



lighttip

For Lottie & Ben, the best travelling companions we could
have ever hoped for. In lieu of inheritance.

18.10.2005
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Pretty Much Packed

As a family of four, with twenty-five kilos luggage allowance each, we've a whole hundred kilos of stuff to pack into two bags. Currently the spare room looks like the inside of a removal van. I can almost fit everything I'm taking into my pockets, but Lottie and Ben have an outfit for every eventuality.

We're just about ready, and as long as I don't develop a hernia lifting all this stuff into the car to the airport, we should be fine.

We fly out from Teesside Airport tomorrow morning to Heathrow, where we connect for JFK.

May 01, 2005.

Computer Says No

Well we were anticipating travel problems along the way; we just hadn't expected them so early in the trip. We arrived at Teesside airport to be told that due to a computer error, our flight would leave ninety minutes late, meaning we would miss our connection to New York.

Anyway we did miss our 14:00 flight and had to take the 18:00 instead. This was only frustrating in as much as we'd planned the timings to try to minimise sleep disruption.

So at least we're now in NY, which is great. The bad news is it's 3am and we're all wide-awake. Lottie keeps asking 'when will it be morning?'. I've tried, unsuccessfully, to explain the whole timezone thing. Turns out I'm not exactly sure how it all works myself.

May 03, 2005.

Health And Safety

Highlights today included a superb playground in Madison Square, a trip up the Empire State building, a two-hour post-prandial nap, then a walk along Broadway to Times Square then on to Grand Central station.

Interestingly, I was reprimanded twice in the Empire State building (at ground level I hasten to add) for carrying Ben on my shoulders. It's a health and safety issue. Apparently. Yet two blocks away someone would happily sell me a gun over the counter without batting an eyelid. I think their phrase is 'go figure'.

The children are adjusting well to local time, but the real test will be tomorrow's wake up time.

May 04, 2005.

Central Park

So maybe the children haven't quite got this whole new timezone thing yet. We started the day at zero five hundred hours this morning and were almost first in the breakfast queue. We'd hit the subway by 08:15 and we rode out to Central Park. It's huge; bigger than a giant Lottie commented. And she's right.

We spent some time in another great playground. On our return I suspect the swings in Sedgfield won't have quite the same appeal as they once had.

We bought another buggy today so that we can transport both children through their midday nap. Despite this, neither Lottie nor Ben decided to take advantage of this new facility and didn't sleep a wink. I'm not entirely sure how we're going to transport this additional piece of luggage on subsequent

plane journeys. I suspect we may have to charter a Hercules all of our own.

We ate at a Cuban café for lunch, and in the afternoon we tried to visit the Guggenheim museum. Unfortunately they don't allow 'strollers' by which time we had two, so we gave it a miss. Instead we went to the Natural History museum. Despite the dinosaur room being closed, it was great and well worth a visit.

We battled the rush hour home on the subway, and ended the day with a hotdog picnic in our hotel room. I do hope housekeeping has access to a carpet cleaner.

Today we've all missed the midday nap and consequently been more cranky-pants than square-pants. Nevertheless it's been another full-on day and we're looking forward to more of the same tomorrow.

May 05, 2005.

I'm A Lady

The children slept until six this morning, making us almost dangerously late for breakfast. By now we've got the breakfast thing well rehearsed, and give or take a wobbly table or choking infant it has become a reasonably relaxed affair.

America seems to have legitimised eating cake for breakfast. Whilst uptight Brits sit in salivatory anticipation until tea-time, our transatlantic cousins seem only to get out of bed on the promise of a doughnut, muffin or indeed anything my grandmother would have categorised broadly as 'fancies'.

Following our early morning cakefest we took the subway down to south Manhattan. The trains were really busy and we looked totally incongruous travelling through the financial

district with two strollers. We messed up initially and missed a change, so ended up walking miles underground to reconnect on the right line. We were both struck by the willingness of others to help us with the buggies up and down the stairs; a total contrast to my experience of finding volunteers back home.

From Battery Park we caught the ferry to Liberty Island and took photos of the statue which is of ambiguous gender. Ben would point and shout 'man', whereupon Lottie would correct him by saying 'no it's a lady'. Whatever. What they did agree on is that it's not a torch held aloft in the right hand but an ice-cream.

We travelled on to Ellis Island from there, but the combination of history, culture and four flights of stairs proved too big an emotional and physical challenge. So we went to the café and shipped on out.

Rather than jump straight back on the subway we walked back through the financial district. We passed Ground Zero and were struck by the enormity of the whole thing; the event, the tragedy and the gap in the skyline. Almost four years on, the newspapers here are full of the story of the rejection of the plans for a replacement tower which is apparently too vulnerable to attack.

We ate this evening's meal close to the hotel at a place called 'Tony's'. Tony might not be the cleanest kid in town, but he did feed us all for less than nine quid. Ben kept the other hobos, sorry, diners, amused throughout by shouting 'tax-eeeeee' each time a yellow cab drove by, which was about every fifteen seconds.

Anyway, unless I'm struck down by 'Tony's revenge' more tomorrow.

May 06, 2005.

It's All Happening At The Zoo

We woke at a civilised 06:00 again this morning and began the day by sorting out some hand washing. We've consciously not brought heaps of clothes with us to save on weight. The downside is that we'll have to wash our stuff at least once a week. I never give much thought to the washing machine back home, but as I was scrubbing about in the bath, I gave thanks to the God of all time saving devices.

We broke with tradition this morning and ate out for breakfast. I'll not bore you with the details but it was mostly fried and then covered in maple syrup. Splendid.

Following breakfast we caught the subway up to Central Park, this time to visit the zoo. I'm not a huge fan of caged animals, and the last time I was at a zoo I was attacked by a free-range monkey. So I wasn't really looking forward to the visit as much as the children. Having said all that, it was very sensitively done and the sight of polar bears swimming underwater is something that will stay with me for some time.

Our next stop was the Museum of Modern Art. On the way we passed FAO Schwartz, which I'd never heard of, but Bec told me was a world famous toyshop, so we went inside. Lottie was wide-eyed and even as an adult I was very taken in. Had it fitted into our cases I would have been very tempted to have bought the twenty-foot stuffed giraffe. A snip at only ten thousand dollars; worth it just to see the look on our neighbours' faces as it grazed their eucalyptus trees over the fence.

MoMA was a bit disappointing. Admittedly we didn't do it justice, as the kids were getting fractious by this stage. The photography exhibition was weak, the Andy Warhol stuff was as you'd expect and the rest was a mixture of the usual Pollocks.

Ben was eager to climb up anything that was sculpted and to his defence much of it looked near identical to the climbing

frames he'd been using all week. Oh and MoMA prohibits all forms of shoulder mounted infant transportation.

We finished the day in a tex-mex restaurant and as usual were all bathed and jim-jamed up by seven o'clock.

And what of the election huh? We learned of the result via the BBC News website on this new fangled Internet thing. Free wireless Internet access in our hotel room means it's like we've never left home. And email from friends and enemies back home is cool too. Besides it's cheaper than postcards and almost as quick.

May 07, 2005.

Reward Offered

Lottie and Ben have finally adjusted to New York time and today we woke at a positively sloth-like 07:00. By the time we got down to breakfast it was standing room only, so we stole some bagels and returned to our room to grind them into the carpet.

We chose not to use the subway today, but rather walked south down past the Flatiron building, to Union Square (where there was a farmers' market of all things), through Greenwich Village and into SoHo. We had planned to continue into Chinatown but the volume of people on the streets was just too high to manoeuvre two buggies without being nunchucked.

SoHo has the best collection of shops I'd ever seen in one place. Highlights included the Apple Store and the Patagonia shop. The whole place is a sea of retail über-cool. I don't even like Apple Macs yet the slate and birch of their flagship store was almost enough to make me move to the dark side. Anyway, I got a grip of myself and left without so much as an iPod.

Unsurprisingly the children were less impressed with what was turning out to be an average Saturday schlep round the shops for them. There was a reasonable amount of crying which we stymied with food bribes. Contrary to advice from most parenting manuals, there isn't much that the promise of a trip to the swings via Ben & Jerry's won't get you.

In amongst our urban adventurings we had a setback of significant proportion. Ben lost clothy. For those of you who have not had the pleasure, clothy is an eight-inch square of red and cream striped silk. Almost without exception it is covered in snot and spittle. Picking it up is like wrestling a jellyfish, but Ben loves it unconditionally. Anyway, it's gone. Lost forever. Somewhere between Broadway and Chinatown. Probably.

We do have a reserve, but we were hoping not to have to introduce it as early as day six. As a precautionary measure, the reserve is now not even allowed out of the travel cot. It's that serious.

On a lighter note, we've had email from many of you. Please keep them coming; your reports of miserable weather and tiresome working conditions only serves to heighten our pleasure.

May 08, 2005.

Mind The Gap

Our last full day in New York began just after six, and after yesterday's log-jam in the breakfast room we were keen to take pole position at the bagel counter. So not long after seven we'd been fed, watered and were raring to go.

We were headed to the Children's Museum of Manhattan and so took the subway uptown. The subway was much quieter

than usual; the only other passengers were drunks, vicars, drunk vicars and other parents of insomniac offspring.

The whole Sunday morning thing was very relaxing. In fact I was sufficiently relaxed not to notice Rebecca trying to squeeze out of the train door behind me. I heard her shout my name and then turned around to lip-read a stream of expletives through the window of the now closed doors. And so the train hurtled off towards the Bronx leaving Lottie and me on the platform.

Lottie was quick to ask why mummy hadn't got off and asked if we'd ever see her and Ben again. I told her not to worry and take comfort in the fact that at least she was with the parent with the wallet, subway ticket and sweets. That seemed to cheer her up.

Luckily in the nanoseconds following our unexpected separation we had managed to concoct an elaborate system of entirely unprepared hand signals that suggested I should stay where I was and that she would ride to the next stop, get off, cross the platform then take the next train downtown. Suffice to say it requires greater effort on behalf of the gesticulator than the relatively simple 'Can I have the bill?' or 'Do you want a brew?'

Lottie and I had run out of sweets by the time the others returned. Still it wasn't all bad news as we were soon at the Museum. Dr Seuss and Dora The Explorer were the order of the day and we spent a jolly morning amongst the exhibits.

After lunch we headed back into Central Park via The North Face store. Central Park on a sunny Sunday afternoon is a sight to behold. People really do sit and play chess on the park benches. There was a fabulous al fresco roller disco where people were strutting their stuff in eighties gear. For the first time in about fifteen years I looked quite stylish. It just looked like I'd forgotten my skates.

It was here that I saw my first ever segway. Reliant on gyroscopic sensors, these battery-powered devices were going to radically transform the face of human transportation. Well five years on it looks like they've come no further than the local roller disco. Tomorrow's World, it's the kiss of death.

We wandered on past Strawberry Fields, a memorial to John Lennon. I spent several moments trying to work out the significance of the simple inscription 'I'm a genie' until my pop-picker wife set me straight.

Afterwards we went to the carousel, a traditional fairground affair with proper wooden horses. None of your poor facsimile Postman Pat vans and Ninja Turtles in the wrong colours here; this was the real deal. I have to say it was absolutely out of this world. Hard to say who enjoyed it most, us or the children.

We finished the day with hot dogs in the park, a great end to a superb afternoon.

Tomorrow we fly out to Toronto. We'll be sad to leave New York; it's been better than we'd ever dared to consider. It's cleaner, more friendly and better suited to infants than we'd imagined.

We've had a great time and Lottie summed it up perfectly this evening when she asked if we could come and live here. And why not?

May 09, 2005.

Hey Canada Eh?

Today saw us check out of our hotel in Manhattan and take a taxi out to the airport. We were headed for Ontario to catch up with my cousins Tania & Kevin, so the lion's share of the day was spent travelling.

Early in the proceedings we suffered another loss. Despite checking the taxi we managed to arrive at Newark airport one bag short. Luckily it was just a bag containing a few items to keep the children occupied en route, but the situation was frustrating nonetheless. Lottie, bless her was quite sanguine about the whole thing and diffused the situation by saying 'well maybe if the driver has children he can give the bag to them'. Cute if a little misguided huh?

The short flight to Toronto passed uneventfully; just the way I like my flights.

On arrival at the car hire place we had a moment of panic when I compared the size of our 'compact' hire car with our 'executive' pile of personal effects. I'm not quite sure how we managed to shoehorn all that stuff into the car. It was like repacking a life raft. Had the airbags have gone off, we would have surely been suffocated.

It only took about an hour to drive across to Kitchener where we sat on the deck soaking up the sunshine.

Shortly after arrival Kevin and I set off to buy beer. The sale of alcohol is regulated by the government here, so we had to go down to the LCBO, the Liquor Control Board of Ontario. They have a control board - how cool is that?

Steaks and beer followed, a real Canadian welcome. We consumed a lot of both. How's my typing? Call 1-800-QWERTY.

A quick word about technology. I'm connected to the Internet via my iPAQ device right now. Best of all I'm hooked up to an

open wireless connection somewhere in the neighbourhood.
Wireless rocks.

