camp was set in a fairly basic youth hostel in the town of **Vorohta**, in the **Carpathian Mountains**. This is quite a beautiful area, and there are lots of resorts, and small towns with beautiful churches. Just a small way down the road is **Yaremche**, which has nice hotels, a beautiful waterfall, and a great wood handcrafts market. Our location, “Base Avantgard”, is the home of the Ukrainian national ski jump team; there are a chair lift and a hill for practicing ski jumping, (even in the summertime).

The children, who travelled by bus and train from all over Ukraine, some for two whole days, were divided into groups of ten or so, and assigned a North American counsellor. All day long, there were organized activities, including talks on various topics (I did sessions on first aid, substance abuse, hygiene, and AIDS education), sports, hikes, singing, and English lessons (a favorite among the kids, who'd thereafter wander about the camp saying “hov do you do?”). There were two mountain-climbing expeditions⁴². There were lots of arts and crafts—creation of team flags, anti-drug posters, and more individual forms of expression. We celebrated several holidays, including the

⁴¹Ukrainians, including Ukrainian physicians, are strong believers in rest cures, at least in part due to their lack of funds for medications and modern medical technology. While In Vorohta, I visited a children's sanitorium, where children were sent to get away from the city to get fresh air and heal. They were not allowed to gambol in the forests and hills; rather, they were kept in their beds, often two or three to a bed, the smaller ones tied in so they couldn't fall out and hurt themselves. Once or twice a day, the beds were rolled out to a porch, where they could breathe the fresh air. Once they'd “recovered” from their initial disease, these children were often quite weakened due to disuse atrophy of their limbs.

The diseases these children were admitted for were strange and often vague. I was told one girl, sharing a bed with two others, had been admitted for treatment of her tuberculosis. Others were there with limb injuries and various “asthenias”.

⁴²I was fool enough to volunteer to go along on the first one. I was told we were going on a three hour walk; “forced march” would have been a better description. I fell behind, and, with my minders, lost the main group. We ended up taking a completely different route, climbing along barely trodden tracks, through brambles and blueberry bushes, past rushing streams and a very shallow lake, and through lots of mud. We finally came upon the group, but not until I'd begged them to abandon me and save themselves several times. I kept getting told “Ще трошки”, “Just a little bit farther”. Once we came upon the main group, I had a shot of vodka with the guides, and finally understood why alcohol is always such a restorative in the movies; it pepped me up full of new energy.

The walk back, I though would be easier—all downhill. Somehow, they managed to find a route that was, Escher-like, uphill again. I trudged along, avoided falling off the mountain, but discovered that I had no tread left on the soles of my hiking boots. This is not a good thing to discover on the side of a mountain. Luckily, two of the girls decided to be my guardian angels, and helped guide me down intact. This was important, as the last little bit of hiking was a sheer drop, and I spent much of it clinging to bits of alpine vegetation and sliding on my butt.

christening of the camp. Ivana Kupala⁴³, and Christmas Eve dinner (many of the kids had never celebrated to one before) with carolling, skits and varenyky⁴⁴. In the evenings, we had a Masquerade Ball, a fair with games and contests, a market where the children bought and sold crafts they'd created for camp money (and learned the workings of supply and demand), several vetry (bonfires with singing and cooking of shashlyky/kebabs), and numerous discos (I knew all the songs by heart by the end, including the Spanish and Italian rave tunes, and some of the Russian and Ukrainian pop). And let us not forget the nail-polishing clinic held by Oksana and Oresia!

I had a clinic of my own. We had brought supplies and medications with us, and some rudimentary medical equipment. On the first day of camp, the 300 children were all given physical examinations by our crack medical team: myself (an OB/GYN from Detroit), Oksana (a podiatry student from Toronto), Dr. Maria (the 76 year old Ukrainian GP who looked after the national ski jump team, who were based at our facility), Natalie (a chiropractic resident from Toronto), and Vasyl (a radiologist from Ternopil). We weighed them, checked a BP, did a thorough podiatric exam and lice check, looked for gross anomalies, and examined ears, throat, lungs and heart. There was a lot of foot and skin pathology. I also had two pharmacists from Toronto who helped with medication and dosing questions. Thereafter, the kids would come by, some with real medical problems (rhinitis, cellulitis, colitis, and trampoline injuries), but many just wanting attention and someone to chat with. They were fascinated by the scale, and often came in to get weighed.

