

2010

Christmas News from the Browns

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Merry Christmas to All



And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more. ~ Dr. Seuss



45th Wedding Anniversary—Napa Valley

Would you believe it, February 12th this year marks our 45th wedding anniversary and we marked the occasion by driving down the Oregon Coast to the Napa & Sonoma Valleys. We made no reservations, had no timetable and made no plan other than to visit wineries once we got to California. The idea was to travel in February in order to avoid the crowds and that we did. Taking our time along the Oregon coast, we stopped at small towns along the way and were surprised to see so many business closed and store fronts boarded up. We didn't have to worry about traffic – there was none at that time of the year making it all the more enjoyable for us. We stopped at a small town Best Western somewhere on the coast where they had a limo parked out front. Marilyn asked if there was a wedding going on and they said that they had the limo available free of charge for any guest that needed a ride “down town”. So we arrived at the Irish pub that evening amid

curious stares from pub patrons who wondered who the celeb's were. Splitting the meals became routine as we couldn't keep up with the heavy weights that frequented the local eateries.

Once we got settled in the hotel in Napa, we discovered that there were 450 wineries in Napa and 256 in Sonoma. Acquiring a mountain of local advertizing, we spent the first evening mapping out our planned visits and programming them into the GPS. Although the grape leaves were not out as they are in summer and fall, the bright yellow mustard seed was blooming between the barren rows of vines and which presented an unbelievable glow over the whole landscape. Marilyn did some wine tasting while Gord drove and we were treated to some wonderful tours of the wineries and their gift shops. The new 4Runner suspension was tested as we were unencumbered by the normal weight restrictions when we fly,

Volcanoes and Strikes

We have been escorting the Egypt and Greek Island tours for Royal Heights since 2004 so, in recent years, there hasn't been much new to report. This year was very different, however. The first hint of trouble came with the eruption of a volcano in Iceland which shut down just about every airport in the world. We were scheduled to leave for Cairo a couple of days ahead of the tour, flying Vancouver/Calgary/Frankfurt/Cairo. When we arrived at the airport in Vancouver, we were advised by a representative of Lufthansa that it would not be a good idea to fly to Calgary because it wasn't likely that the connecting flight to Frankfurt would go. Earlier in the day, we had acquired our boarding passes online for all flights up to Frankfurt so we said – we're goin'. The connecting flight to Frankfurt left Calgary on time and, as it turned out, was the first international flight to leave Canada since the airports had been shut down earlier in the week. We had no great expectations for catching the connecting flight from Frankfurt to Cairo but, when we arrived at the Frankfurt airport, the Cairo flight was one of only two flights that were leaving Frankfurt that day. We arrived on time but several guests who had earlier flights had to cancel their tour because subsequent attempts to reschedule flights were not successful.

After our Egypt tour, we normally leave our group in Cairo in the morning and join the Greek Island group in Athens in the afternoon of the same day. The Greeks, however, declared a general strike on the day that we were due to arrive - along with 21 other guests who were waiting for connecting flights at a number of gateway cities. The strike closed the airport in Athens for a day so we were stuck in Cairo while the Greeks proceeded to conduct a violent protest that ended after 3 people were killed when a bank was fire bombed. Some of our group had arrived before the strike so they were on their own until we managed to get to the hotel a day late. Normally, after we arrive in Athens, we have dinner with the guests and prepare to leave for the Island of Paros on the 7AM ferry the next morning. Many of the group, however, didn't get to Athens until 2:30PM so we arranged to leave on the 5PM ferry instead. Some of the guests were still stuck in gateway cities like Paris, London etc. so Marilyn left with the majority of the group while Gord stayed behind in Athens to pick up the remainder as they drifted in. It took us two days to eventually get everyone together but, once we were on our way, it was business as usual. It's a good thing we have friends in the taxi business in Athens otherwise we would still be there.



Napa Valley in February—no people !!