Unless the locals lynch me for purloining their bandwidth,
more tomorrow.

May 10, 2005.

Come On In The Water's Fine

We've been getting lots of mail recently encouraging me to keep this site updated daily. I can only imagine that television back home has hit a particularly bad patch. Regardless, the pressure to find something interesting to write about is growing daily. If it gets to about midday local time and the day is panning out as scheduled I begin to get a little twitchy.

Therefore I was delighted when at only 09:30 this morning Ben fell into a pond. In a show of shameful parenting we had taken the children to feed some Canadian geese and their goslings. Despite our taking along a smorgasbord of what could only be described as goose and gander sweetmeats, the geese just weren't interested and swam away from us almost as soon as we had arrived.

Eager as a Foie Gras farmer Ben pursued the geese just an inch too far. The bank collapsed and he splashed full length into the water.

It was a bittersweet moment. Despite not having the video camera handy I'd already mentally addressed a freepost envelope to 'You've been framed'. The pay-off was that I'd have something to write about later in the day.

Rebecca was less than an arms-length away and so was able to haul him out in the blink of an eye. So whilst Ben was damp, upset and covered in goose-poop his head stayed

above water. So if social services are reading then you can call the search off.

There was a great moment of comedy tension where our hosts, Tania and Kevin were evaluating the most appropriate response. Their shoulders had already begun to judder and their cheeks were twitching, but it was only as Lottie and I began to fall about hopelessly that they felt able to join in the laughter with thigh slapping abandon.

Fortunately we weren't far from base and we soon stripped Ben off and had him sluiced down in the bath. Half an hour later we were on our way to see Rowland and Sheila in Great Bend.

Great Bend is on the shore of Lake Huron. It's a small town with great access to what was described as a beach. I was sceptical, thinking that any beach on the shore of a lake would be unspectacular. I was about as wrong as it's possible to be. The beach was great, stretched for miles and was lovely and sandy.

Despite its obvious charm Ben seemed in no rush to load test his pampers again and stayed well away from the water.

I proceeded to do that thing that only Dads do which is to try to entice their kids into freezing water on the premise that a swim in a recently defrosted lake will be the best fun they've ever had. To perpetuate this myth Dads then continue to remove all but their underpants and wade manfully into the water. They then shout that obligatory 'actually the water's not that bad' thing, yet in sharp contrast hesitate for several minutes with the gusset of their pants just millimetres above the water. At this stage they usually flap about a bit, a mixture of splashing and trying to find a warmer patch of water until they realise no-one else is interested in supercooling their genitalia and worse still no-one is watching.

Today I was that Dad.

Later we returned to Rowland and Sheila's and ate homemade burgers, which kept everyone happy. To end the day on a humanitarian note Lottie and I even rescued a turtle. Neat huh?

May 11, 2005.

No Losses, Drownings Or Rescues

This post is a little later than usual. I generally write this just before going to sleep but last night I'd been involved in some important government work. The Liquor Control Board of Ontario are hard task masters. At least that's what it feels like this morning.

Yesterday was a relatively gentle day with no losses, drownings or rescues to report. We drove back out to the shores of Lake Huron to a park called the Pinery. The weather was much colder and as a consequence the whole place had much more of a wilderness feel about it. The lake is two hundred miles by one hundred and fifty miles. It's little wonder they call it a great lake. Standing on the beach is like looking out into the ocean. Quite incredible.

Our hosts right now are my aunt and uncle and they have some things that used to belong to my grandparents. Without being too sentimental it's nice that Lottie and Ben can see these ancestral artefacts. There's a clock on the mantelpiece here which used to be in Bromley Cross. It was great to see that again.

We had an email from Lottie and Ben's nursery who are following our adventures. Apparently the stories are being printed out and shared with the children. I can imagine the proud parents of three year olds all over Teesside who yesterday learned the new phrase 'supercooled genitalia'.

May 12, 2005.

Back On The Road

Today we left Grand Bend on the shores of Lake Huron and travelled back towards Toronto to overnight in Kitchener. As we were driving along the highway I was struck by the simplicity of the names of the retail outfits alongside the road. Back home it seems that the more convoluted and abstract the name of a shop the better. Not so in Canada. Spotted today were 'The Beer Store', 'Boat Shop' and my favourite, the terse but descriptive 'Meat'.

We bought neither beer, nor boats, nor meat, but once in Kitchener we did stop at the local Wal-Mart to see what the fuss was about. Holy smoke these guys sell everything. Initially we scurried around looking like we were doing a trolley dash in preparation for a nuclear winter. Then we got a grip; despite everything being super cheap, there was no way a patio set was going to make it onto the next flight as hand luggage.

Earlier in the day one of our buggies had fallen to pieces. It was no surprise really; it had been patched up several times and had seen some action during the four years that we'd had it. So after stripping it of vital components we threw it in the dumpster. It feels better being back down to one buggy; less clutter to transport. Lottie is going to have to learn to walk more quickly as a consequence.

We arrived back at Tania and Kevin's in the late afternoon. They had prepared spaghetti bolognese for us all. Ben added to his portfolio of stunts by slipping out of his chair restraint mechanism and diving headfirst to the floor. On the way down he stopped only briefly to up-end his bowl of pasta sauce splattering it all over the kitchen. The result was a Tracy Emin, Jackson Pollock style fusion. He'd have had a slot at MoMA if he'd done this a week ago.

Our hosts were as gracious as ever and spent the rest of the evening fishing spaghetti out of the air conditioning ducts and wiping sauce from the vertical blinds.

We leave Ontario tomorrow for the next leg of our journey to Alberta. Hey that's a whole new province to devastate.

May 13, 2005.

Welcome To Canmore, Toy Heaven

Today was reasonably devoid of adventure; we spent the day travelling from Kitchener in Ontario, to Canmore in Alberta. We packed up the hire car and scooted off to the airport in Toronto. Just a word on the hire car. If you ever have a long way to drive, six tons of luggage and two wriggling infants could I suggest you select anything other than a Toyota Echo as your vehicle of choice. In fact next time I'm going to try and get one of those trucks they use to transport people from prison to court; plenty big enough for all our stuff and we could keep the kids 'cuffed to their seats.

We arrived at the Air Canada desk in plenty of time, only to find out that we were pretty much all sitting separately on the plane. After a moment rejoicing at the fact that some other guy would have to entertain my one-year-old son on the four-hour flight, my conscience took over. Well actually, it was my wife who is often a more reliable substitute. We told Air Canada that it would be in everyone's interest to be sat as a family, but apparently there was nothing they could do. Eventually we sorted it out ourselves by trading seats once we were boarded but it did seem a crazy way of doing things.

We boarded the plane just as I imagine The Simpsons would. Homer, carrying the car seat down the aisle banged it on everyone's head as he walked past. Oops sorry, oops sorry, sorry, excuse me, oops. Marge began to engage the hostess in rhetoric regarding the injustice of their seating plan. Meanwhile Bart and Lisa quickly managed to bind themselves together using the cord from the in-flight headphones. Once Springfield's favourite residents were seated it wasn't long

before Homer was asleep dreaming of Duff beer and doughnuts whilst Marge was holding it all together.

Arriving in Calgary was great. We were picked up by Saira in her huge truck and drove out to Canmore. It was just superb to see family Reed again. They've got a splendid house on three floors, views over the Rockies, more decks than you can shake a stick at, and best of all, a washing machine.

The children were in toy heaven. Having been deprived of all but a few carry-on trinkets, the toy-fest that met them in Canmore was a sight to behold. Both children sat in a catatonic state for a few moments in awe of it all. They then had to be dragged to bed wailing after several hours of non-stop plastic dinosaur action.

Apologies once again for the later than usual post. I know by now that if I've not posted by 04:00 BST then many of you guys think that we've been mauled by bears or somesuch. Well, we've not. Well not yet. It is bear season in town right now and we're just off for a walk in Cougar Creek. So if I've not posted again by this time tomorrow call the Rangers would you?

May 14, 2005.

What No Cougar?

The two hour difference between Ontario and Alberta seems to have caused more consternation amongst the children than the original UK:US clock change. Lottie and Ben are waking at just after five each morning, so we're seeing lots of early morning Canmore. In some respects it's fine waking up so early; the Reeds have deer grazing their garden first thing, so it's a great opportunity for a two-hour pre-breakfast nature fest.

The early morning vista reminds me of home. If you were to add just a handful of flare stacks, a couple of cooling towers, a brace of ghost ships, the steelworks and a petrol refinery it would be like waking up at home.

Lottie, Ben and their Canuck counterparts George and Bertie are playing together very well. We all had to give our heads a shake as Lottie and George walked off hand-in-hand to Cougar Creek. Oh how times have changed. It's almost half a lifetime ago since I met Andy. At that stage I'm not sure I'd ever have countenanced any son of his holding hands with any daughter of mine.

At Cougar Creek we went fossil hunting. George, aged four, is a world renowned Palaeontologist. My pub-quiz level of dino-info is spectacularly eclipsed by his encyclopaedic knowledge. I even asked him the trick question 'What colour were dinosaurs?'. He didn't even stop to flinch at such underhand tactics and responded, quite correctly 'We don't actually know'.

When we arrived at the creek, the pressure was on to actually find a fossil. It's a bit like trying to find a toilet in London. The wait was excruciating and the relief divine. The joy of smashing rocks all morning has to be up there in the list of 100 things to do before you die. Of boredom.

Nevertheless, the kids loved it. The thrill of knowing that there were Cougar out there ready for their mid-morning snack added a certain frisson to the proceedings. And whaddya know, we did find a fossil. It wasn't very big, but it was a fossil all right, some type of shell.

In an Alanis Morrissette style twist, when we got back home, we found a huge fossil (possibly a woolly mammoth) in the crazy paving two feet from the front door. George was keen to dig it out of the paving and bring it inside, but Andy convinced him otherwise.

The afternoon was spent watching a bicycle time-trial. Saira was officiating, and Andy was race doctor. We thought a bloody crash was possibly on the cards, so we were keen to hang about and watch. After about twenty minutes of collision free activity, we skulked off back home.

Anyway, more bike racing is on the cards today. Andy is in the saddle this time, so we're off downtown to holler 'Go Reed'.

May 15, 2005.

Bicycle Race

Everybody in Canmore is super fit. Not just fit, but really really fit. Remember that dreadful eighties ad for ski yoghurt with the fit family? Well if the fit family really do exist, then they live in Canmore. I was downtown today, and in amongst a few hundred people, I reckon I was about fourth heaviest.

Similarly, when we took the children to the playground today the mums were talking about triathlon training. Back home adult playground banter generally extends no further than chicken nuggets and infant stool consistency. Not always entirely unrelated threads.

Anyway, my point is that the fresh air seems to motivate the citizens of Canmore to exercise their butts off. And our hosts are no exception. Today Andy was involved in 40 kilometre time trial and then a downtime crit race in the afternoon, so we went to watch, cheer and not try and get hit by high speed bicycles. We got the wrong location for the morning's race, so failed to see speedy reedy complete the distance in about fifty-five minutes.

We did however get to see the crit. Crit racing is all about hurtling round town in short laps. The idea is you try and knock other people off their bikes but stay on your own. It's

like a cross between jousting and knock-a-door run. Andy came a commendable fourth, not bad for his first race, and won thirty dollars into the bargain.

In the evening we went to the pub to spend his winnings, and in so doing, undid all the good work.

In amongst the bike race excitement we took the children to the park where Lottie did some excellent jumping from the climbing frame. The heights she was clearing would have made her grandparents' hair curl. Good job they're not reading any of this.

We also went to the supermarket to stock up on food for our newly formed family of eight. We did that thing that you do in foreign supermarkets, buying only foodstuffs with rude names or that appear unfit for human consumption. Beef jerky wins on both counts.

Oh and in case you're wondering, Andy does shave his legs.

May 16, 2005.

Banff Day Trip

Well, hard to believe but we've been on the road now for just two weeks. It seems much longer, but I guess this is just a function of having visited so many places already. The children remain very settled, and are benefiting from having other children around to squabble with. Luckily they've played together very well and the fallings out have been few and far between.

Today was a regular day for family Reed, so we hijacked their truck and left them to it. We drove up the valley to Banff. This is a place we've visited previously (before children) and it was just as we remembered. The place is a centre for both

summer and winter mountain sports. It has a great feel and we enjoyed visiting again.

The town is full of mountaineering stores and so we spent as much time as the children could stand, browsing their wares. When it got to the stage where Ben was ready to tear all of the clothes from their hangers we left, as usual, without buying anything.

To redress the balance, we then took the kids to a playground. It was mediocre by general North American standards, but was sufficient to let them work up an appetite. And so it was my turn to choose the venue for lunch. Craig's Family Restaurant in Banff was my choice as it looked cheap, and the use of the word 'family' suggested to me a place that children could roam free with the ketchup gun and knock over drinks with gay abandon. I was right on both counts. The food however was rubbish, and no amount of sloshing ketchup about seemed to improve the situation. Dr Leigh remained unimpressed.