What impressed me the most was the way the children bonded with us. The most valuable lesson they learned at camp was that there were people who loved them for who they were, thought they were wonderful, and had hopes for their futures. The last night, we all walked down together to the train station in town, about a kilometer away. The children's train left at 0230. It was incredibly sad. We all stood around on the platform, in the dead of night, crying and hugging. When they had all boarded and left, I felt like I'd lost a little piece of my heart.

After camp had ended, I spent some time in **Western Ukraine**. My cousin Myrosia and her husband, Ruslan, picked me up from camp, and we drove to **Strilkivtsi**, in **Ternopil oblast** (state), where we stayed with his family. It rained, so we sat and talked a lot and watched the Independence day ceremonies on TV (the parade in Kiev was quite militaristic, and quite reminiscent of old Soviet May Day parades. Apparently, there was a huge party in the streets afterward, a very un-Soviet occurrence.) I spent some time with my five year old goddaughter Daria, who was quite taken with the doll I'd gotten for her, and quite chatty. She kept trying to get me to eat sunflower seeds (to which I'm horribly allergic), insisting that they were "full of vitamins!".

We then journeyed to my Mother's village of **Kniaje**, where I visited with family, saw her old church, and the newly erected monument to the villagers who'd been shot by the Germans in 1944 (during their retreat back to Germany; my mother and her family had been taken to the labor camps in Germany at about the same time). We spent a day in the nearby regional capitol of **Sokal**, where many of our relatives have moved, and spent the day visiting churches and watching wedding videos (unedited). Anatoly, a distant relative, now runs the municipal museum in Sokal. It has become dedicated to his philosophy of the interactions between earth, man and the universe. There are some local crafts and antiques, then a few rooms dedicated to the space program, and then the rest of it takes on a religious millennialist tone. Anatoly is convinced that the world will end, in a philosophical sense, in 2000, and that Ukraine will lead in the spiritual rebirth of the world. Most of the exhibits are his work—Anatoly is a gifted sculptor who works in wood and prefers marquetry and miniatures. There are room after room of these intricate carvings, and copies of works by both Nostradamus, Gandhi and Madame Blavatsky⁴⁵. This museum is fascinating, and a must-see if you're ever in the area.

I then returned to **Lviv**, my favorite Ukrainian city. Unlike Kiev, it is small and baroque, and much more European. It's sort of Prague on a smaller scale. I saw the sights, visited Ihor's studio and admired his paintings,

⁴³Ivana Kupala is an ancient pagan holiday celebrated at the midsummer. The girls all make flower wreaths, then toss them into the river. The boys wade after them, hoping to catch the heart of the girl whose wreath the capture. There are traditional songs, and later on there is a huge bonfire. Effigies of Ivan and Marena are burned (to insure a good harvest), and then the boys demonstrate their masculinity by jumping over the fires.

⁴⁴ Ukrainian ambrosia, the food of the gods, small dumplings filled with potatoes, cheese, or sauerkraut. The Polish make a version called pierogi, which are but a pale shadow of their Ukrainian counterparts. They are said to have come to Ukraine from China by way of the Mongol raiders who destroyed the Kievan empire and enslaved and killed my ancestors. I can almost forgive them...

⁴⁵ Founder and chief prophet of the Theosophist movement at the turn of the century, she was apparently Ukrainian.

visited a few churches (they're slowly being restored⁴⁶), and shopped for books. The changes that have occurred in the last five years are amazing, especially at the private shops. Some are quite up to western standards, and even the smaller shops have a level of service unimaginable just a few years ago. The state shops are the as always⁴⁷. The city is altogether cleaner and brighter, thanks to privatization; owners have fixed up and painted their buildings. Gone is the drab dirtiness of Soviet times, except in the government apartment blocks and other state-owned buildings.

While I was in Ukraine, Russia got into trouble, and when Russia sneezes, Ukraine catches cold. Last time I was in Ukraine, there was a revolution in Russia (televised!) and Yeltsin and the army bombarded the deputies in their Congress Hall (has Clinton considered this option?). This time it was the complete collapse of the ruble and the Russian stock market, along with huge losses in the European markets, which I got to watch live on Ukrainian cable television. Ukraine's currency, the hryvna, was devalued from 2.2 to 3 to the dollar in the course of a few weeks. It meant the price of imports shot up, and the money Ruslan and his partners owed for the printing equipment they'd bought from Germany had gone up almost 50% overnight. Food prices remained fairly stable, but Ukraine has become integrated enough in the world economy that everyone felt the pinch, especially in clothing and gasoline prices. What this will do to the price of heating and food throughout the winter is anyone's guess.