2010 Olympics—Whistler

The Olympic spirit was alive and well here in Vancouver and even the Olympic detractors had to admit that it was worth the money and effort. For the Browns, the festivities were enjoyed in the comfort of our media room. The PVR worked overtime as we reviewed events that had been recorded earlier in the day. The lack of snow was a little disconcerting but this occurred only on Cyprus Mountain where the special events like moguls, aerials and skier cross events took place. The big events like Downhill, Super G and Giant Slalom all took place at Whistler where there was plenty of snow. Unfortunately, the Olympics related news was all about sending dump trucks full of snow up the mountain in order to facilitate the events but, in truth, there was never much of a panic among the

organizers. We were on our way home from California during the first few days of the Olympics. We were pleasantly surprised with the positive US television coverage of the games. They had previously recorded clips featuring Canadian cities from Vancouver to Halifax – it was very well done.

This summer, we visited one of the new venues at Whistler Mountain - the new Whistler-Blackcomb Peak 2 Peak Gondola which stretches 4.4 kilometres between the two mountains. One of the gondolas has a glass bottom so we made a special point of selecting that car to travel across the valley 1,427 feet below. The 12 minute ride offers a spectacular panoramic view and you can go back and forth as many times as you wish.



Peru/Ecuador Tour—November

We arrived home from our Peru/Ecuador tour on November 23 at midnight and were greeted by a blast of unusually cold air along with several inches of snow. We had spent our nine hour lay-over in Houston lounging around a hotel day-room getting caught up on emails and just relaxing. Some of our fellow passengers, however, had just come from the golf course in Houston and boarded the plane in shorts and golf shirts. It was almost 80°F in Houston and 10°F (-12°C) in Vancouver – we last saw them switching to golf shoes so they wouldn't slip on the ice.

The tour went well except for our flights from Cuzco, in Peru to Quito, in Ecuador. This flight required a connection in Lima but the Peruvian antiquities folks were so intent on catching tourists that were leaving with more than their quota of Cocoa leaves, that they caused the flight to be delayed by several hours. Our connection time was tight in Lima – 1 ½ hours – so we missed our connecting flight from Lima to Quito which

we took the next day. The airline put us up in a hotel in Lima and, other than the logistics of moving 25 people and all the luggage to and from the airport by taxi, we had a wonderful time at a 5 Star Hotel. It's the first time that we have ever stayed in a suite on the top floor of a hotel that included a sauna and whirl pool bath.

Normally, we do an afternoon tour in Quito, then leave for the Amazon basin in the morning. Because we missed that evening in Quito, we arranged for our Amazon bus to meet us at the airport with box lunches so that we could just blast off to the lodge which is about a 7 hour drive. The only problem was having to cross the Napo River (like the Fraser only not as deep) at night. We usually get in motorized canoes and ride for 20 minutes on the river to the lodge but, because it was dark, they decided to take us directly across the river and use pickup trucks to take us the rest of the way. We were relieved to find that the crossing was bathed in bright flood



This year, Gord joined two marine biologists and two photographers on a search for the very rare Primnoa Coral. Found normally past 300 metres it is well beyond the range of a recreation diver. There was a rumour in the area that the Coral could be found in an inlet

Diving Knight Inlet

near Port Alice at about 25 metres and, with the help of our skipper on the MV Mamro, we actually found the area where it grew. This condition is very unusual and the biologists were delighted with the find. They were also busy collecting small critters for aquariums and taking samples of a rare sponge that were sent to labs in California. The photographers had a ball with the huge branches of coral which are rarely seen in these waters. Some of the largest pieces were located on Gord's Rock, aptly named for the diver that discovered it for the group! Since Gord was the only one without a camera, he got to play poster boy for the photographers—the purpose, of course was to catalogue the size and colour in relation to a diver. This trip was truly amazing as we also dove with Sea Lions, Eels and large Puget Sound crabs.



lights and, instead of pickup trucks (it was raining), they commandeered the local 20 seater bus – complete with dingle-balls – to take us to the Casa del Suizo.



Unlike other tours that we lead, this one is busy and very tiring. We are on buses, trains, planes, vans & canoes and always on the move so that meals have to be arranged on the fly. The group was a good one, however, and everyone was up for a challenge.



Merry
Christmas