With the kids all food-bribed out, we returned to the shops in the high street. I ended up talking to an assistant who was from Sheffield, and became engrossed in a conversation about running shoes. Meanwhile Ben was asleep in his buggy so I left him in a corner of the shop whilst I continued to browse. I left to meet up with Bec and Lottie afterwards, forgetting that Ben was asleep in the shop, and it was only on my way back down Banff avenue that I realised that I was missing a stroller and one of my progeny. I had to return to the shop sheepishly and was successfully reunited without any of the assistants noticing my careless error. I think.

We returned to Canmore, ate dinner and then went out for a walk in the woods. Bec and I are still a little nervy about the whole bear thing. It is bear season, and we'd both rather not meet one close up. Andy and Saira were both relaxed and reassuring about the whole issue, until during the walk a large brown dog bounded through the trees just metres ahead of us doing a great impression of a bear. It seems the

procedure is to stand frozen stiff, slack jawed until the creature scurries off. Well it seems that this approach works for dogs at least.

Once the children were in bed, Andy, Saira and I went out for a run along the local trails. They whopped my ass, but at least I got round the course. Not bad for a fat lad.

So, two weeks in and we're still having a blast. Canada is a great place.

May 17, 2005.

Hey Science Fans!

Following the previous day's leisurely trip up the valley, we thought the children could do with some full-on education and interactivity. Given that none of the adults present could provide this type of service, we all jumped into the truck and headed off to the science museum in Calgary.

The place was great. There was even a bicycle that you could ride on the inside of a cylinder to achieve that schoolboy ambition of looping the loop. This exhibit was meant to demonstrate the effect of G-Force, and fast riders could pull three-gees on this baby. According to the display, the biggest number of Gees experienced by a human was a heart-stopping 186. I struggle to believe this number, particularly as the individual concerned was alleged to have survived the ordeal.

The place had all the key ingredients for a splendid day out, including hot-dogs and popcorn, meaning that all age groups came away happy.

I drove the truck back from Calgary to Canmore, with six sleeping passengers. I did think about pulling off my own G-Force stunt in the truck to wake them all from their slumber

but most of the roads in Canada are just too straight for G-Force type shenanigans.

In the evening the adults split into two cohorts. One group sat about drinking beer and eating whilst the others performed a lactate test in the garage. This involves strapping on a heart monitor, pedalling a bike like billy-o for an hour, and then drawing blood via a finger prick test to establish at which level of performance aerobic activity turns anaerobic.

I'll let you decide which adults did what.

They're all bonkers in Canmore.

May 18, 2005.

Downtown Canmore

We left the Reeds to their own devices during the day and family Leigh took a borrowed double stroller down into Canmore. The weather was great, and the two-mile downhill wander into town was very pleasant. I've never been a fan of the whole double buggy thing, but although this thing was about the size of my car (not my wife's car you'll notice) it was reasonably easy to manoeuvre.

In town we found yet another playground where Ben achieved a development milestone. He started to join two words together to create sentences. It was a bit of a shame that his first sentence was 'bump head', but I guess you've got to start somewhere.

Once the children were all played-out we set off for the Bagel Company café where, collectively, we ate almost as much as we scattered on the floor. Following a brief wander down the main street we set off back to base. The journey home was more of struggle. Given that it was uphill, I chose to let Bec

push the double stroller. Both children were asleep, and did that turning heavy thing that all children do when they're deeply unconscious.

In the early evening the ladies set off for Calgary to do some orienteering. Saira is training for an adventure race in just over a week and needed to bone up on her map work. Bec decided to go with them on the promise of a fancy meal without husband and children after the necessary exertions.

So that left me looking after four children until Andy had finished work. The instructions I given were fairly straightforward, keep them alive and get them all in the car to Andy's surgery for half-five. I succeeded on almost all counts. Getting four children in their car seats in less than five minutes without swearing at any of them is a challenge I throw down to you all.

Despite none of my passengers being older than four, they all knew a different way to the surgery and I was offered random and conflicting directions along the way. It's funny how even the persuasions of infants can start to make you doubt your own navigational skills.

Too idle to cook for the assembled crèche, Andy and I offered a choice of restaurant venues for their delectation. The unanimous verdict was Wendy's where the lure was not any of the deep fried sweetmeats on offer, but rather the plastic toy that accompanies each platter. To avoid conflict, I had to ensure that each toy was identical. Move aside Kofi Annan.

The highlight of our trip to Wendy's was discovering that the headline in the Canmore Leader was all about Andy's successes in the bike race last weekend, accompanied by a photograph of him, which took up most of the front page.

So Andy is King of Canmore for a week. And yet they still made us pay for our burgers.

May 19, 2005.

Sport Billies

Today Andy and I left the ladies and the children at home and set off to climb Mount Lady MacDonald (8550 feet). We set off at 08:00 and had to be back for Andy to start work early in the afternoon. One of the greatest things about this route is we set out on foot right from the front door. None of this getting in the car nonsense.

The route involved just over four thousand feet of ascent and starts through forest and then climbs to an abandoned teahouse just above the tree line. The final thousand feet are up sharp shale and scree to the final ridge. The summit ridge itself is probably only five hundred feet in length, but is pretty exposed and an awkward scramble. It's unlikely you'd ever fall off, but if you did, it's likely you'd have grazed knees or worse. For the record we did it unroped and in approach shoes.

The weather was kind to us, although we did get a tiny amount of snow at one stage. There was what the English would call a stiff breeze; the Scots amongst you would have been in bikinis.

Andy, as ever, was fit as a fiddle, he set a reasonable pace on the ascent and we beat our own estimated ascent time. Once we were back at the teahouse, we put on our shorts and ran the whole way down. About three thousand feet of descent in forty minutes. Suffice to say, this mountain is reasonably steep. When we got back home, Dr Reed threw a couple of ibuprofen tablets at me and said 'better take these'. A purely prophylactic measure of course, but who was I to turn my nose up at free medical advice? It was one of the best days in the mountains I'd had for a long time.

Meanwhile the others had gone to the local pool to do some swimming. Reports indicate that Ben cried most of the time due to the low water temperature. Eskimo Nell apparently broke through the ice and swam a whole two lengths. Good work Lottie.

The remainder of the day was spent snoozing and wrestling, depending on your age. Oh, apart from Andy, who was packed off to work until nine pm.

Work huh? What's all that about?

May 20, 2005.

Moraine Lake

Following breakfast we left the Reeds to their everyday tasks and stole their truck to drive up to Lake Louise. We stopped on the way to take a hike around Johnson Lake. When we arrived, the place looked fairly eerie, not least because we were the only folks there.

I'd really taken the whole bear thing to heart, and was quietly petrified about taking the two-mile walk in the woods. All of those children's stories started to take on a sinister twist in my mind as we sat looking at bear posters from the truck. After some brief coaching from my wife, we agreed a bear strategy. It was little more than every man for himself. Even you Ben. I even did that hopeless thing of attributing my nervousness to the kids; "oh, it's not me I'm worried about, I'm thinking of the children".

In fact, so unworried was I, that I picked up a large stick. Realistically, had we met a bear, it would have snatched the stick out of my hands and saved it to pick the bits of me out of its teeth. Still, it made me feel better.

So, we were going on a bear hunt. Swishy-swashy, stumble-trip, I was really hoping we wouldn't get to the 'two big googley eyes' bit. My lovely wife was much more composed.

What do you know; we completed the whole circuit without seeing so much as a ground squirrel. And as we approached

the truck again my bravado started to return. I think I even dropped the stick.

We continued on up the road to Two Jack Lake where we had a picnic lunch, and then with our well-behaved children napping peacefully on the truck, drove up to Lake Louise. Despite having visited Lake Louise on two separate trips previously, once in winter, once in summer, we'd never made the detour to Moraine Lake. It's great. I'll not bore you with the geological details; I've already done that with my family, but suffice to say it's not without interest.

The view is also superb. It's locally known as the valley of the ten peaks, and is a view that's replicated on the Canadian twenty-dollar bill.

Anyway, enough education. This is starting to sound like one of those early morning Open University courses that you only watch when you're drunk or nursing a sick infant. Or both.

There was water, and neither of my offspring fell in. In my book, that's a result.

May 21, 2005.

How Far Is A Kilometre?

Huzzah, it's a bank holiday weekend here in Canada. In contrast with most bank holiday weekends back home the day started sunny and warm. Encouraged by the fine morning we set off en masse for a drive through Kananaskis country. The road out to this spectacular area is what your dad would call 'unmetalled', whatever that means. In fact my dad would probably be straight on the phone to the council. It was a shocker.

Anyway, we set out along what was little more than a broad dusty track in convoy. We needed two cars to accommodate

all of our stuff. Our kit list for the day out included four infants, four adults, a road bike, buckets and spades, Tonka toys, enough sandwiches to feed a small army, and a handful of plastic dinosaurs thrown in for good measure. Unfortunately what we had forgotten to pack was any warm clothing.

Saira, training for an adventure race next weekend, decided to set off before us on foot, and had run 11k before we caught up with her. Kilometres are a North American invention, perpetuated to make them think their continent is bigger than everybody else's. Still, eleven of these babies uphill, in less than an hour is a splendid effort.

Once we gained altitude the weather became almost as bad as the road we were driving on. We saw a couple of Moose (what is the plural of Moose?) but were all really holding out for a bear. Any variety would have done, black, brown, grizzly, polar, koala, danni. We just wanted to see one. Besides, I'd promised the kids.

We stopped by a lake and dragged the children out to play in what by now was arctic tundra. Let me tell you, even Tonka toys have a tough time digging frozen earth. As we were decked out in our finest Hawaiian garb, it didn't take long before we decided to jump back in the car and head down to a lower altitude. On the way down eagle-eyed Andy spotted a bear on a closed service road. Breaking every rule in the 'don't get eaten by bears' handbook, we left the car and walked up the service road to get a better look. The risk to Andy was small; given all of his training he certainly looks much less juicy than me. On this basis, I stayed a few steps behind and sucked my stomach in.

It was a black bear, and he looked up at us in a disinterested fashion. We took some video and then shot him.

Actually, that last bit isn't true, but by now I'm sure my mother has already got the RSPCA to issue a warrant for my

arrest the moment I step off the plane back in blighty. Seeing the bear was great, but it was his forest, not ours.

Later we dropped by a visitor centre to see more wildlife, albeit stuffed and on this basis much easier to photograph. We ate lunch, all eight of us cocooned in the big truck, and then set off for home.

By now, it won't surprise you that the bike we were carrying belonged to Andy, and he got out at this point to cycle the eighty kilometres home. The journey home was uneventful; I drove like the clappers to make sure Andy wouldn't beat us back. Most of my passengers slept as usual.

Andy arrived home about two and a half hours later. We ate dinner and then he suggested he and I bike out to Banff, twenty kilometres up the valley. I only agreed to it as I thought he'd be jiggered from his earlier ride. That was the first mistake I made.

The second mistake was agreeing to ride his race prepared mountain bike that has a saddle that's made from the nose cone of an old space shuttle. My ass wasn't that shape. It is now.

Anyway, we made the ride and had the ladies and children meet us at Bow Falls by the Banff Springs hotel. Riding up to meet them was a lovely family moment. Because there weren't enough seats in the truck for all eight of us to travel home, Saira cycled the thirty kilometres back to Canmore along the road. You've stopped looking surprised.

So, two moose, a bear and a remoulded backside. Not a bad day out.

May 22, 2005.

Mount Rundle

This was one of those days where not a moment was wasted. Everyone seized the day in some style, including all of those team members aged four or less. The secret, I suspect, lay in the pancakes that Andy cooked up for breakfast. Throw away your fancy powerbars, Doctor Reed's blueberry pancakes are the thing to eat.

Once we had finished breakfast and unbuttoned our pants we set off for Grassi Lakes. This was just a short car journey away to the other side of the valley. In true Canadian style we stopped for coffee to drink in the car. Automatic transmission is great. It leaves one hand free to dangle out of the window, and the other to swig bucketfuls of caffeine infused beverage. Little wonder the roadside ditches are full of smashed up cars.

Grassi Lakes was a good venue. Water to fall into, rocks to climb up, snacks to eat. The children were in good spirits and so too were the adults. The trip back down to the car turned into quite a fell race between Lottie and George. The spoils fell to George, although the grazes he sustained were almost worthy of a transfusion. Lottie didn't do so bad either, not least considering she was competing in second-hand wellies.

We ate close to home, at the Summit Café. Breakfast burritos were all the rage, and famished by the morning's excesses even our children ate a reasonable meal.

Soon afterwards, Andy and I headed out again to climb the East end of Mount Rundle. This was less technical than the Mount Lady MacDonald trip we'd made recently and involved less ascent. However, it did involve climbing up tottering piles of shale, which isn't my favourite terrain. The weather was mixed, at one stage was pretty miserable - suffice to say the shorts didn't get much of an outing. The view from the top was fantastic, as good as any summit I think I've ever been up. True to form, we hurtled down and knocked the guidebook time into a cocked hat.