Bolivia

For months before I left, people kept asking me "Why Bolivia?" I could only reply that it was just one of those countries that I'd always wanted to visit. Towards the end, I began to doubt my choice. Then, one night, a few weeks before I was scheduled to leave I had an epiphany. I was watching tapes of two of my Friday night programs after coming home from the Symphony. In *Millennium*, one of the actors says the word "Bolivia". My ears perk up. Then during *Homicide*, "Bolivia." This is getting weird. I flip through the stations. Suddenly, on AMC, Paul Newman says "Bolivia." I decided it must be fate.

Bolivia is a large, landlocked country lying just south of the equator in South America. It was once almost twice as large and had a seacoast, but has managed to lose every war it's gotten involved in since winning independence from the Spaniards in 1824, and has lost territory with each unfortunate encounter. Simon Bolivar wept for the country that bore his name, its political instability being legendary from the start. Bolivia has had some 90 presidents in 174 years, few of them actually elected. Currently there is a democratically elected government, and Bolivia, the land where Che Guevara died fomenting revolution, is enjoying a period of extreme political stability.

To me, Bolivia is the Canada of the Andes. Like Canada, it has a large, sparsely populated land mass (one million square kilometers, about the size of Alaska, with a population of only seven million). Like Canada, there are a lot of mountains. And like Canada, the people are extremely polite⁴⁸. The food, music and beer, however, are better in Bolivia, and I had a chance to enjoy them all.

La Paz and the Altiplano I flew into La Paz, arriving early in the morning, after four stops. As I was driven into town, high up in the Andes, and immediately felt the effects of sorroche (altitude sickness), despite having taken medication. La Paz is at 3800 meters of altitude (12,300 feet); I became incredibly tired, breathing was a chore, and walking up even one set of stairs was a huge task. As the days passed, I noted restless sleep (I don't think I slept for more than two hours at a stretch), and memory loss. It was like getting really old really fast!

I spent some time exploring La Paz and the nearby Altiplano. La Paz itself is, with the exception of a four block area of souvenir shops and hotels, not really a tourist town. When I was in Cuzco last year, I often felt as if I

⁴⁶I also saw evidence of how the current Pope is trying to destroy the Eastern Rite Ukrainian Catholic church. He is pouring millions of dollars into the restoration of Roman Catholic churches in Ukraine, and even paying for the construction of new ones, but is not spending any money on the restoration of Ukrainian Catholic churches. Not only that, but he's not allowing Ukrainian Catholic priests (who are allowed to marry) to minister to ethnic Ukrainians in Poland, insisting on the legitimacy only of the Roman Catholic Church.

⁴⁷It began to rain, and I needed an umbrella. There were several on display at the state shop, and there were several clerks, but none could be bothered to help us—one was reading a book, two were engaged in conversation, and another was doing her nails. At the small private shop, we were waited upon immediately, and the proprietor showed us all her models and even demonstrated them. She got the sale.

⁴⁸A Canadian joke: "How do you get one hundred Canadians out of a pool? You ask them"

were in an Inca theme park, as everything was picturesque, and all the vendors seemed to sell souvenirs. La Paz is quite the opposite. There are attractive churches, some picturesque parks, and several marvelous museums, but it's a living, breathing city with few concessions to tourism. One of the more interesting parts of La Paz is the Witches' market. Here you can buy all manner of colorful charms, herbal remedies, small idols (I bought a Pachamama) and even freeze-dried llama fetuses⁴⁹.

I took a day trip to **Tiwanako**, where lie the ruins of an ancient pre-Inca city. Tiwanako once lay on the shores of lake Titicaca, but as the shoreline receded, the city itself died. There are monoliths, sculptures, some large walls, and a buried pyramid or two, but not a lot to really look at. Because of Bolivia's political instability and poverty (it is the third poorest country in the western hemisphere, after Haiti and Guyana), the site hasn't been properly excavated and reconstructed. What's there now is the result of efforts in the 1930s, and much of what has been rebuilt is wrong.

