

# 2002 Christmas News from the Browns

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Merry Christmas to you all! We hope that this note finds you well and in good health. Marilyn has just turned the big six-oh (no) this December, and Gord follows in July. We plan to have a combined birthday bash next summer so stay tuned. The theme of our party will change somewhat this time. At Gord's 50<sup>th</sup> . . . 10 years ago . . . where does the time go! . . . we spiced up the party with activities and games. In order to facilitate the same activities next summer, we've managed to assemble wheel chairs, crutches and first aid paraphernalia that will ensure that the egg on the spoon relay is completed before nightfall.



Marilyn has decided to retire this December after 42 years of paralegal work. She may do some contract work in the new year but, for the most part, she will be keeping house and home together.

Time also marches on for our two grandsons, Ben (7 Yrs.Old.), and Mathew (4 Yrs.Old.). Ben is in grade 2 this year and Mathew will be starting pre-school soon. It's nice to have them so close as we see them most weekends (treats please, grandma!). With spectacular weather this summer, we had lots of time to spend with them on the beach, camping, barbeques and any other activity that still permitted us to duck out when things got boisterous . . . a grandparental privilege that we exercise frequently . . . wind 'em up and send 'em home is what we always say!!

In February Marilyn adopted not one but, yes, you heard correctly folks, TWO fur-balls, Tyson & Sativa (short we assume for the Latin, cannabis sativa), who spend most of their day just lounging around. Anyone allergic to cats doesn't have a hope of survival in our house. When Gord starts up his exercise bike, a great cloud of fur rises up from the carpet and floats around the room like a fresh snow fall. Marilyn loves them anyway so they are here to stay.



First of May saw us sailing once again from Trinidad to Freeport in the Grand Bahamas on the old Amazing Grace. Joined by our friends from the Channel Islands, Dave & Sally Smith, along with other friends from Vancouver, we steamed out of Port of Spain ready to party. The Amazing Grace, however, populated for the most part by geezers like us, gets pretty quiet after 10:00PM so the partying was generally limited to a couple of glasses of wine and a game of Yahtzee. Lots of hot sunny weather, white sandy beaches, SCUBA and shopping on little out-of-the-way islands throughout the Caribbean and Bahamas. Along the way, there was a charity auction which was managed by our good friend Dave Smith whose skilled salesmanship boosted the pot considerably thank you very much. We bid on a bed and breakfast offered by a family of Texans from Galveston and won it. So we're booked for Texas in May and expect to spend some time in and around Houston before going on to San Antonio. There was recently some doubt about our friends' accommodations when Hurricane Lili came close enough to cause some concern.. This category 4 super hurricane, with winds of 145 mph (233 kph), was headed straight for our friend's house until it made a sharp turn at the last minute. We are happy to report that their house is still standing and awaiting our arrival in May.

While Marilyn and her friends were off exploring and shopping on various islands, Dave and Gord booked as many dives as possible. The dive charters would come along side the Amazing Grace, pick us up and return us in the same way. The water was as pristine as ever but it got a bit rough between the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas and many of us were confined to quarters as we toughed it out in heaving seas. Marilyn was up in the middle of the night to secure the rum . . . everything else got tossed all over the place.

In May, Paige, Mitch & the kids, joined us for a weekend at the West Edmonton – “over 800 stores and services” - Mall. We had taken Ben on an airplane the summer before so he was busy making sure that his little brother was up to date on the latest flight protocol. As we left the aircraft, the Captain made the mistake of inviting the kids into the cockpit for a visit and probably spent the remaining part of the day returning all the buttons and knobs to their rightful positions. Gord and Mitch were disappointed to have missed out on some shopping when they were required to spend most of the time with the kids at the huge water park or at the amusement centre!

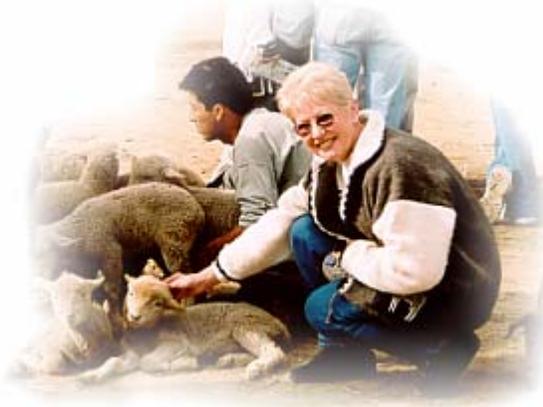
This weather here this summer and fall was nothing short of spectacular. Mostly warm sunny days turned our lawn to golden brown . . . just the right colour if you are not into mowing. We were surprised by a visit from our Texan friends (we will see them in May), Ron & Jean McElvogue who were attending a seminar in nearby Seattle. After spending the first evening with us at home, we took them to Whistler for a couple of days to give them a little taste of the local mountains. There was lots of wildlife to see from the chair lift on the way up which was a bonus for the Texans. We managed to find our way to the glacier at the top of Blackcomb Mountain where they where they conduct ski schools all year round. Although it was windy and cool up there, the ride both up and down presented some great scenery for people who live on the Gulf of Mexico.