Almost as soon as we returned home the ladies passed the baton, so we were immediately given the bigger adventure challenge of bathing and bedding four children. The honey-mummies were off to Banff to drink cocktails and go to the movies. Ben chose this evening to wail like a banshee. So I shot him.

No, that bit's not true either, but it did cross my mind.

May 23, 2005.

Cookout

The eagle-eyed amongst you may notice a slight change in style. Up until now this blog has been in Tim's words but at last he's letting me get a word in. You can expect a much more reasoned and accurate account of our adventures, none of this fabricated nonsense about children falling in ponds or seeing bears.

We are having a FAB time (now you know for certain that it's not Tim writing don't you). Today was a bank holiday in Canada so Andy wasn't working. We were all feeling a little sluggish this morning - the Reeds are full of cold and the Leighs are exhausted at keeping up with the Reeds.

We set off in the cars for a day out but had to make a quick stop for coffees and a huge bag of scooby-snacks. Sustained by caffeine and chocolate we headed back to Kananaskis Country. You know, we went there two days ago. Oh do keep up.

This time we went on a real road rather than a dust track. And this time we had practically all the fleecy, downy, waterproof gear that we possess. For the Leighs that wasn't actually that much since we've only got two bags of stuff between us but the rest of the gang have more kit than

Blacks. Needless to say the sun came out and not a flake of snow fell all day.

First stop was Wedge Pond. Out of the cars we poured dashing for the beach. We set up camp on the beach on a stripy mat, just like being at Blackpool if it wasn't for the mountains.

There was one other family on the beach, a dad with two children. One of his kids fell in the pond. How shameful. What terrible parenting.

The sun gradually disappeared. Andy and Saira started running around the pond to keep warm. Time to move on. We drove back down the valley to Lorette ponds where Saira produced a fabulous picnic before we set off for a gentle stroll. What a beautiful place this turned out to be. Sparkling blue water, fish leaping out of the pools and loads of bushes for the kids to hide themselves in. The grownups sat on a bench for a good half hour while the kids just potted in the pools and woods.

The kids all fell asleep on the way home and the big boys went out for a bike ride when we got back. By 5pm we were all packed up and ready to head off on our next adventure. This is when the day became really mellow. We found a campsite by a lakeside where we lit a log fire to barbecue some wonderful Canadian steaks. The kids played on the climbing frame and threw stones in the lake while the boys did their manly stuff around the fire. The sun shone, the mountains glowed and everything was good in the world. Tim, a man of general grumpiness and scepticism, gushed "this is one of the best days of my life". Me too.

Back to the grumpy sceptic for further instalments you'll be relieved to hear.

P.S. we really did see a bear the other day and, yes, Ben did fall in a pond.

May 24, 2005.

Bad Hair Day

Compared with many of our recently action packed days, today was much more relaxed. Which was no bad thing as most of us were fairly goosed. We had some everyday chores to do. Despite being on a big trip, there are a few mundane things that still have to be done. So, we bought nappies, posted some excess baggage home, washed the car and sorted out some washing. Most of my socks have been sucked into the Reed's laundry vortex and so for the remainder of the trip I shall be wearing one Barbie sock and one Bob the Builder. I'd cut a dash at pre-school.

Ben is growing some more teeth. Hard to believe, I know. That boy is always teething. It's going to cost me a fortune when the tooth fairy comes knocking on the door. The weather here is thundery and it's also a full moon, so we've got a mixture of tension headaches, lunacy and teething which is a heady brew even at home, never mind on the road.

To try and entertain the children we went to the Dollar Store in Canmore. Lottie bought a bug collectors kit, including tweezers, magnifying glass and bug storage device. I'm not sure the state of California will thank her for introducing the Canadian Weevil when our eager entomologist next hops off a plane.

We ate at the Bagel Café again and then went to the park. Ben entertained the troops by eating nothing at the café and then scoffing handfuls of gravel at the park. I guess it's easier to cut teeth on stones than bagels. Anyway, to borrow a phrase from Saira, the whole morning was a gong show.

Later in the day we turned the deck into a barber's shop and Bec cut my hair and Ben's. In an attempt to show Ben that there was really nothing to worry about, it was decided that I

would go first. Unfortunately she omitted to put the guard on the clippers, so I now look like I'm about to start my twelve weeks basic training. Worse than that, I've been trying my hand at a bit of facial topiary, so with a beard, it now looks like I've got my head on upside down. Quite the bobby dazzler.

When we strapped Ben to the gurney, he was looking pretty worried. And with good reason. He now looks like his dad.

May 25, 2005.

Another Busy Day

So, the big news in Canmore today is that there's a Grizzly in town. She's a momma bear with two cubs and has been wandering about two streets away from where we're staying. The local papers and radio station are reporting recent sightings and are recommending that children not be allowed to play in the woods on their own. I've told the kids that if they don't behave I'm going to drizzle them in honey and leave them outside.

Given their recently improved behaviour we took them back to Johnson Lake to play on the lakeside beach. Buckets and spades with a mountain backdrop is quite an experience and everyone seemed to love it. We lured the children back into the car on the promise of fast-food and super sugary drinks, but on the return trip they were so exhausted that we managed to drive right by Wendy's without so much as a whimper.

I was left in charge of all four children in the afternoon, whilst the ladies went back down to Canmore. Bec bought new clothes, Saira had a sports massage and I played with plastic dinosaurs.

I was relieved of my pre-historic duties in the late afternoon and went to collect Andy from work. We were going directly out to ascend Ha Ling (7,900'), another local Canmore summit. It's an easy day out and the guidebook suggests a round trip time of 2.5-4 hours. Andy set off at his usual pace, and we hurtled on up.

About half way up we met one of Andy's sports buddies who was on her way down the mountain. Apparently she's the world record holder for most distance covered on cross-country skis in twenty-four hours. She noticed that Andy hadn't even broken a sweat and commented that he must be in great shape. She then looked at me, perspiring liberally, breathing like Darth Vader and hugging a tree for support, and asked if I was from England. It seems that despite my efforts, I still don't yet look like a Canmore native.

Andy summited in exactly one hour, and I got to the top six minutes later. The view, as usual, was terrific. We decided we'd have a whole thirty seconds rest whether we needed it or not, and then make the descent.

In true Billy Bland style we made the summit back to the car in twenty-two minutes, knocking a whole hour off the guidebook time. I was absolutely goosed. I might have been mistaken, but I think I even spotted a bead of perspiration on Andy's brow.

We drove home and whilst the Reeds performed a lactate test on a neighbour, Bec and I went out to sample the culinary delights of Canmore. It was great to be out just on our own and a chance to reflect on the trip so far. Better still was to be eating below a mountain I'd been on top of just an hour earlier.

Canmore rocks.

May 26, 2005.

On The Beach

We've become accustomed to travelling in vehicles so large that we take almost everything we own with us. When we set off on our day trip this morning, we had so much stuff with us that Lottie asked 'Are we going to the airport?'. Poor thing thought we'd finished the trip and were headed back to Blighty.

Today we drove up the road to Lake Minnewanka. Be careful how you say that. It's a twenty-kilometre lake with some great trails and picnic areas on its shores. Better still it has some splendid beaches that are ideal for hauling drowning children onto.

Before long all four children were mostly naked and wet. For the first time on this trip, the weather was hot and sunny, with temperatures in excess of twenty degrees. The water, however, was still pretty chilly, and it was only the under fours that were brave and foolish enough to venture in. I showed willing by taking off my socks and then replacing my shoes, just so I was in 'rescue mode'. I felt so at home with the Miami Vice look that I promptly fell asleep leaving the ladies to oversee the infants.

I took some comfort that between them, Saira and Bec hold certifications in life saving and medicine, so I was probably surplus to requirement. Wake me up when that ball thingy falls out of the bottom of your mouse and I'll be right onto it.

I managed to open my eyes for a spot of luncheon. On the way out, we'd visited Tim Horton's. Timmy's offers a wide range of cardiac disease inducing delicacies, particularly doughnuts and coffee. Thirstier customers can avail themselves of a 59oz cup of coffee, although I suspect it's only available to those who are already catheterised. Anyway, I digress. Tim Horton's also sells sandwiches, so we did that whole sand fly and grit sandwich thing that is only really possible on the beach.

We stayed at the beach until mid afternoon. The children were almost entirely played out when we left and almost without exception there was a good deal of snoozing on the return trip. Given that we dodged the whole fast-food thing yesterday, we were able to manipulate the kids on the promise of Wendy's again - but this time we did actually have to deliver.

By the time we'd got them home the children looked as though they were fairground ride operatives. Even a decent hosing down in the bath didn't really restore them to their former glory, so we sent them to bed still encrusted in ketchup and sand.

Once the under fours were asleep my man-flu, from which I'd been suffering all day, began to subside. What are the chances of that eh? My hosts were kind enough to suggest it may have been a case of 'over-reaching' which I think is what happens to fat lads when they put on an old track-suit. Anyway, I soon became well enough to drive out to the shops with Saira for some late night snacks.

It seems that despite this healthy facade, once the sun goes down, the whole of Canmore goes shopping for bread, crisps and chocolate. It's a whole new calorific underworld for me to explore.

May 27, 2005.

Back To Banff

Ah, the joys of house sharing. Last night, in an attempt to tidy away the kids' stuff, I ended up scrunching up a picture that George had drawn. It turns out that he'd planned to give it to his teacher on his last day at pre-school today. At one stage I thought I was going to have to stay up all night and make a fudged attempt at a forgery, but Saira got the iron

out and returned the two-dimensional representation of the T-Rex back to its former glory.

Given that family Reed was busy either at work or graduating from pre-school, we went on our own back up to Banff. This time we took the gondola up to the top of Sulphur Mountain. The view is tremendous and the children got to ride for free so everyone was happy.

Like most visitor attractions in Canada, the summit station is very well set out. A series of platforms and steps lead to the top of the mountain. Ben and Lottie very carefully negotiated all of the possible hazards and got right to the summit without any problem at all. It was only when we got to the safest possible section, a precision laid concrete walkway without any conceivable trip potential that Ben chose to launch himself floorwards and burst his bottom lip.

There then followed that two stage facial animation that all other adults in the vicinity then feel obliged to execute. This is generally characterised by a short sucking in of breath through pursed lips with eyes firmly fixed on the infant. Stage two consists of a slight yet discernible shaking of the head, exhalation through still pursed lips with eyes now fixed on the not so responsible parent.

At this point I generally mouth 'He's not mine' with an exaggerated head shake to the assembled masses.

We lunched on Banff Avenue and then drove back to Canmore via Safeway. You see it's not all wall-to-wall excitement. Ben and I snoozed in the car whilst Lottie and Mum went shopping. I did that thing that all blokes do when they're sat at the wheel of an unfamiliar car in a car park; I pressed all of the controls on the dashboard that I was too afraid to touch whilst I was driving.

I'd repacked the airbag by the time the ladies arrived back at the car, and so we loaded up and headed back home. By now the temperature was mid twenties, and when we got home,

the boys were playing in the garden with a sprinkler. It took our children less than ten seconds to take off their clothes and join in. It made me wonder why getting undressed at bath-time often takes half an hour.

Saira then left with Andy for Calgary in preparation for a twelve-hour adventure race tomorrow. This means we've got four children to look after for the next day or so. I'm beginning to wonder whether entering the race would have been an easier option.

Unless the children beat us into submission, more tomorrow.

May 28, 2005.

Two For One Offer

So two new hot pieces of news to report today. One natural, one unnatural. The first story involves the grizzly that was on the loose; well it's been caught and relocated. Apparently it had been stalking people, and although it hadn't yet attacked anyone, it had seemed to have lost its fear of humans. It was caught in the woods just a few hundred metres from here, where we'd been running just a few days earlier. Not sure where they'll send it, but the bloke that caught it was called Simon Smith, from Amazing Dancing Bear Inc.

The unnatural news is that Lottie has gone totally native and now seems to prefer weeing in the woods than using conventional methods. I guess she's never spent so long outdoors for such a sustained period. I blame the other boys in our party. I've managed to convince her out of the 'standing up like a man' approach and at least get her to squat which is some consolation. Results are mixed, but improving.

As Saira was adventure racing and Andy was supporting her, Bec and I were in charge of all four children. We thought

we'd better take them somewhere where they knew the drill, so a waterside location was chosen. Lots of water to choose from in Canada; this time we set up camp at Cascade Pond. As usual, the kids had a blast, spending most of their time either getting wet or drying out.

The reaction of others at the pond was quite comical. They were looking at Bec and I askance, and trying to work out how on earth we'd managed to produce four children who are almost exactly nine months apart. Passing blokes would wink at me encouragingly; ladies would generally look aghast.

Well, despite general all round good behaviour, we were glad when Andy and Saira came home and we could hand them back. One adult per child is a much superior childcare ratio.

Anyway, tomorrow is our last full day in Canmore. We'll let you know how it goes.

May 29, 2005.