Archaeologically, it's really quite interesting. The jumbled heaps of sandstone and basalt slabs, some of which weigh as much as 175,000 kg each, could not have been quarried locally; the nearest sources of basalt are on the Copacabana peninsula, some forty kilometers away and across the lake. The **Puerta del Sol** (Gate of the Sun), has incredibly intricate zoomorphic figures. Much of this disorder was the work of the Spaniards, who felt it their Christian duty to destroy pagan idols and temples. The Ponce monolith, which appears to represent one of the Aymara gods, was too big to destroy, so the Spaniards treated it as they did the Indians—cut off its ears and nose, and then marked it with signs of the cross and trinity. Thus, a convert, it was allowed to stand.

The relics from this site are scattered all over Bolivia. The gold masks and jewelry are in the Museo del Oro in La Paz, and ceramics are in various locations. I found the pottery quite beautiful, with its wild animal shapes and bright colors. It was much more attractive than the Inca pottery which succeeded it.

On the way back we stopped in at the town of **Laja**, which was the original site of La Paz. **Mendoza**, a fool of a conquistador, founded the city here in 1548 on the exposed plain, at 4000 meters. A few years later, wiser heads prevailed, and moved the city down into the more sheltered hills of current day La Paz. A well-preserved colonial church remains, which was built with sandstone blocks pilfered from Tiwanako.

I also spent several days visiting **Lake Titicaca**. At 3820m, it is the world's highest navigable lake. It is deep blue, and was once thought to be bottomless (it's actually 457m deep). Titicaca straddles the Peru-Bolivia border, and has a surface area of over 9000sq km. The ride there through the Altiplano was quite picturesque and starkly beautiful. There are no naturally-occurring trees in the altiplano, just scrub. The snow-capped mountains of the **Cordillera Real** (Royal Range) of the Andes in the distance were amazingly beautiful. There was much agriculture, all the flat lands being intensely worked, and lots of adobe brick houses with their attractive hornos (large, beehive-shaped outdoor ovens). As we approached the lake, I noted two things: large flocks of vividly pink flamingoes in the lagoons, and large stands of eucalyptus trees⁵⁰. The drive into Copacabana was scenic, along the shores of the indigo lake. At one point our bus had to be ferried across the **Strait of Tiquina**; it was taken across on a small barge that was barely visible above the water line, while the Swiss couple, our guides and I crossed on a small passenger ferry. On the far shore we were able to view the naval base, the last remaining vestige of the Bolivian Navy. At **Copacabana**, a pilgrimage town, we visited the moorish-looking church and saw the legendary Black Virgin of Candelaria, which was carved in 1580s by an Aymara artisan who had seen her in a vision.

Copacabana is a good example of the syncretism present in much of Latin American religion. Overtly Catholic, the parishioners still worship many of the old gods. One in particular is Ekeko, whose name means dwarf in Aymara. He is a household god and distributor of material possessions. His devotees purchase miniatures of the items they wish to acquire, and heap them on plaster images of the god. At the sidewalk market in Copacabana, you could buy miniatures of cars, money (American dollars), appliances, even computers. These items must be blessed, and then are displayed. To further win Ekeko's favor, he is given cigars to smoke, as he enjoys them very much. Most older Ekeko statues have burn marks around the mouth from smoking so much.

⁴⁹The llama is a particularly important part of traditional religion. If you are constructing a new home, it's necessary to bury a llama fetus beneath the cornerstone as a *ch'alla* (offering) to the Pachamama. If you are a bit better off, you are of course expected to sacrifice a whole llama. I had wondered at the source of all these fetuses; one of the guides explained to me that most female llamas do not carry their first pregnancy to term, but almost always miscarry. These fetuses naturally freeze-dry in the harsh climate of the altiplano, and are saved for use in religious ceremonies.

⁵⁰These are not indigenous, but an introduced species from Australia which seems to thrive in this difficult climate. The local people plant it for a source of wood, as it grows rapidly.

