

2013

Christmas News from the Browns

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seaba In March, Gord & his buddy, Mark, boarded the *Nautilus Swell* for some diving in the Gulf Islands. The diving was not so great but the boat was like a cruise ship compared to what they have been used to in the past. Normally used to taking their own sleeping bags, cramped spaces and so-so food, they were treated to clean sheets and turned down beds every night. The boat sported a hot tub and ensuite bathroom and the food was exceptional. Prepared by chef Malinda, the food was as good

as you get in any fine-dining restaurant. Her husband, Chris, was the boat/dive master and Gord knew them well from another dive boat they served on years ago. A great reunion.



Cuba Tour - January

Our escort duties for Royal Heights Tours this year in Cuba combined business with pleasure as Paige and Mitch joined us on the tour - it was Mitch's 50th birthday and he wanted to celebrate it with a visit to the island of Cuba. We arrived a few days in advance and stayed a few days after the tour so that we could introduce them to our friends in Havana.



After we said good bye to our tour guests, we hired a car and driver to do some SCUBA diving at the Bay of Pigs on the other side of the island. We took our own regulators, snorkels and masks, not wanting to trust the regulator maintenance to the Cubans. Good thing too because one of the dives was very advanced taking us to depth of over 100 feet into a cave that didn't seem to have any end. It was fun for us to spend some time on our own in Cuba without the burden of having to look after a group.

Good Bye Tour Leading

The month of May saw us once again in the Greek Islands leading a tour group for Royal Heights Tours. We had a large group this time but they were all great to deal with and we had a chance to visit with the many Greek friends we have come to know in the hospitality industry. Of course, who isn't going to be friendly when you bring 24 guests to dinner! During the course of the last ten years of leading tours in the Greek Islands we have learned a lot about the culture and have come to understand their economics and their way of life. Sadly, this would be our last tour of the islands as we have decided that ten years is enough so gave Royal Heights our notice. We told them that we would do the Cuba trip for them in January, 2014 but that would be the last. We were scheduled to escort a group to Peru and Ecuador as we did last year but Marilyn had back surgery in

October which did not give her enough recovery time to make the trip. This ends our tour leading career that had us leading tour groups to Thailand, Turkey, Cuba, the Greek Islands, Peru, Ecuador, Egypt, Jordan and the Sinai. Most of these tours took place in the Spring or Fall just ahead or behind the tourist season for the country that we were visiting. This meant that our personal travel had to take place at peak tourist seasons which were often crowded and expensive.

The owners of Royal Heights tours have shown their appreciation for the work we have done for them by offering us a complimentary tour of our choice at their expense. We have chosen Northern Italy where we will go next Spring if they have enough guests booked to make it happen. We spent a lot of time in Rome in 1990, but never made it to the Northern part of Italy.

Trip to Spain - September



We finally made it to Spain. We say "finally" because, two years ago, we had purchased tickets and made hotel reservations to go but had to cancel when we got word that we both had cancer. After taking a year to deal with both issues, we booked the trip once again for this year - two years later. We left in September with another couple who have travelled with us before on several tours that we escorted. We rented a car in Barcelona and drove a total of 2,200 km all the way to Madrid. We stayed and explored Barcelona, Valencia, Alicante, Granada, Ronda, Seville, Cordoba, Toledo, Avila and finally, Madrid. The goal was to see all of the historical parts of Spain during this trip which took us to Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, Alhambra, we saw flamenco dancing, visited the Royal Palace and the Prado in Madrid and much more. Driving from city to city was made stress-free by six lane divided highways but navigating the historic parts of the cities by car proved to be very difficult. On more than one occasion, we enlist-

ed the help of a local person on a scooter, motorcycle or on foot to help us find the hotel. The trip would have been more enjoyable had we taken the train from city to city, then a taxi to the hotel from the train station. The train system is excellent in Spain and it's the only way to explore the historical parts of the country. If the historical sites are of no interest, the road systems - even the rural roads - are well maintained and easy to navigate so visiting small towns in the country side by car could be fun. The cities were very crowded, mostly with tourists and many of the historic squares of the cities took on a circus-like atmosphere with an amazing number of activities designed to separate the tourists from their money. There were jugglers, mimes, people selling lottery tickets, gold buyers, Goofy, Mickey, three of the Seven Dwarfs, even a guy with an electric drill who challenged people in the crowd to drill a hole in his head. Surrounding the historic squares were McDonalds, Burger King, KFC, Starbucks, TGI Fridays to name a few. It certainly took the "historic" part out of the old squares. Maps of most cities looked like a plate of spaghetti. Since there were no town planners 600 -700 years ago when these cities were being built, the labyrinth of roads had even the pedestrians confused.