Last Full Day In Canada

Our last day in Canmore was fantastic. All eight of us drove out to Lorette Ponds and had a cookout lunch. The skies were blue and the temperature had risen to about twenty-four degrees. In fact as I was stood juggling sausages over our wood fire I began to wonder whether I was in danger of spontaneously combusting. Boy, that would have been something to write home about.

The rest of the afternoon passed without incident. Andy cycled the forty-five kilometres back over a mountain pass trail. When he got back he complained that the trouble with that route was he wasn't able to gain enough ascent. Apparently the thousand-metre climb he'd put in along the way just wasn't enough. In his defence, he is training for the

TransAlps race in Europe in six weeks time where some of the days will involve three thousand metres of climbing.

In the evening we left the children with a babysitter and the four of us went out into Canmore for a meal. It was just like old times, except we didn't drink quite so much and we were back home by ten o'clock.

Our time in Canmore has been better than we could have ever hoped for, largely due to the efforts of Andy and Saira who made sure that every day was action-packed, not just for the grown ups but the children too.

Despite our geographic separation it was interesting to see how similarly we were bringing up our children. It seems the Victorian Father approach works pretty much anywhere.

Anyway, must sign off in order that I can birch my offspring before their cold bath.

May 30, 2005.

San Francisco

Like the song says, if you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear a flower in your hair. Another top tip would be to write down the name and address of the hotel you booked months ago on the Internet.

We were driving to Calgary airport today when Saira asked where we were staying in San Francisco. It was a good question, but unfortunately not one I could answer. Neither could Bec. Which was a shame because I'd booked and paid for it in advance but had no record of it anywhere.

My luddite wife writes everything down with a pen in a paper notebook. Despite being very last century, it's not a bad approach because it actually works pretty well. Generally I either commit information to my own 32Kb memory or store it electronically on one of the myriad gadgets hanging from my utility belt. Like Batman.

So the deal was I'd paid for a hotel but didn't know where it was. I got that queasy feeling that Saira accurately calls 'bile rising'. I tried, unsuccessfully to implicate Bec in my poor handling of the situation. As ever she managed me beautifully by suggesting she was sure I'd find a fix to the predicament I'd got us into.

With some help from a cell phone, Saira's friend Tammy and her Internet connected PC I was able to retrieve the hotel details from my online account with Expedia. Spelling out the URL, then my username and password over a cellphone, to a Canadian, in a car full of screaming children was as error prone as it's possible to be. I was like Tony Hancock in 'The Radio Ham'. Anyway it was marginally quicker than visiting all of the hotels in San Fran to check if I'd made a reservation. So thanks to all involved. And yes, first thing tomorrow I'm off to buy a notebook and pen.

As a punishment for being such an idiot, I had privileges suspended and a trip to the Mountain Equipment Co-op store

in downtown Calgary was removed from the itinerary. I deserved nothing less.

When we arrived at Calgary airport we thought we'd get rid of the bags by checking them in. Unfortunately, the moment we'd done that we were effectively on American soil, despite still being in Canada. So our plan of having a farewell lunch with the Reeds was thwarted. We had to hurriedly say goodbye to our hosts and pass through immigration.

It was an abrupt end to our visit. A real shame. Still, Lottie and George hugged, which was cute.

The flight itself was straightforward. Ben slept, Lottie fidgeted. We ate crisps in the shape of aeroplanes.

Two and a half hours later we landed in San Francisco. We did find the hotel and it's quite nice. Funny how things turn out huh?

May 31, 2005.

Over The Bridge

Ben woke at a quarter to five this morning and howled for a full two hours. He just seemed to want to get up and out. Eventually at seven o'clock I took him outside to play on the steps outside the hotel. Never mind a swimming pool or a playground, give him a pile of concrete steps, preferably where he can't reach the handrail, and he'll play for hours. Until he grazes his knees at least.

And whilst we're on the subject of 'owies' I remember that the number of scars you went back to school with in the autumn was a good barometer of how much fun you'd had in the holidays. Well if this still holds true Lottie and Ben are having a whale of a time.

We ate breakfast and then set out to Lombard Street and then on to Fisherman's Wharf where we hired bikes and a trailer. The trailer hooked up to the back of my bike so we could tow the children along. Once they were helmeted up and strapped in we set off along a coastal trail. The first hundred metres were fine, and I set off at quite a lick. We then encountered a slope of probably no more than one in five hundred and the bike almost came to a standstill. Pulling the little guys didn't seem to be the problem, as ever, it was the eighty pounds of 'just in case' items that were slowing me down. I knew I should have trained harder in Canmore.

Just as I'd got the hang of the bicycle juggernaut and picked up some speed again I misjudged the width of the trailer and clipped one of its wheels on a kerbstone as I was turning a corner. The bike started to handle erratically and then an awful scraping noise followed as the frame of the bike forced me to the floor. I'd flipped the trailer.

What followed was eerie silence. I had expected sustained wailing from the passengers, but there was nothing. Not a whisper. Bec was ahead in the distance. Boy, I thought I was toast.

I peered through the mesh of the buggy and saw two neatly stacked and grinning infants laid on their side. Lottie's first words to me were 'Steady on Dad'.

My wife said something similar.

We righted the trailer and continued up over the Golden Gate Bridge. It's an impressive piece of bridgery, if you're into that sort of thing. Despite the weather being scorchio downtown the bridge was shrouded in mist, so the views weren't spectacular. Nevertheless, it was a great venue for a bike ride.

A nice touch, I thought, were the strategically placed telephones offering counselling along its length. They obviously want to reduce the number of jumpers. I didn't pick

up the handset, but I was curious as to how the person at the other end might answer. I just hope they've not implemented an automated call handling system.

In the afternoon we wandered through Chinatown and then splashed out in the pool back at the hotel.

It was tough trying to compress a tour of a whole city into a single day, and I'm sure we've not even scratched the surface. Still, we had a fun day out.

June 01, 2005.

Half Moon Bay

Today was one of those days that I thought we would have from time to time on this trip. Ben slept in until a relatively respectable zero six hundred hours but this just made him extra mischievous.

We were checking out of our swanky hotel this morning and taking a car down Highway One along the coast. Therefore all of our belongings that had been exploded across the room had to be repacked. We have learned from bitter experience that a one year old and a four year old aren't a great help when it comes to packing up. Actually, thirty-five year olds aren't much help either, so the three of us were sent to play by the pool.

I'm sure by now you're thinking, 'I bet one of them fell in, hell no, I bet it was him'. Well, sorry to disappoint, you can all stop that thigh slapping right now. Uncharacteristically, we all stayed dry although I did think a poolside calamity would have made for an excellent journal entry.

At breakfast Ben decorated his vest with fruits of the forest berries. It looked like one of those garments a smug looking housewife gives to Danny Baker on those Daz adverts. Where was that soap lovin' C-list curly haired cockney when I needed him?

It was before nine o'clock and Ben already looked like he'd been shipwrecked for weeks. I knew a gong show was on the cards.

After breakfast we headed downtown to pick up the hire car. The walk was probably only half a mile but it was one of those excruciating expeditions where ones' offspring need attention, servicing or beating every two or three yards.

First we stopped for a drink. Then we discovered we didn't have anything to drink. Then we stopped to apply sun cream. Then Ben started to cry. Then Lottie needed to take her vest

off. Then we stopped to buy a drink. Then we had to try another shop because the first one didn't have the water bottles with the right spouts. Then Ben wanted something to eat. Then Lottie wanted to go on my shoulders. Then Ben wanted to be up there too.

I turned around and saw the hotel less than two hundred feet away. Then I looked for a streetcar to throw myself under.

Eventually we got to the hire car place. I offered to leave the children as collateral against the car but they insisted on a credit card imprint. I'd opted for a 'midsize' rather than 'economy' this time, which meant we didn't have to shoehorn the buggy into the glove box.

So look at me, in my Hyundai midsize, downtown in San Francisco. And that's exactly what all the other drivers did, disbelievingly as I then drove the car off the pavement perpendicular to all the other cars, crossing four lanes of traffic so that I could make a right turn. It was a move so jaw-droppingly audacious that the other drivers just let me go. At one stage I did wonder just how many dollars my collision damage waiver was good for.

We arrived back at the hotel to pick up our bags and then headed out to the Golden Gate Park. Bec navigated exceptionally well and we got there easily. We bought a park map and headed off to a playground. For a few seconds we were ahead on points.

Everything was going to plan. Until Lottie announced she needed the toilet. So she and I traipsed halfway across the park to find the facilities. And then when we got there she failed to deliver.

So we returned to the playground to find Bec and Ben hungry for lunch. Lulled into a false sense of security by Central Park we were sure that we would be able find food in a park of this size, so we followed directions to a snack bar in the Japanese gardens. When we got there, a country mile later, the only

snacks on offer were fortune cookies washed down with a thimble full of green tea. By this stage I was ready to napalm the bonsai.

We'd foolishly decided not to take the stroller with us so we were carrying one child each. Ben was doing the nodding dog thing and very soon fell asleep. We managed to make it to an ice-cream stall and bought a selection of frozen and salted snacks.

Armed with our meagre and largely nutrition-free picnic I lay down on the grass with Ben asleep in my arms. A few seconds later a rotary sprinkler gushed from behind a hedge soaking me and waking Ben in the process. Oh how we laughed.

By the time we had Ben in the car he was wide-awake. Two minutes later Lottie was sound asleep. Ben was crying, no-one had eaten properly, the children's sleep was totally out of kilter and we had to navigate our way out of an unfamiliar town in an unfamiliar car on the wrong side of the road.

As chance would have it, we stumbled across Highway One easily. Forget GPS, all you need is a wife with a good sense of direction. Oh and masses of patience.

Before long we ran into a traffic jam. This wasn't right. The wind should have been blowing through my hair, Bruce Springsteen should have been on the radio. Instead we were stationary, in a stuffy car, with two crabby children. We even had a kit-kat busy digesting itself in the wrapper on the dashboard. We could have gone to Bridlington for this.

I'd read in a book of 'one hundred things to do before you die' that driving along California's Highway One was right up there in the list. At this point I'd happily have added it to my list of one hundred things I'd be rather dead than doing.

Once we were through the jam things started looking up. We drove through a nice looking place called Half Moon Bay, and

so stopped and booked into a motel. We walked to the beach and ran around with the children. This is how I'd imagined it to be, and it all started to fall into place.

We walked into town and ate pizza. The kids, having eaten virtually nothing all day, scoffed the lot. And so by seven o'clock they were tucked up in bed, leaving me to muse on the day's events.

Tomorrow, I think we shall surf.

June 02, 2005.

Santa Cruz Is Not That Far

We started the day at a leisurely pace, waking up at seven o'clock. The extra sleep seemed to have perked Ben up a little as he seemed to start the day in an unusually jolly mood. It didn't last.

Breakfast was included with the accommodation so we reverted to form and shovelled as many calories into the children as they could possibly stand. On this trip you're never quite certain where the next meal is coming from. The children are learning this too, and between them consumed eight bowls of cereal this morning.

Lottie lightened the proceedings by asking in a loud voice how babies got out of mummies tummies. We told her straight. She nearly choked on her Cheerios. As did the other breakfast guests.

After the biology class we checked out and headed south to Santa Cruz. The coastline was impressive, although most of the beaches were deserted. I'd imagined row after row of surf shacks and baywatch life guardettes and felt a little bit cheated.

My navigator was spot on as always. This feat is most impressive as all we've got to go off is an AA style guide for the area that I found in a dustbin in San Francisco a couple of days ago. The moment we get lost I'll happily splash out on a road atlas. Until then it's an unnecessary luxury.

Once we reached Santa Cruz we parked up and headed to the Boardwalk. It's almost identical to Blackpool's pleasure beach, it's just that the weather's better and as a consequence it seems you don't have to be drunk to endure the outing.

We bought tickets for the children's rides. Lottie was happy with that, but Ben seemed to want only to climb on rides with names like 'extreme pressure disco explosion six thousand'. Fortunately he consistently failed to meet the height requirement, so we avoided the inevitable vomiting and carnage that would have ensued.

Once all our ride tokens were spent we picnicked in the car park then headed off down to Monterey. The drive between these two places was not as as impressive as I'd hoped and I was surprised to find Monterey a largish town. So we drove on without stopping, onto Seventeen Mile Drive. This takes a coastal route and is particularly spectacular. Again, we didn't stop, but this time as we didn't want to wake the children who, as usual, were enjoying the splendid scenery with their eyes shut.

We chose to end the day's driving in Carmel. This is a very exclusive looking resort full of galleries and fine clothes shops. We're totally out of our depth and our price bracket here.

We played on the beach, which has fine white sand and watched the surfers hurl themselves into the waves. I had a cursory glance for a place where I might have hired a board myself but was quietly relieved when I couldn't find one. Wrong type of surf I told the children.

We ate dinner in the only restaurant in town that offered an early bird menu. Oh how their eyes lit up when we walked in with our two little sand urchins. Although we didn't properly trash the place, it's my bet that they'll never get the wax crayon off those mirrored walls.

So we plan to hang around here for the next day or so, or until the council move us on. Or at least until one of us works up the courage to catch some surf.