At the dock, I boarded the catamaran and checked into my room. After a pleasant lunch, I discovered that I was to spend the next day and a half with a group of American travel agents (scary!). We were dropped off on the **Isla del Sol**, and left to climb the Inca Staircase. Water flowed down alongside the stairs; at the top were llamas and a small museum. The museum was not very impressive, but the views of the coastline and the **Isla de la Luna** were quite fine. We then continued to cruise, ending up at **Cha'llapampa**, at the northern end of the island. Here we were presented with garlands of locally grown flowers, then crossed a small spit of land, got into smaller boats, and were rowed the opposite beach. From here it was a steep but easy ascent to an old ceremonial site, where Augustino, a traditional priest, performed blessing ceremony for us. This was to purify us, and to make peace with the Pachamama (Aymara Earth goddess), so that we would be allowed to enter the holy areas of the island. The priest chanted in Spanish and Aymara, then burned coca leaves and various colored coins and pellets. Finally, he sprinkled us with water, head and hand.

We were now free to visit the island at will. We wandered around the ancient Tiwanako site of **Chincana**, a maze of stone walls and tiny doorways overlooking a white sand beach. Our guide managed to get us lost, but some local children who knew their way around led us out again (in exchange for a cherry-flavored chapstick). It was beginning to get late, so we headed back to Cha'llapampa, this time over land, along an undulating trail. Because of the altitude, even the small climbs necessary were difficult; one of the boatmen had been sent along with an oxygen tank, and we occasionally took breaths of it. The landscape was vaguely mediterranean in atmosphere. We returned to the boat just after sunset; it was all lit up like a Christmas tree, while the town was quite dark. That evening, we had a traditional altiplano meal, with lots of peppers, corn, and chuño (freeze-dried potatoes), and a folkloric show featuring music and dance. The travel agents all insisted on posing for photos with the band and dancers, and they were the sober ones on board that night! My Swiss compatriots had introduced me to the only palatable Bolivian wine, Concepción, and I drank quite a bit of it that night. Later, I went outside, to look for the Southern Cross. There were no stars out that night; the sky had clouded over. I slept well, rocked by the boat. The next morning, as we sailed back towards La Paz, I stayed on top, watching **Illampu** (the local mountain) and the Isla de la Luna go by.

The Highland Valleys Much of the population lives in the lower and much more pleasant Highland Valleys. After spending a week in La Paz and the Altiplano, **Cochabamba**, at 2600m, comes as quite a relief. The weather is balmy, and the sorroche much less severe. I spent a day here on my way to Sucre, and quite enjoyed it. There were trees and flowers, nice parks, pleasant cafes, and lots of teenagers cruising and preening for each other. It reminded me of Miami.

The jewel of the Highland Valleys is **Sucre**, the traditional capitol, and a beautifully preserved colonial city. Zoning regulations require white-painted walls and red tile roofs, and the effect is beautiful. Sucre is a university⁵¹ town, and the pace is nice and relaxing after the hubbub of La Paz (which is ten times its size). I spent time wandering its streets, and visiting its museums. Sucre is a depository for colonial art, between the many monasteries and churches found here. Of particular note are

–the **Cathedral**, which contains the Virgen de Guadalupe de Extremadura, originally painted in 1625, and subsequently encrusted with gold and jewels donated by those wealthy parishioners whose prayers she has answered. She is covered with diamonds, amethysts, pearls, rubies and emeralds, (along with a few watches), estimated to be worth millions. Her head, in contrast, is ringed with incandescent red and green Christmas bulbs. Go figure!

– the **Textile Museum**, which has fantastic displays about local weaving. Not only do they describe the entire process, from the carding, dyeing and spinning of the wool, but they also have antique and modern examples of local weavings. Mannequins show how the costumes are worn, and galleries show the evolution of design over time. There are even several artisans weaving on the premises; their work is so intricate, it can take several months to complete one small piece.

–**La Glorieta**, known by locals as El Castillo, was a mansion built on the outskirts of town by Don Francisco Argadoña, one of the silver barons. It was meant to encompass various European styles, and much of the material was imported from Europe: Venetian glass, French mirrors, Italian marble. Most interesting to me were the local touches: friezes of plaster orphans⁵² and vampire bats. It has since run down, and is now but a classic example of faded grandeur.

–the **Cemetery**, which is beautifully landscaped and full of tombs and monuments to former presidents, a

⁵¹The University of San Xavier was founded in 1622, making it the oldest one in the Western Hemisphere. Sucre was known as the Athens of the Americas.