Six Months of Sunshine !

We have been very lucky with weather this year. In May we were in the Greek Islands where we never see rain then, from May until the end of October, the only rain we saw was in Madrid, Spain, and that wasn't much. We normally don't travel in the summer and are used to the usual West Coast summer rain. This year, however was the driest on record and, in September, when our normal "wetcoast" weather kicks in, we were away in Europe for the month, missing the rain and storms that apparently hit the Lower Mainland area during that time. When we returned in early October, it was sunny and dry once again.

Marilyn's Back Surgery

Four days after our return from Spain, Marilyn underwent back surgery. She's been trying to resolve an issue with her back for over 2 years and has taken the final step by going under the knife. We started with the public system a couple of years ago but started paying for private treatment in an effort to speed up the diagnostic process. After physio, massage therapy, traction, acupuncture, cortisone injections, chiropractor and drugs we finally paid for another MRI, then a consultation with a top neurosurgeon to get to the bottom of it as quickly as possible. Pretty sad when you have to take charge and pay for your own medical treatment in order to get anything accomplished. The MRI showed a herniated disk which compressed a nerve root causing numbness and pain in her back, hip and knee. The Neurosurgeon recognized the problem and was able to clean up the hernia and patch the disk but results will not be evident for a couple of months. In the mean-

time, Gord (under close supervision) is providing most of the back power required for the household chores. As a result of the surgery, we had to turn down the Peru/Ecuador tour for November so one of the owners, Norman Bruce, lead the tour in our place. We were hoping to see our friends in Peru and Ecuador one last time before giving it up but we still keep in touch with them by email. That tour is very different from when we originally took over in 2002 as we made many changes to the schedule and venues that made it flow a little better. One of the biggest problems with leading a tour in Ecuador was the condition of the roads. They always seemed to be under construction, washed out or covered with lava flow from an erupting volcano, which caused many delays. Last year, we were delighted to see that they had made a concerted effort to improve all of the roads which made life for us very much easier.



**BEN GRADUATES
IN 2013**

Our oldest grandson, Ben, has now graduated from high school and has secured an apprenticeship in auto mechanics. To give Ben a start, Mitch turned his wood working shop into an auto mechanic's garage complete with hydraulic hoist, organized shelving and work bench area. He bought a Nissan Skyline which he intends to rebuild but, at the moment, the Skyline is in a million pieces and the project has been put on hold in favour of his new girlfriend. It is unlikely that much progress will be made on the rebuilding project before year end.

Mathew, our youngest grandson, is so much different as he is very much engaged with his buddies and sports. He is very active in soccer and grandpa (Gord) continues to freeze his butt off on the sidelines this year. Electric gloves, full rain gear and the thermos of tea are still no match for the cool damp weather and, by the time the second half comes around, it's usually foot stomping time. Once the soccer season ends, relief will be found indoors as the ball hockey season commences. It's a lot warmer in the arena and the concession stand sells popcorn!



Marilyn & Paige in New York



In April Marilyn and our Daughter, Paige, took a "girly" trip to New York City for a week. They stayed at the Crowne Plaza Hotel right on Times Square and spent every waking moment exploring the city. Highlights were Ground Zero, Top Of The Rock, Empire State Building, 2 Broadway shows (Mama Mia & Jersey Boys), boat cruise around Manhattan island,

visiting Yankee Stadium, having a soul food lunch in Harlem, a Food On Foot tour, NBC Studio tour, Central Park, numerous museums, Hop On Hop Off buses and much more. I'm sure shopping was another highlight. They're already talking about another trip together, but to a different location.