June 03, 2005.

Big Sur

After a soggy but free breakfast in our hotel we packed up the car and drove down to Big Sur. I'd read in guidebooks that this was one of the most scenic sections of California's Highway One. And it was. It's a very windy and often precipitous road carved into the headland.

The edge was slightly taken off the beauty as Bec and I were just waiting for the 'Mummy I've got a headache' comment from the back row, which is usually a precursor to a vigorous bout of travel sickness. Luckily we were spared the soggy breakfast a second time.

We stopped by an information point where rangers suggested we go to the Pfeiffer Burns Park where we could see a sixty-foot waterfall cascade onto a beach. It sounded great, so we drove the additional eleven miles south to find it.

When we got there, it was pleasant enough, but actual access to the beach was restricted. All you could do was look at it from a gantry. Which is pretty frustrating if you're the proud owner of a new bucket and spade set that you're itching to get dirty.

And so we drove all the way back to where we were staying in Carmel where there was a perfectly good beach just down the road.

The conclusion we've come to is that California has so many beaches that you've got to really search hard to find the good ones. Once you've found a good one it's best not to try and find a better one or you'll spend the whole day in the car.

It wasn't the best day for the children, and I was frustrated that I'd not delivered the perfect tour of Central California, so we ended the day in a downbeat and cranky mood.

After an exceptionally good dinner at a scruffy looking restaurant I set out to look for a call box to book some accommodation for tomorrow night. Given that everyone now has cell phones, call boxes are thin on the ground. This, coupled with the fact that Carmel doesn't have any streetlights meant it was almost an abortive hunt in the dark.

I did find a phone eventually, miles away from our hotel and made a reservation. Unsurprisingly, on my way home I discovered another payphone just yards from where I'd set off.

California isn't working out as either of us had expected. For the moment, that's all part of the adventure.

June 04, 2005.

Seaside

Today was a milestone in our bigtrip. We had our first complaint. At about a quarter to nine this morning a fellow hotel guest hollered at me to keep my children under control. Apparently the noise they were making had woken her up. It was fair to say they had a spring in their step, but the fuss she was trying to cause was disproportionate.

Tip for middle-aged ladies; brush your hair before you open the doorway to abuse your neighbours. You look a real state.

Anyway, quarter to nine. I ask you. She should have been thankful she'd not met us in New York. When I reported the incident to Bec, she was keen to go and find this lady to set the record straight. I was rather keener not to spend the rest of our trip budget on a bail bond, so I talked her out of it.

Following the minor fracas we drove down to the beach to watch the annual surfabout contest in Carmel. It was an open competition, so in an Eddie the Eagle style I could have entered as a wildcard for a few brief seconds before being swept on a rip tide towards Nagasaki.

The competition was fun to watch. The surf was up to about three metres high, and all of the competitors looked like they knew what they were doing. I wore a Hawaiian print hat and looked desperately like I was trying to fit in to a culture way beyond my reach. It was the bucket and spade set that really set us apart from the assembled bohemian masses. Still it was a good vibe and we dug it. Awesome man.

In my own mind I'd created a vision of the place that hadn't really been delivered. I really thought everyone in California wandered round with a surfboard and that it was sunny all the time. Well today we'd got the surfers, but we were sat on the beach in down jackets. It was like childhood holidays spent on the beach in Llandudno. Every day I'd go to the beach wearing my trunks my wellies and my paisley print anorak with the hood drawstring pulled so tight that it used to chaff my chin.

About midday we headed out of Carmel and ate a sandwich lunch in the car. Hire cars, don't you love them? I just hope the family who get our car next aren't Jewish. There's enough pork product down the back of those seats to open a kebab shop.

With the children asleep we drove out to Salinas. Birthplace of John Steinbeck. No wonder he turned to writing, there's nothing else there apart from a twenty-four hour martial arts place. Which is handy if you fancy a spot of light kung fu at four in the morning.

We continued on through Monterey and stopped at a Dennis the Menace playground. Just a point of order here, it wasn't the real Dennis, but rather a softer, almost unrecognisable North American variant. Nevertheless, there was a full size, decommissioned stream locomotive to climb all over. It was the most dangerous playground item I'd ever seen, and as a consequence it was swarming with children. Lottie and I climbed onto its roof and no one batted an eyelid.

We ended the day at Fisherman's Wharf where we saw real crabs, lobsters and otters. The otters were in the sea; the crustaceans were ready to be boiled alive. Still, it was cheaper than buying a ticket for the zoo.

We're staying in a place called Seaside tonight. It's erm, by the sea. Tomorrow evening we fly out to New Zealand. More later if I can work out this International Date Line nonsense.

June 05, 2005.

Last Day Of Summer

Well it's our last day of summer for a few weeks at least. We're currently back at San Francisco airport waiting for our flight to Auckland.

We've had fun today; we spent the morning in the pool and the afternoon on Cannerey Row in Monterey. We then drove back up to the airport.

A short post this evening, I'm sure you're all too busy watching Big Brother to follow our journal now anyway.

Expect a hiatus in the entries over the next day or so as we cross the date line. The time stamps at the bottom of each post are in BST anyway, so we should go from being behind you to ahead. I think.

June 06, 2005.

Have We Had Breakfast Yet?

So we caught the plane in San Francisco on Sunday evening and arrived here in Auckland at six o'clock in the morning on Tuesday. The flight was just twelve hours and apart from crossing the date line nothing interesting happened. The children slept for most of the journey and arrived in reasonable shape.

One of our correspondents, now a resident of NZ, suggested it would be easier to smuggle an assault rifle into the country than an apple. And judging by our experience today, that seems about right. These guys are big on biosecurity and don't want their agricultural industry to suffer from external contamination.

Once we were through the biosecurity cordon we caught a taxi into town. I've only just got used to traffic driving on the right and then we arrive here where they ride goofy like us.

This time I remembered the name of our hotel (well I had it printed out at least). It turns out that our hotel is fabulous; despite booking it over the Internet on the strength of its low price, it's superb. We've even our own washing machine. Oh it's that type of twin tub I replied, trying to hide my disappointment.

As luck would have it we were able to check in as soon as we arrived at seven am. So after a eating the custard creams and having a cup of tea we were back out again ready for our second breakfast of the day on Vulcan Street. We then wandered round the quayside and looked at the boats. By this stage both children were in a fairly deranged state but we were keen to keep them awake until their lunchtime nap. It was like a junior version of Guantanamo Bay. I can write that now I'm off US soil.

Anyway we bought some lunch and ate it back at the hotel and then let the under fours sleep. The under forties had to busy themselves with laundry chores in order to stay awake.

In the afternoon we all strolled up to Albert Park to try and tire the children out some more. By this stage Lottie was totally discombobulated, asking why we were going out without breakfast. And this in spite of having eaten two breakfasts earlier in the day.

The park trip was largely a tear-fest. Lots of falling over and splinters. In an attempt to regain control we took them back to the hotel via a wine shop. Wine in NZ is incredibly expensive, even the moonshine the produce themselves.

Once back at the hotel we trooped down to the swimming pool. Lottie put in some sterling work and swam four lengths with armband assistance. In contrast Ben sat looking pensive on the poolside and then pooped in his swim nappies. Turns out that this is a more effective way of getting out of swimming lessons than having a note from your mum.

Bec took him back to the room whilst Lottie and I did more swimming. Once we'd had enough we put towels round our waists and climbed back in the lifts to return to the eighth floor. However we hadn't got the room key that was also needed to activate the lift control panel.

To cut a long story short, we were scooted up to the twenty fourth floor in our dripping skimpiers where someone else had called the lift. We then had to persuade them to drop us back off at our floor on the way down. We were lucky; we could have been stuck in the lift all afternoon.

And we'd have soon run out of things to eye-spy.

On a rather more tragic note we received chilling email from Canmore this evening. Yesterday the captured grizzly had returned to the area and had killed a woman on the same trail we'd been using to walk and run. The woman, a friend of Andy and Saira's, had been out running with two friends and had climbed a tree in an attempt to evade capture. Her companions escaped to raise the alarm. When Rangers returned to the scene the woman's body was discovered and

the bear was shot. A desperate turn of events leaving the community of Canmore deeply shocked.

June 07, 2005.

Early Start

Rather unsurprisingly we had an early start today. The junior ranks blew the bugle at zero five hundred hours. In reality this was better than we had expected; we were anticipating a re-run of the New York debacle.

We were able to take advantage of the fact that our hotel room, sorry suite, has a kitchen and so we were breakfasted and out by eight o'clock.

First stop was a ferry to Devonport, an island just twelve minutes ride away. There we climbed up a relic volcano to gain a great view of Auckland. Despite the volcano having been dormant for probably hundreds of thousands of years Lottie was quite captivated by the experience, and was expecting an eruption whilst we were on top.

The afternoon saw us jump on a bus to Auckland museum. The bus ride was challenging, with Ben so keen to stay on the bus that he wailed like a banshee every time it stopped to pick other passengers up as he thought that meant he was getting off too.

When we actually did get off there was one of those cries that is only audible to dogs and the NSPCC. He was heartbroken. Still, nothing fours hours wandering round a boring museum won't fix we told ourselves.

Luckily the museum was great and very child friendly. Once Ben had stopped crying we all had a pretty good time.

The evening's meal was courtesy of Ponsonby's Pies. This was swiftly followed by the worlds quickest bath time bedtime so that we could watch the Lions play Taranaki at footy as they call it over here.

Pies, rugby, crying. Like a regular day at home really.

June 08, 2005.

Piha Beach

We're in a fairly remote setting right now and getting a GPRS signal proved impossible last night. So I've climbed to the top of a tree and am writing this monkey style. If this entry stops abruptly I'd encourage you to send help.

We started the day by checking out of our well-appointed hotel room. It really had been the perfect place to stay, not least because of the washing machine. In our two nights there we'd done six loads. I had to keep asking the front desk for more powder. I think they thought we were running a service wash operation.

We picked up a hire car downtown and shoehorned ourselves and our luggage into it. As ever, cat swinging was out of the question.

Driving in New Zealand is made slightly easier due to the fact they drive on the left. However they compensate for this by not putting up any road signs. Not to where we were going anyway. Lottie was being as helpful as its possible to be when you're navigating in a foreign country by saying 'I think we've been here before'. She was, of course, correct as we spent most of the morning driving round in circles.

Directions from a petrol station eventually helped us on our way and we were soon on the right road for Piha. The landscape very quickly changes from suburban to subtropical

rainforest. We stopped at a ranger station with a great view over the rainforest basin. An incredible sight. Even Ben stopped eating stones for a moment and took in the view.

If you know where you're headed Piha isn't far from Auckland. It's on the west coast only about an hour from the city. Nevertheless it's a world apart, and is quite a special place. The place we booked into is called Piha Cottage and is a self-contained unit at the end of the owner's garden. It's basic but very charming. The approach to the cottage is up a steep and narrow track, the only way to successfully get up there is to stick the car in first gear and approach the incline at about six thousand revs. My first attempt, at a moderate four thousand revs ended up with us slithering backwards into the jaws of the rainforest. For the second time of the day, Ben looked up to see what was going on around him.

When we eventually arrived at the cottage the owners were dreadfully apologetic, telling us that the hot water was off and that she had arranged alternative accommodation for us. However there was no way I was driving back down that hill again so we decided to stay put. Still, cold showers are at the very core of Victorian parenting.

In the afternoon we walked down to Piha beach. The waves were enormous; I'd estimate them to be approaching four metres. There were surfers out there and they seemed so close to the rocks that I can only imagine they'd all had lobotomies. It made Californian surf look like Blackpool beach.

The sand on Piha beach is black. Very odd. Something to do with iron in the sand from the volcanic activity. Anyway, the bottom line is kids love it because it makes them look like they've been playing down a coal mine. Not to worry kids, nothing a nice long shower won't fix.

We stayed at the beach until it was almost dark. Being in the depths of winter over here it's dark by half five. The change from the light nights of California has been hard to deal with,

and the children really aren't sure what's going on with the seasons.

On the way back from the beach we tried to buy some grog. Wine, beer, methylated spirit would have done. But it seems that like many places we've been to the liquor license is very strict. And so our temperance tour of the world continues.

So we had nothing to drink, no hot water and no Internet connectivity. I'm not sure which was worse.

More updates, possibly by carrier pigeon, later.

June 09, 2005.

Karekare Beach

We started the day much later than usual. Our normally energised children only fell out of bed at the very respectable time of seven o'clock this morning. The prize for this uncharacteristically good behaviour was freshly prepared waffles. We might not have wireless Internet down here, but a waffle iron is some consolation.

After breakfast we packed up the car and drove to Karekare beach just over the hill. According to our guidebook this is the beach they used in the film 'The Piano'. Interestingly, Bec thinks this is the best film ever. Conversely I thought it was rubbish. It's about a woman who falls in love with a piano she finds on a beach or something. Anyway there are no car chases or explosions or anything like that. So if you're a bloke I'd recommend avoiding it at all costs.