⁵²His wife was made a Princess by the Pope for her work with orphans in Bolivia.

large percentage of whom seem to be buried here. The hoi polloi get small crypts on the walls, for which rent must be paid. If the payments are not kept up, the spaces are vacated after a given number of years.

Also of note were the central square, with its statues, fountains and ancient trees, and the many churches (one per block) which are closed and now but reminders of the glory that once was Sucre.

While I was in Sucre, there was a massive campesino⁵³ demonstration. El Niño had caused drought, and the government had promised them seeds and fertilizer to help with this growing season. Whether because of graft or sloth, it hadn't come through. Several thousand campesinos were bussed in and camped out in the main square, blocking traffic, and having a rally every once in a while. Tom, a Canadian fellow I had met in Tiwanako, had told me of the pro- and anti-Pinochet demonstrations he had run into in Chile, with much violence and tear gas. But this is not the Bolivian way. Remember, this is the Canada of the South. The police showed up en masse here and then proceeded to...divert traffic away from the protestors. The following night, a large group of policemen assembled in the square with their...musical instruments. It was the police band, and they serenaded the protestors. The following day was the anniversary of the National Anthem and everyone, police, army, school groups and protestors, took part in its singing and the subsequent parade. On the fifth day, the government acceded to their demands, and the campesinos quietly returned home. Democracy in action.

While in Sucre, I met Bert, an American bureaucrat from the FCC, who was in Bolivia checking on the nation's Y2K compliance. He and I ended up sightseeing together (I can be a damn fine tour guide, as I read up on sites extensively before visiting them), and visiting Potosí together. Potosí was founded in 1545, following the discovery of massive silver deposits in the nearby mountain of Cerro Rico, and soon became the largest city in the world. To mine the silver, the Spaniards enslaved the Indians and imported millions of African slaves. The work was hard, the altitude high⁵⁴, and the miners forced to work 12 to 18 hours a day. They rapidly succumbed to silicosis, mercury poisoning (from the smelting process), and exhaustion. It is estimated that some eight million Indians and Africans died over the three centuries of the colonial period. There are no cemeteries in Potosí for them; their bodies were thrown down into the mountain, making it probably the world's largest mass grave.

Potosí is a beautiful three hour drive through the mountains from Sucre. The scenery is stark, with rocky outcrops and mountains. The road was good, but difficult; even the car had some difficulty adjusting to the altitude, and we had to ford a river where the bridge had gone out. We stopped at a market in Potosí, purchasing coca leaves and alkaline base, grain alcohol and dynamite. At Cerro Rico, our guide gave us a demonstration of the dynamite we'd bought, and then we donned yellow slickers and boots and entered the mine.

We stopped to leave offerings to the gods at two small altars. The first was Christ/Tio⁵⁵ (more religious syncretism!) Catholicism stops at the edge of the mountain; here one enters the domain of the Pachamama. Christ/Tio was the good god, and we left him coca leaves as an offering. Further in was the altar of the evil aspect of Tio; here he was represented as a devil/Spaniard, with two sets of horns and a beard. We once more left a offering of coca leaves, and also poured libation of grain alcohol. The guide then lit two cigarettes, and put them in Tio's mouth. He was pacified. The rest of the coca⁵⁶, alcohol and cigarettes we lowered down by pulley to the miners, who were

⁵³The campesinos, or country people, are the still largely of pure Indian descent, either Aymara or Quechua. The women, particularly, still preserve the old ways, especially traditional dress. The *chola* outfit, as it is called, was imposed on them in the 18th century by the Spanish king, and the center parting of their hair by the Viceroy of Toledo. The outfit consists of a dark bowler hat, several layers of petticoats and full skirts, a *chompa* (pullover sweater), jacket and apron. Usually there is added a traditional shawl known as a *llijlla*, and slung across the back an *ahuayo* (a colorful carryall filled with everything from coca leaves to groceries to babies). The hair is parted in the middle, and braided into two long plaits, which are joined by a tuft of black wool known as a *pocacha*. Often colorful wool decorations are tied onto the ends (a bit like the llamas!)

⁵⁴At 4090m (13,300 feet or 2.3 miles), it's the world's highest city.

⁵⁵Tio is the bacchus-like god of the miners, both good and bad, both devil and angel. The miners pray and sacrifice to him, so he will protect them in his underworld domain.

