

# 2008 Christmas News from the Browns

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## South American Adventure

In February, we escorted a group of people to Peru & Ecuador where volcanoes, stormy weather and the temperament of the local people usually present us with some exiting travel adventures. This year was no exception – in fact, it probably will hold a record for the number of problems in a single trip. It all started when some of our guests' luggage was left in Houston as we transferred to our Lima, Peru flight. Instead of forwarding it with the next flight out of Houston, they sent it to Orlando, FL to be sorted and sent out as freight along with thousands of other "misplaced" pieces of luggage. One of the guests had unwisely packed her much needed medication with her checked luggage, carrying with her only enough for a few days. So we were faced with the dilemma of locating a doctor to order more prescription drugs or finding the luggage before we had to take off for the next leg of our journey. Fortunately, we were in Lima for a



Machu Picchu

few days, and, after four days of berating and bribing, the luggage was, to our great relief, delivered to the hotel just one hour before our departure.

After landing in Cusco the same day, we were concerned with signs of labour unrest. We had been in Cusco during strikes on another occasion

when the local unions blocked the road to the Sacred Valley of the Inca's, a tour-day that takes us through a valley where we spend the day visiting small country villages and ancient Inca temples. This is nothing unusual in Peru as protests are common – so is the lack of communication. Most important in our tour of Peru is the overnight trip to Machu Picchu, the lost city of the Incas, situated high on the top of a mountain above the small town of Aguas Calientes. We normally board a train in Cusco and travel to Aguas Calientes, then, after checking into a local hotel, we take a small bus up to Machu Picchu. The first part of the train ride to the town of Ollyantatambo takes us through open farm land and small villages. The second part follows the river along a gorge and is not accessible by car. The local unions, incensed with the prospect of outside interests building hotels without the use of local labour, blocked the railway through the farm area. We managed to get a bus to take us around the blockades to Ollyantatambo where, under heavy guard in full riot gear, we boarded the train which took us the rest of the way without further incident. We finally got our guests up to Machu Picchu but, many people, who had travelled thousands of miles to see this very famous site that day, never got there because of the labour unrest.

We thought that we were finished with labour issues until we boarded our bus again in Ollyantatambo where we were warned to expect some delays on the return trip to Cuzco. Our dinner was reserved at the hotel for 7PM and the ride through the valley from Ollyantatambo normally takes only an hour so, after arriving at the station at 5PM, we figured we had it made. Through heavy rain, and road blockages, it took us over 4 hours to get to the hotel. The strikers blocked the road with huge boulders, trees, guard rails and burning tires which had us stopping, pleading and paying bribes until we reached the edge of the city. All entrances to the city from the valley-side were blocked and, after several failed attempts at alternate routes, we were finally forced to drive to the other side of the city and double

back to the centre. Determined to beat the strikers, we organized our departure to the airport the next day so that we left very early in the morning. Getting everyone up at 4AM for an 8AM flight took a bit of selling. The buses were on



Cusco Strike

strike so we managed to pile the luggage on the top of a van and get everyone to the airport which, by now, was crowded with tourists who had experienced cancelled flights the day before. As we waited in line to receive our boarding pass, they suddenly closed the airport. The locals were throwing Molotov cocktails over the fence onto the runway so the officials deemed it too dangerous to keep the airport operational. Surrounded by riot police, we called the van back and were fortunate enough to find enough rooms at the hotel. There, we re-planned the Ecuador leg of our trip because of this lost day. We finally took off the next day for Lima but our connecting flight to Ecuador was fully booked so we were forced to wait 12 hours in the airport before we were able to catch the next flight to Quito. The local travel representatives suggested that they meet us at the airport that night and take us immediately to the Amazon which is a 7 hour journey over rough roads. Faced also with the prospect of having to cross a swiftly flowing river in the middle of the night with a bunch of luggage, we refused to do this and, instead, cut out the Southern leg of our journey through Ecuador. We were happy to see home and having doubts about leading a tour to Peru/Ecuador again. We are scheduled to do it all over again in the fall of 2009—good thing we are old and forgetful.