The beach was deserted and very atmospheric. It was almost spooky having an entire beach to ourselves. The children busied themselves with shell collecting and sand swallowing respectively. Despite the later than usual start it wasn't long before Ben laid face down in the sand and announced that he

was tired. His rock and roll lifestyle seemed to have caught up with him and he was ready for a nap.

We ate a picnic lunch and then drove back to the cottage in order that the children could have a reasonable snooze. And so they did. Both Lottie and Ben slept for three hours leaving us to drink tea and marvel at how quiet it had become.

When they finally did wake up it was nearly dark which didn't really leave enough time for all of the planned afternoon activities. We had hoped to take the nearby trail through the forest to a waterfall and be back in time to buy provisions at the local store. However we only had enough daylight to complete one of these activities and the waterfall won.

Whilst the tramp up to the falls was superb I do now wish that I'd looked out some bush tucker whilst I'd been up there. Right now I'd happily chew on a tree weta or a couple of stick insects.

Because we'd missed the Piha general store dinner was a 'Ready Steady Cook' affair. We ate chicken noodles, pasta and waffles. Pretty much only one of the major food groups. It was a bit like being a student again, alas without the obligatory tins of out of date lager.

We finished the day by looking out at the stars this evening. The light pollution is much reduced here compared to home and it's really easy to make out the Milky Way. There are just hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of stars. Incredible.

Tomorrow we fly down to South Island to catch up with family Blomley where we are looking forward to abusing their hospitality and our livers.

June 10, 2005.

To Christchurch

The day started early as usual. This time we couldn't blame the children; it was the grown ups that were keen to catch the ten o'clock flight to Christchurch.

We're like a well-oiled machine when it comes to packing up and checking out. In fact, recently, it's the only time we've been well oiled.

And so we set off from Piha and drove to Auckland airport. As ever, the road signs were scant and it required help from a petrol station to get us back on the beaten track. Bec feels obliged to buy something in each of the garages we stop at for directions. Currently our haul includes a cordless screwdriver, a cool box and a patio heater.

The flight from Auckland to Christchurch took just over an hour and was straightforward. There was a poor chap behind us who was petrified of flying who shook throughout the entire flight. Unsurprisingly, the madcap antics of our progeny did nothing to calm his nerves.

Alistair met us at the airport. Luckily, like Andy he has a truck, so getting us and our pile of luggage back to his house wasn't a problem. On the way back we learnt of a crazy rule of the road that I'd been blissfully unaware of on North Island. If you're turning right, seemingly approaching traffic turning left into the same road has priority. No wonder the North Islanders had been scowling at me.

When we got to Al and Susan's house the children were immediately transported back to toy heaven. We didn't hear a peep from them for hours, and only had to reprimand them once for throwing stones at the neighbours' houses.

A quick visit to the park followed and then we dispatched them. Once all was quiet we opened a bottle of wine, and then another. And then another.

And this morning the children seem to be making an awful lot of noise. Funny that.

June 11, 2005.

Downtown Christchurch

Today we all jumped in the car and drove downtown. Christchurch is a small city, not dissimilar to the size of Leeds. In summer I suspect it's heaving with people and has quite an atmosphere. Today, in the depths of winter, well it just looked like Leeds.

We visited an arts centre, which was neat. Lots of artisans selling their wares. They were all wrapped up in outfits that would have been suitable for a nuclear winter; these guys are obviously not cut out for the cold. We strolled round in our shirt sleeves. I think if we had let her, Lottie would have taken her vest off and run about in just her pants.

At the market, there were four Maori children that were doing the Hakka. These guys were probably aged between four and ten, but the whole thing still looked quite impressive. Goodness knows how intimidating it must be when fifteen All Blacks square up to you and do it. Ben gave them quite the hard stare, and I was pleased that he didn't attempt to wrestle them to the ground when they'd finished.

We jumped on a tram that trundled round town and gave a historical commentary. Alistair's commentary was much more contemporary and better value. Still the kids loved it, and with Al's help, they now know where all the Strip Clubs are.

In the afternoon we drove back home and the children played in the garden and watched television. Regardless of our location in the world, it seems we are only ever been ten feet

away from a Lion King video. It's a reassuring thought, and buys us all some quiet time.

Simba and his Chums drove Al and I to head for the hills. We took the mountain bikes out and headed off up some steep and dusty track. Despite my two week Canmore boot-camp, Al was well ahead of me on the bike. It was good to get out, and, despite the damp weather, the views over Christchurch were reasonable.

We arrived home covered head to foot in mud. I think we even scared the children.

Tomorrow we're headed off to Hamner for a short break. If I can get this mud out from under my eyelids, more later.

June 12, 2005.

Winter Holiday

Now here's a thing. I reckon I'm solar powered. The weather here is cold and grey and whilst this makes me feel less homesick, it's much harder to feel energised.

Our hosts are continually apologising for the weather. Although it's not the weather we ordered, it's almost certainly better than home. And at least it's not acid rain.

The only downside is that my capsule wardrobe isn't quite cut out for the climate. In fact I'm having to wear the entire capsule all at once. I've convinced myself that the Hawaiian shirt really does set off my wellies.

In search of better weather we packed up the cars and headed off for Hamner. This is a resort some ninety minutes drive from Christchurch. We've booked a holiday home for a couple of nights and so it's like a holiday within a holiday for us. It was reassuring that our hosts, the Blomleys, took more

stuff away with them for the two night break up the road than we have with us for our three month round the world jaunt.

On the way we stopped at the Golden Arches for some lunch. Despite you thinking that by now we must have 'supersized' ourselves, this is only the second time in the entirety of the trip that we have eaten chez Ronald MacDonald. Anyway, the meal was sufficiently nutritionally deficient to mean it tasted absolutely great.

The drive north to Hamner was geologically interesting. These guys have got every type of landscape; it's like driving through a geography text book. But less boring. Much of the journey took us through limestone country, with the sheep, the rolling hillsides and the drizzle we could have been at Malham.

We arrived in Hamner and moved into our house. The place was freezing and the only real source of heat was a wood-burning stove. So it didn't take long before Alistair and I were out flailing about with axes in a fairly random attempt to chop wood.

Typing with only seven fingers is tough and so my posts might get increasingly shorter.

With a roaring fire and the children full of spaghetti and sausages it started to feel more like home. Thankfully you can buy beer and wine in Hamner so the evening' entertainment was, as usual, the blokes talking nonsense.

Our plan tomorrow is to dip in the hot springs. I might even take some of these clothes off.

June 13, 2005.

Hot Springs

Apologies for the latest outage. Things have been a hoot here, and we really have been too occupied to keep this journal updated. A temporary aberration, I promise.

We continued our winter holiday in Hamner and woke up to more lousy weather. Our hosts are still continually apologising for the weather, which is unnecessary, but keeps them busy. The weather today was exceptionally lousy and in keeping with the scenery is just as you'd expect in December in the Lake District. It was that fine rain. The dinner ladies would have had us all sat inside for sure.

Fortunately, the weather today didn't matter as we were off to the hot springs. These are outdoor pools that are fed with geothermally heated water. The smell is pretty sulphurous, and for the first time in about six weeks we didn't need to keep smelling Ben's bottom to see where the stench was coming from. Nevertheless the water is hot hot hot and so we spent all morning turning into prunes.

The actual process of taking children swimming is fairly straightforward. It's the getting them changed in and out of their trunks that results in a gong show. This time the whole undressing thing passed without incident. It was the getting out part that fell to pieces. In pursuit of efficiency, Bec and I had chosen to take one child each. I had the little fellow and Bec had the little princess. Just as I took Ben into the changing room he weed (is that the past participle of to wee?) down my front. That bit is par for the course, but when I returned to the locker Bec had taken all of our clothes into her cubicle. So I was running about outside where it was about five degrees, peering under the other cubicles in the hope that I would spot my wife from a purely ankle based perspective. In the meantime Bec had replaced my clothes, with some of hers back in the locker. I eventually found them and swiped the lot. The whole hide-and-seek process was repeated several times in an increasingly comedy style. I

remained largely naked and covered in urine throughout. Terry and June eat your heart out.

Once we'd recovered we ate an unusually relaxed lunch and took the children back to the house for some quiet time. Grabbing our chance, Al and I took the mountain bikes out again for a quick hurtle round a local forest. Trees, mud, lots of huffing and puffing. It was good fun and nice to be outside, despite the awful weather.

We returned to the house and acted like excitable schoolboys; 'Look ladies, look how muddy us blokes got. Look at us in our muddy underpants. Look how we're all muddy, except for our feet. Look'. I strung it out a bit longer than Al, because I'm a bit better looking in just my pants. The ladies love it.

Once showered and fully clothed we put on some of Alistair's eclectic music collection and danced with the children. Ben was the last man standing; in fact I think he was hoping for an all night rave.

In the evening Al and Sue looked after the children and Bec and I had a rare evening out together. We ate out at a local restaurant and spent the time reviewing the trip so far and planning the weeks to come.

On balance, a great day. We seem to have been away for ever.

June 14, 2005.

Tea Ceremony

We woke to more miserable weather and on this basis decided to leave our holiday home in Hamner. We'd exhausted the wet-weather options there, and mini-golf in the rain just didn't appeal to any of the grown-ups.

So we packed up and hoovered the house. It's amazing how much stuff four children can grind into a carpet over the space of just two days. The inside of the vacuum cleaner must have looked like a giant bag of Bombay mix.

Anyway we packed up, leaving only Lottie's coat and drove the ninety minutes back to Christchurch. We stopped briefly to shatter the peace of the other diners at a beautiful restaurant on the way home. The staff were very attentive, and apart from providing cable ties to cuff the children to their seats, did everything they could to help.

The food here in New Zealand is exceptional. Everything seems fresh and full of flavour. I'm not naturally a great foodie, but I think the stuff here is great. I might put the bathroom scales on eBay when I get home.

When we finally got back to chez Blomley the weather had dried up a little, so we drove out to Sumner, a small coastal resort just fifteen minutes drive away. We took toys with wheels and scooted along the esplanade on a variety of scooters, trikes and a dinosaur on a leash.

Then for the second time in less than four hours we took the children to trash another café. In Sumner there is a place dedicated to the enjoyment of tea. A good cup of tea is high on my list of priorities and so we went to see what all the fuss was about. The place was superb, playing oriental music and offering low-slung benches on which to play out the whole tea ceremony thing. It was an oasis of calm. And then we turned up.

Disaster. The teapots were presented with burning candles underneath, and egg timers to ensure perfect infusion timing. Soft drinks were presented in foot-high gossamer glass flutes. It was possibly the least child-safe venue on the whole of South Island.

Anyway we blew out the candles, gulped down our tea, knocked things over a bit, apologised and left. The place was great, it just wasn't right for us.

We came home, washed tea off the children, and packed them off to bed. We watched television, drank beer, and ate crisps.

From Terry and June to Homer and Marge in less than twenty-four hours.

June 15, 2005.

Mount Hutt

In a selfless show of kindness, Al and I offered to look after the children this morning for a couple of hours whilst the ladies went into town. They could stay out as long as they wanted, as long as they were back before eleven o'clock.

There was method in our madness, as Al and I had planned to drive out to the Mount Hutt ski field to do some skiing. We did a reasonable job of stopping the feisty infants from maiming one another whilst the ladies were gone. The house was toast, but no blood was spilt.

On their return we did a handover of about six seconds and then drove ninety minutes up the road to Mount Hutt. The last sixteen kilometres of the journey were the most impressive, and consisted of a very steep unsealed track with almost room enough for two cars to pass. If the roads to the ski resorts in Europe were like that, the sport would have died out long ago.

At the resort we bought an afternoon ski pass and hit the slopes. In fact, I spent most of the afternoon doing just that, hitting the slopes. In a moment of poorly structured thinking, Al persuaded me that he should ski and I should snowboard.

It would be like a handicap system, each of us exploiting our weakest discipline.

After just one lap of nursery slope, Al was convinced I was ready for the chairlift. Besides, I had eaten most of the snow of the lower slope, and the steep stuff at the top looked much tastier.

I managed to buy more time with the beginners and it was during this time that I decided that I was an old dog and that snowboarding was a new trick. At this point we swapped boots and reverted to our transport of choice. There were only two slopes open; it's early in the season, but the snow was good, and on skis I spend much more time standing up than on my backside, so I started to have some fun.

Later in the day, Al persuaded me to move back to the dark side and strap the slippy tin tray back onto my feet. His explanation was great, and peppered with phrases like, 'No it's really very easy, just put your weight on your left leg.' It all made sense until it came to the execution whereupon I just kept biffing my head into the snow. I got quite good at that bit.

The skiing came to an end at about four o'clock and we headed back down the hill. On the way back to Al's house we stopped at Susan's parents' place. It's fantastic and was almost identical to our house, apart from the twenty-five acres, the pool, the aircraft hanger complete with plane and the airstrip. Worse still, Susan's parents are lovely folk.

Susan's Dad was out cutting the lawn, so Al stole the electric golf cart and we rode out to meet him. Now here's a thing about electric golf carts, they can go pretty fast. Particularly when Al is driving. He took care not to take out many of the sapling hazelnut trees that grow on the estate, but it was a white knuckle ride nonetheless.