⁵⁶The Bolivians use coca the way we norteamericanos use coffee—as a source of energy. Coca leaves are fairly innocuous and consumed by just about the entire population, either as maté tea or chewed. Coca must be chewed with an alkaloid to release the active ingredient. When chewed, it gives you a faint caffeine-type buzz, a vague numbness in the throat, and suppresses the appetite. A popular T-shirt in Bolivia is one that proclaims “La hoja de coca no es droga!” (the coca leaf is not a drug). In truth, cocaine, as it is consumed in the States, is a completely different

quite grateful. The conditions in the mines haven't changed much from the turn of the century. The silver ran out years ago, and most of the miners left Potosí when the government closed the mines; the few that remain have formed small cooperatives and lead a hard-scrabble existence.

In town, we shopped a bit, admired the facades of some beautiful churches and wandered the streets. Potosí, though attractive, does not have the antique beauty of Sucre; it's just another South American town. We then toured **La Moneda**, the old mint and now a massive museum, sort of the Smithsonian Institute of Bolivia. It has huge collections of paintings, silver objects, silver coins, and mineral samples (at least ten rooms of these!); there are also examples of local ancient pottery, and the rooms and equipment of the old mint. It took more than three hours just to walk through, and resulted in a severe case of sensory and information overload!

The Amazon Basin About 60% of Bolivia is actually lowlands, which are hot, flat and sparsely populated. The rivers that drain them flow eventually into the Amazon. Recently, there has been much population growth as a result of the government's decision to urge displaced miners and other poor campesinos to settle here. At the same time, there is a growing conservation movement, and recently huge areas have been set aside as National Parks. The largest lowland city is **Santa Cruz**, with a population of one million, almost as large as La Paz. It is rapidly expanding and fairly rich, as a result of tropical agriculture. The downside is that the rainforest is being burned and cleared in ever-widening circles.

There isn't much in the way of sights; once you've circled the square a few times and been to the cathedral and zoo, there isn't much else to do. It used to be that you could spend time sloth-watching in the main square, but the sloths were recently removed to Amboro National Park.

Santa Cruz is the gateway to the Jesuit missions and **Noel Kempf Mercado National Park**, both of which I visited, the former albeit only inadvertently. Just prior to leaving I had signed up with a Nature Conservancy tour to NKMNP. This park is incredibly remote; it is the size of Massachusetts (plus a bit of Connecticut), and can be reached only by small plane or a four day boat trip. I met up with my group in Santa Cruz; after a slide and sound show introduction to the park and a preview of the wildlife at the zoo, we flew in a small Cessna to a remote airfield in Flor de Oro (a former cattle ranch on the Brazilian border which has been converted into a solar-powered ecotourism lodge). This would be our base for the next week.

We spent the next few days exploring the diverse ecosystems with our two resident naturalists: Chelsea, a botanist, and Nick, an expert on birds and 18th century French. We wandered through the termite savannah, cerrado, and riverine forest, and rode on boats among the various bays of the Rio Itenez. The mosquitoes were particularly ferocious, despite DEET and protective clothing; luckily, their bites did not itch much, and they didn't carry malaria, as we all got quite bitten up. Chelsea was frequently pointing out members of her (plant) family, and Nick could imitate any of the resident 700+ bird species at the drop of a hat. It was all quite good fun.

One day we boated to Lago Caimán, and then hiked up fairly steep terrain to Monkey Point. Diane and I fell a bit behind, but had the pleasure of Chelsea's company and a running commentary on the various plant species. We didn't see any monkeys, but we did get a wonderful view of the Huanchaca Plateau⁵⁷ receding in the distance, the River Itenez and its bays, and the rainforest below. On the way back down the rains began, and Nick serenaded us with "Singing in the Rain".

The next day, during a brief interlude of sun, we got a marvelous flight in a four-seater airplane over both of the waterfalls on the Rio Paucerna, Ahlfeld and Arco de Iris; they were beautiful, like something out of Eden. There was also an overnight trip up the Rio Paucerna to Ahlfeld Falls. The river was shallow (the rains had come late) and narrow; like any narrow jungle river, the vegetation crowding the banks often collapsed into the river as the banks gave way. Our boatmen also spent a good bit of time clearing branches and trunks out of the water with machetes, an axe and a chainsaw, so that our boats could pass. As we travelled along, we saw lots of birds (particularly the emerald green kingfishers which flew ahead of our boats), occasional caiman, and lots of small jumping and skipping fish on the water's surface. Progress was slow, because there were many branches just below the water which had to be carefully avoided, and we were on the river some seven hours, arriving at the camp at dusk.