We have just returned from spending most of November in Ecuador and Peru where we visited the famous ruins at Machu Picchu. We started in Lima where we visited Inca ruins and historic Spanish landmarks. Although it was interesting to learn the history, being in a third world country makes one realize how little we have to complain about. People begging on the streets, armed guards at every store entrance (double for banks), ghettos with one water tap for hundreds of people, incessant honking of horns and sirens all in a city that never sees the sun. Cold water from the South meets the warm inland temperatures and the city is in a morning mist that never burns off. The people, however, are friendly, courteous, and genuinely helpful to tourists . . . we didn't exactly get mistaken for one of the locals! After a few days of excursions around the city, we flew to Cuzco which is nestled in a valley high in the Andes. At 13,000 feet, most of us had some difficulty adjusting and some were very sick. We found ourselves short of breath which made sleeping difficult . . . something like a mild form of sleep apnea where you would wake up trying to catch your breath. In Cuzco, we boarded a

train to Aguas Calientes which is a small town at the base of the mountain where Machu Picchu is located. Leaving the valley by train is not a simple process of travelling up the side of the mountain . . . it is too steep. Through a series of switchbacks, the train went backwards and forwards switching tracks each time so that we eventually ended up on a set of tracks that took us up over the surrounding mountains then down into a valley which we followed during the four hour trip to Aguas Calientes (7,000 feet). From there we boarded a bus that took us up another 1,000 feet over switchback gravel roads to the famous site of Machu Picchu. After spending part of the morning with the guide, we wandered around until nightfall. The site is spectacular



and we were lucky enough to hit a day that was mostly sunny . . . unusual for that time of year. Back to Lima where the rest of the group left us to visit the Galapagos. We decide to take a rest from the gruelling pace and do a little shopping and site seeing in the city. As we prepared for our flight to Quito, Ecuador, we learn that a volcano has just erupted only 60 km. from the city and the heavy ash has caused them to close the airport to international flights. We changed our flight to arrive at Guayaquil instead which is on the coast and then found a local flight that took us on to Quito. We were travelling on November the 13<sup>th</sup> and the flight number was 911 . . . good thing we are not superstitious! By the time we get to Quito, a lot of the ash had been cleared away but the wind was still full of it and we bought surgical masks to wear for when it got really bad. We reunited with our group and headed down to the Amazon basin where we traveled up the Napo River by canoe (motorized for our convenience) to a lodge located on the river at the edge of the jungle. After donning our "wellies" at a change room in the lodge which we affectionately dubbed the "boot boutique" , we headed out for the first of two jungle excursions which included sampling Chicha, the local booze followed by a blow-gun demonstration . . . . we would have preferred the demo's to be in the reverse sequence . . . several chickens were almost eliminated as our aim was somewhat impaired at this point. We then head to the South of Ecuador by road through the beauty of high mountains and fertile valleys. One of our stops along the way was Riobamba, a small town near the middle of Ecuador which sports a large military training camp. We left



early the next morning and found out at our next stop that around 4:PM that same day, the munitions storage facility blew up when someone dropped a grenade. Apparently it flattened a two square km. area and left unexploded shells all over the city . . . nine people killed, over 600 injured. Our hotel was only three blocks away from the camp! We travel further South to remote Cuenca where the famous Panama hats are made. On our way, through some heavy rain, we pass a very bad bus accident which doesn't surprise us as we experience buses and trucks passing one another on very narrow, winding roads. Feeling lucky to arrive to Cuenca in one piece, we fly back to Quito . . . enough of the bus and "El Condor Pasa" which is playing wherever we go!! From Quito next morning we travel North by bus (big bus!) to Otavalo which is the largest Indian Market in South America. The Indians are dressed in their colourful native costumes which are not limited to the market. The colourful dress of Ecuador is as common in the fields as it is at the market. Two hours of shopping was followed later in the day with some creative packing in preparation for our trip home. Throughout this trip, one of the big challenges was the language. Over the years, we have found that

most Spanish speaking countries though TV and Internet have adopted English a close second language. We had to dust off our Spanish for this trip as very little English is spoken in either country. See our pictures at [www.browfamily.ca](http://www.browfamily.ca) → "Photos"

We are standing by for tour-leader duty next year in Turkey and Greece. We are scheduled for two back to back tours the month of October but this will be determined by how many people sign up to go.

There is much more news as this has been a busy year with lots of changes, travels, and events but, for now, we wish you all a Merry Christmas and a happy and healthy new year.

Marilyn & Gord