## Merry Christamas!

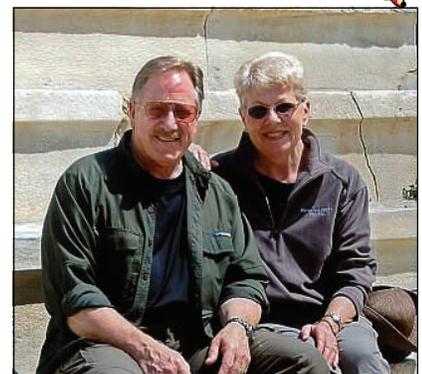
FROM THE BROWS

"May peace and plenty be the first to lift the latch on your door, and happiness be guided to your home by the candle of Christmas."

### On Being 65

We're still getting used to the "seniors deals". Seems we just got over showing our drivers license to get into the pub, now we have to present our Gold card to prove we have actually reached the ripe old age of 65. On a recent ferry trip to Victoria, we were surprised to discover that we had saved just about \$60.00 on the round trip. Seniors' day at the Bay is now a monthly event as they knock off 15% even if the item is on sale. Life is good. The other side is getting used to the aches and pains that come with the territory. Both of us go to the gym regularly so we're staying in decent shape. Gord took the boys (Grandkids) to the pool the other day and

they were jumping off the three metre board. They said "I'll bet you can't do that Grandpa!" After a couple of dives (seems the competitive training never left him), they were left with their mouths hanging open and Gord limped home to ice his prosthetic knee and have an afternoon nap. Gord says the only really good thing that you can say about being 65 is that you stop giving a hoot about the soup stain on the front of your shirt. Mind you, there is no longer a tie to intercept the drop. And, if what you say in a crowd is met with dead silence, you can always write it off to old age. Memory lapses are now forgivable and so is taking your time at the seniors buffet. Being an old fart ain't so bad!



Alexandria, Egypt



Ben is now 13 and started high school in September. We attended the “graduation” celebrations this year as he moved on to grade 8. It was a much bigger deal than when we moved on to junior high – just a “sock-hop”-what’s that Grandpa? He is now a challenge to his Mom and Dad who threaten murder on a regular basis. He’s at the age now where he’s figured out that it’s easier to beg for forgiveness than it is to ask permission. He has a paper route and earns money babysitting so is doing

OK. The house rule for the boys is that they must put half of their earnings in the bank and they can blow the rest. From what I hear, Ben hasn’t learned much from this global financial crisis and is into his dad for a few dollars at the moment. Mathew is 10 and the athlete in the family. They are both into martial arts but Mathew also is into soccer. They are both in great shape as Mitch has them doing sit ups and push ups when they get out of line, which is pretty often most days – sounds like the army! We spent a week with them while their folks were away on business. Mathew was telling Gord about his math teacher one day and Gord asked if she was good looking. Mathew said “Ya but she’s already married.” So much for hitting on his teacher! Like all boys of their generation, they are experts at kicking back on the couch. Too bad they didn’t know Gord’s dad who had the uncanny ability to assign work detail to anyone caught relaxing in a chair. The couch wouldn’t even have a chance to get warm before you were whisked off to mow the lawn or clean the windows.



### Cuba Cultural Tour

If we were to describe Cuba in a word, it would be “decay”. Castro’s goal to have everyone educated and housed has been accomplished at the expense of almost every other aspect of their existence. Grand old buildings have been left to rot and decay. Abandoned by wealthy people fleeing the country during the revolution, they are now multi-family dwellings occupied by people who live mostly in squalor. Clothes strung out between the Roman columns on wash day are the only evidence that someone actually lives there. The tourist areas of Havana have been upgraded somewhat but the rest of the country is falling apart. We spent the first four days with a Cuban family in a Casa Particular—the Cuban version of a B&B.. Ana and Pepe were very generous with their time and, between daily visits into Old Havana, we spent hours with them over dinner learning about how Cubans manage to live-[www.anahavana.com](http://www.anahavana.com). Everything is in short supply so much of the time is spent travelling all over the place trying to find things as simple as toilette paper. Subsidized food is rationed by the state and can be purchased with local Pesos using a ration book. Beyond that, there are government run “mini-marts” where extra