I had the misfortune to fall into the group that had heavy rains both coming and going. Despite ponchos and other rain gear, we got very, very wet, and, amazingly, very, very cold. No article of clothing can keep that amount of constant rain off. The previous day, when we had been hiking, the rain had been welcome, cooling us off; now it was just unpleasant and chilled right down to the bone. That night, at our camp, we watched as thousands of moths

substance from that consumed by Bolivians, and requires a fairly sophisticated chemical process to extract.

⁵⁷ The Huanchaca Plateau has the same origin and configuration as the "tepui" of Venezuela. Numerous streams cut through the plateau, occasionally resulting in spectacular waterfalls. The plateau is bounded by precipitous escarpments 600-1800 feet high.

settled onto our drying clothes. They were quite beautiful, and their eyes glowed a golden color when light was shone upon them. There was a constant humming in the air at the camp, as the ground was completely covered with the nests of solitary ground-nesting bees. We got to watch Olga cooking our dinner using a headlamp, and enjoyed the chicken, rice, squash and Coca-Cola immensely, celebrating our Thanksgiving a day early.

The next morning, we hiked to Ahlfeld Falls. They were quite beautiful, with water rushing over the steep precipice into a pool below, and throwing up a mist. Tropical plants clung to every surface. There were butterflies all around, including the beautiful blue morphos. On the ground we found huge rhinoceros beetles and tasty palm nuts, and in the jungle all manner of palms and other lush vegetation (sorry Chelsea, I can't remember the names!)

On our return (which featured more rain and the breakdown of one of the boats), the sun finally came out and the rains stopped. After a day of exploring the bays and lagoons near Flor de Oro, seeing the pink river dolphin, and nearly suffering sunstroke, Charlie, Luis and I got a ride down the river to the Brazilian town of Pimeteiras. There we did a bit of sight-seeing and shopping (some hot sauce, some aguardiente, and every plantain in the town). The ride back was relaxing—warm day, cool breeze, and a drop-dead gorgeous sunset. What more could we ask?

After a week in this bastion of biodiversity, it was time to return home. We flew out reluctantly; as it was the rainy season, we hit quite a bit of turbulence and squalls. I made sure my ID was on me so I could be identified in case of a crash, and was amazed at how calm everyone else was. I later learned that they were all white-knuckling it also, several with pharmacological assistance. We ended up making an unscheduled stop in the town of **Concepción**, as Santa Cruz airport was closed due to storm.

Concepción is one of the Jesuit mission towns of Bolivia, and has a nice central square with a beautifully restored mission church. As it was Sunday, a service was on, so we didn't get a chance to look around inside very much, but did note that the paintings of the stations of the cross featured local landscape features prominently, and even included a few 4WD vehicles. The cloisters were attractive, and the bell tower was a huge curved wooden edifice. The market was open, so I treated everyone to guineos (those wonderful, small finger bananas) and stocked up on hot sauce. Some Guaraní Indians sold us jungle crafts (macrame, feathers and beads), and then we returned to the airport to await permission to take off again.

We returned to Santa Cruz through more rain and turbulence, and then headed our separate ways. I regretfully headed home; Bolivia is such a wonderful place, and I would have loved to have spent a lot more time here. Perhaps next year.... Interestingly, although I met few Americans on this trip, a surprisingly large number of them were Michiganders (4) and Minnesotans(3). It must be the hot weather that attracts us, and the pleasant nature of the people. We Midwesterners are basically nice, and like to visit countries full of other nice people. Maybe that's why so few of us visit France!

Well, I think I've tried your patience enough this year. (Remember, no one forced you to read this .) It's late, and, as I've been completing this letter, winter has finally arrived. Within an hour or two of the arrival of the Solstice, temperatures dropped to the twenties (or about 5°C) and it began to snow. I've had a chance to enjoy both my fireplace and my Bailey's.

My annual tree-viewing and Holiday Open House was a smashing success this year; if you missed it, do try to come next year, 8pm on the 18th, to my house. See you then! Most importantly, keep in touch!

Ciao,