food can be purchased with CUC - the tourist dollars. There is not enough room here to explain the two Cuban economies - it is very complicated and most Cubans are resigned to a system that can only be likened to our third generation of welfare recipients. They own nothing and, although they have exclusive entitlement to live in a house or use a car, they cannot sell them. If it is not passed on to the next generation, it is returned to the state and assigned to someone else. With no pride of ownership, there is little incentive to paint or repair so everything is left in a decapitate state of disrepair. The city of Havana is dotted with beautiful parks and in the days before the revolution, we could imagine that they would have been wonderful places to meet and spend time with friends and neighbours. They are now left unattended; the swings are rusted,



Agatho’s Taverna Island of Crete

Our Egypt and Greek Island tours were uneventful this year. We are working much closer with our guide in Egypt now and have made some changes to the schedule that make the tour flow easier. The Greek Island part is a lot more fun for us because it’s not so busy with tourists. The pace is slow and we get to mix the cultural experience with the culinary ones. We have made so many friends in the restaurant and hotel business that it’s more like visiting old friends than it is taking folks on vacation. We think the guests take comfort in knowing that we have a good relationship with the people that provide us with services, always greeting us with a big hug and lots of extra food. The high-

light of our Greek Island tour is always the last few days on the Island of Crete. We take the guests up into the mountains of Western Crete where the water is as sweet as wine. Nestled among grape vines and orange trees is a small rural taverna that we love to frequent. It is a very small taverna so we have to time our meal between when the locals are there for lunch and dinner. Agatho, the proprietor, starts cooking for us early in the morning and brings her sister (a sheep herder) and a friend in to help with the process. We have pork, chicken, homemade sausages, Greek style lemon potatoes, salads and lots of wine. After the main meal everyone goes into the kitchen and helps to make cheese pies out of phyllo pastry which is served hot and covered with sugar. Agatho and her family line up outside the taverna to bid us farewell and we never get a complaint about the meal. It is a guaranteed crowd pleaser.



broken lamp posts and the sidewalks falling apart into loose blocks. Only the parks that are frequented by the tourists are maintained, the rest of them are left to the elements. After the first four days on our own, we joined a tour group where we traveled from one end of the Island to the other. We first visited the Vinales Valley West of Havana where they grow oranges and grapefruit. From there, we headed for the Bay of Pigs where Gord did some snorkelling during our lunch break. From there, we visited limestone caves which were navigated by boat on an underground river then on to a beautiful Orchid farm which, unfortunately had been hit hard by recent hurricanes. Traveling South East now, we visited the town of Cienfuegos then crossed the Sierra de Escambray Mountains to Trinidad where we spent the evening dining on fish, chicken or pork – the only three things available to eat during the entire tour. The highlight of the day was a bum-numbing, one hour ride in an ancient Russian built truck over rough roads to the top of the mountain where we were treated to a nature walk in the forest with a local guide. From Trinidad, we traveled through Guantanamo to the town of Camaguey, the “city of plazas” where we stayed overnight and were treated to more gastronomic delights – fish,

chicken or pork! From Camaguey we continued our journey East crossing the Sierra Maestras to Holguin, then on to Baracoa. The full name of the city is Nuestra Senora de la Asuncion de Baracoa and comes from the aboriginal term meaning “End of the Land” – and that’s where it is located, at the farthest Eastern point of the Island. From there, we came back West to Santiago de Cuba before flying back to Havana. During our entire journey, we stayed in 13 hotels and only one of them had hot water. Most of the faucets and toilettes did not work properly, elevators, if there was one, rarely worked – it was sort of like camping in a hotel. Overall, it was a great experience but a rough trip, with little in the way of the travel comforts we are used to. We learned a lot about the way Cubans live – maybe someday it will change.