We stayed to drink tea and talk about our skiing exploits, and then hurtled off in the truck back to see the ladies and the children.

Anyway, that's all for now. It's been tricky trying to type this with my wrists in plaster.

June 16, 2005.

Taylor's Mistake

A day on the beach. More later. I promise.

June 17, 2005.

Road Trip

The objective today was to drive as far south as possible. Our target was Queenstown, four hundred and fifty kilometres away, but we knew that this was probably further than we'd get in one day.

After a morning spent retrieving our stuff from the farthest corners of the Blomley's house we set off south. Actually getting out of Christchurch was the most difficult bit of the journey. We had begun to wish we'd brought a ball of wool with us, one end tied to their gatepost, so that we could simply wind it back up in a week's time.

Alistair has lent us his car for the duration. I don't think it's ever been driven so slowly. His parting shot was 'it doesn't matter if you trash it, I need a new one anyway'. He's only been in New Zealand for five years and already he's a full-on Kiwi bloke.

Once we were out of the suburbs the weather started to improve. There was a nor-wester, a warmer wind which

allegedly makes people behave strangely and causes an arch of cloud in the sky. We saw the cloud, but behaviour was pretty much standard in the back of the car.

As we drove further south we started to see the picture postcard New Zealand. Lots of empty plains surrounded by mountains and sheep. Lots of sheep.

We stopped for a run around at Lake Tekapo, a vast body of water surrounded by snowy peaks. By this time the cloud was hugging the mountain tops so we saw few summits. It was very reminiscent of Scotland in the winter. Very pleasant indeed.

We stopped at a tiny church on the shore of the Lake where a couple had just got married. The setting was tranquil and the mountain air still. Then Ben slipped on the steps, banging his head and letting out a shrill yodel down the valley. They may have to dub the wedding video.

About an hour later we arrived in a place called Twizel. The Lonely Planet guide refers to it as an uneventful place. And they are right. The only redeeming features are some abandoned diggers that now serve as a playground. On the strength of that alone we decided to stay the night.

More rugby on the television tonight. The best bits are the adverts. In amongst ads for beer, cars and supermarkets are ads for worm treatments for cattle and sheep dip. It's a different world.

Tomorrow we're headed further south. Expect more then.

June 18, 2005.

Whoa It's Chilly

It may be the hottest day of the year at home but it really is winter here today. We woke up in Twizel to a ground frost and not for the first time I began to wish I'd packed more clothes for this trip.

Lottie and Ben were eager to play on the abandoned diggers that I mentioned yesterday. It transpires that these were left behind after some hydroelectric project that was completed in the late sixties. Despite being old, rusty and covered in ice they are just the job for entertaining under fives.

When I'd managed to unstick Ben's frozen tongue from the bucket of a front loader we jumped in the car and continued our journey south.

Bec drove today and quickly got the hang of an automatic gearbox. I was demoted to navigator, a fairly lowly role on a two-hundred kilometre stretch without any junctions.

Despite the cold start, once the sun was up the temperatures began to rise quickly and we were driving under blue skies. The landscape remained very reminiscent of Scotland as we passed through mountain roads interspersed with flood plain. As we got beyond Cromwell and closer to Queenstown the landscape became less rugged and gave way to acres of orchards and vineyards.

We arrived in Queenstown at lunchtime and ate at a funky café. It was too cool for children really and we shattered the peace of the hungover twenty-somethings who were enjoying a relaxing Sunday brunch.

After lunch we headed down to the lakeside where all sorts of adrenaline inducing activities were taking place. Lottie pronounced that 'This place is even crazier than Disney'. She was right, despite not ever having been to any of Walt's resorts.

The only extreme activity we engaged in was toddler wrestling. Ben had decided that he was going on a boat. Without consulting either parents or crew he would bound up any available gangplank, his little legs carrying him as fast as possible. Any attempt at restraining the stowaway ended in a sustained crowd-stopping wail.

We found a place to stay overnight and then walked back into town. We stopped to kick a ball about in a vain attempt to tire the children out.

The rest of the day followed its usual course. Find somewhere to eat, order chicken nuggets, cover them in sauce and drop them on the floor. The children didn't disappoint and Ben displayed the highest degree of gongery which won him the big prize of three spoons of Medised, which was awarded at bedtime.

As ever, more tomorrow.

June 19, 2005.

We'll Get There When We Get There

Despite his Medised chaser, Ben was up with the lark again this morning. It seems impossible to wear the little guy out.

Part of the problem with early starts right now is that it doesn't get light until just after eight, so the first two hours of the day are spent putting sugar puffs down the back of the sofa.

The room we were staying in last night didn't have a dining table. We did, however have a low-slung coffee table in the room. I decided that we would eat breakfast Japanese style, all of us knelt in an orderly fashion on the carpet with our bowls of wheatiebangs on the coffee table. Hands up who

thinks that worked? The room ended up looking like the set of Tiswas.

Breakfast was more abandoned than completed, and after picking up a gazillion sugar coated corn puffs off the carpet I'd have given my right arm for a dustbuster.

Once out of the hotel we set off to the park. The weather was cold again and it didn't take the children long to freeze to the apparatus. We stopped for coffee and then went shopping.

Lottie has grown out of, or worn out most of her clothes. Her current look is asylum seeker chic. So much so that people we visit have been taking the clothes off the backs of their own children to dress ours. This is a cost effective strategy for clothing kids but is now so effective it's embarrassing.

And so we spent an hour in a kids' clothes shop buying outfits for Lottie. We were congratulating ourselves on how unique our daughter would be when she gets back home with her Kiwi wardrobe. Look at us with our Pumpkin Patch princess. Oh, isn't she global for a four year old.

It was only when we'd spent a hundred dollars that we saw that their catalogue listed a branch at the Metro Centre.

We ate lunch at a particularly good place called Dux de Lux. They even had toys for the children that we had to prise out of Ben's hands when it came time to leave. Toy deprivation is the worst part of this trip for the children. When they complain I tell them they better get used to it. We sold all their stuff to finance the trip.

After lunch we climbed in the car and drove the hundred and seventy kilometres to Te Anau. This is the last town before Milford Sound. The drive out here was uneventful. The terrain was less dramatic than yesterday's drive and the light was much flatter. For the most part the children slept. During the last twenty kilometres Lottie woke up and then asked how far we had to go approximately every hundred metres. On

balance she's been very patient with all the driving we've done. Almost as patient as her parents.

We arrived at our motel at around four in the afternoon. We chose it on the strength of its playground. In reality this is little more than a rusty swing and a piece of corrugated tin roof that doubles as a slide. The picture in the brochure looks like an advert for the tetanus jab.

Other than that the place is fairly basic. In fact the whole town is fairly basic and has a real out of season feel about it. There's little reason to come here unless you're on the way to Milford Sound. It's a long way to come just to play on a rusty swing. Even Ben senses that there must be another reason for stopping here.

It's a big day tomorrow. More driving, a boat out on Milford Sound and then back here to the Bates Motel.

Sea legs and psychopaths permitting, more tomorrow.

June 20, 2005.

I'm Never Getting On A Boat Again

As ever Ben was first out of the blocks this morning. However, for a change our six o'clock wake up was consistent with our schedule. Today we were eager to get a flying start on the road to Milford Sound. The drive from Te Anau is only one hundred and twenty kilometres, but there is a good deal of scaremongery masquerading as driving advice in these parts. The motoring advisories make it sound like you're driving to middle earth and cinematically you are. But practically there's not much to worry about. There is no petrol en route and snow chains are recommended. Given that we had a full tank and it wasn't snowing we were more than adequately prepared.

We set off well before eight and headed out in the dark. The rain was atrocious and there was hardly anyone else about. On this basis alone it felt like we were setting out on a big adventure; even the children picked up on this and were unusually subdued.

The first half of the drive was similar to much of the territory we had already driven through in the last few days. However once we were over what is called The Great Divide the landscape changed dramatically. All of a sudden the peaks around us became incredibly steep sided, the vegetation turned into temperate rain forest and waterfalls cascaded from every available surface. It was, and I use the term advisedly, awesome.

About twenty kilometres from Milford we passed through the Homer Tunnel. This was only completed in 1953 after eighteen years of hard labour. It is the roughest looking tunnel I've ever been through and apart from the sealed road surface, looks entirely unfinished. The tunnel walls have been left as rough rock and the illumination is provided by little more than a string of fairy lights. Still, as tunnels go, it works brilliantly.

We arrived at Milford and bought tickets for a two hour sailing that was to take us the length of Milford Sound through to the Tasman Sea. The boat we were on wasn't the biggest on the jetty. It was bigger than a raft but smaller than a ship. I'm sure you nautical types have a proper name for this type of vessel. Anyway there were about twenty passengers with room for about thirty more.

From the boat the views were incredible. Although the torrential rain meant that visibility was reduced, it did mean that the waterfalls were brimming over. I've never seen so much water. Except for maybe bath time when the kids have been on the Red Bull.

The whole place is magnificent. It's no good me blathering on about it. It almost defies description. Suffice to say the sides of the fjord are very steep and they get up to nine thousand millimetres of rain a year. It's waterfall central.

As a family we were ahead on points at this stage. We'd not run out of fuel, dropped off the edge of the road, missed the boat or fallen in the water. It was never going to last.

And so, just minutes after we'd emerged from the fjord into the Tasman Sea we hit the swell. Three metres of angry swell. It took Lottie less than fifteen seconds to announce her intentions and within a minute the contents of her stomach was neatly bagged and held tightly in my hands. It transpires she has more stomachs than a cow and by the time we got back to the flat water I was clutching five bags of partially digested sugar coated corn puffs.

Just for the record she was a very brave girl, and didn't complain once. We felt very sorry for her and some guilt at subjecting her to the ordeal. As we disembarked there was a beautiful moment where she announced to one of the crew 'I am never getting on a boat again'. I can't fault her logic.

And so we drove back to Te Anau stopping briefly to walk up to The Chasm, a waterfall that has cut huge cleft deep into the surrounding rock.

Our learning point today was not to buy fish and chips from a newsagent. Tonight we did. In an attempt to save a few dollars and a restaurant carpet we thought we'd buy fish and chips and eat them back at the motel. The only place in town that was open was a newsagent that had a deep fat fryer. The lady behind the counter was sufficiently overweight to suggest that her fried fancies were nothing short of irresistible. Encouraged by the girth of her outsize jogging pants I ordered two portions of cod and chips and ten minutes later I found myself salivating all the way back to the motel.

The first hint of disaster arose as I began to unwrap the soggy chips. They'd been packed into waxed paper bags identical to those Lottie had been decanting her stomach contents into just hours earlier. The memory was just too fresh to ignore.

Worse to come was the fish that sagged woefully under an inch and a half of barely cooked batter. Not wanting to put the children off their meal, Bec and I looked sideways at each other and mumbled 'Cette poisson c'est merde'. Lottie asked what we were talking about but Ben evidently understood because he just tipped everything on his plate onto the floor. I don't blame him. Another meal abandoned.

Chips from a newsagent. Incredible. They weren't even wrapped in newspaper.

June 21, 2005.

To Dunedin And Don't Spare The Horses

We had quite a long drive ahead of us this morning. It's nearly three hundred kilometres from Te Anau to Dunedin and so we checked out of the Bates motel at around eight o'clock and hit the road.

The roads were deserted. As always the road was in good condition but was single carriageway for its entire length. By now the children have got quite used to getting in the car, squabbling for half an hour, demanding that we play the fun songs tape and then falling asleep.

Just a tip to any of you who might be considering taking infants on a bigtrip. If you take a cassette to play in the car, make sure you can bear the songs to be indelibly etched on your soul for the rest of your days.

I've even created my own star wars version of the classic 'The Hokie Cokie'. You can try this at home, just start by replacing the chorus with the phrase 'Obi-Won Kenobi' and busk the rest.

Bec was right. We should have taken more than one tape.

Anyway we were on our sixth rendition of Jungle Jazz when we approached another car coming the other way. This provided a bit of interest on these otherwise unpopulated roads so I broke out of my jungle jazz induced trance and stuck my foot down.

Look Daddy a police car. Look at its flashing lights. Look at the angry looking police lady. Look Daddy she's pointing at you.

Anyway she stopped me for speeding. I'd been driving at 112 kph in a hundred zone. Well below my personal best as it happens, but it made me a felon nonetheless.

I decided that my approach to the police lady should be eccentric English fop. For the next few minutes I was Hugh Grant, charming, humble and apologetic.

My acting career was hopeless and short lived. It cost me eighty dollars, twenty demerit points and a hard stare from my wife.

The rest of the journey was straightforward by comparison. We arrived in Dunedin mid-afternoon. Dunedin is the medieval name for Edinburgh and there are lots of Scottish connections here. It's not a particularly touristy place but it's far from unpleasant.

We ate lunch at a café, paid my fine at the local bank and then returned to our motel for an hour of wrestling with the children.

Anyway unless I'm banged up for more misdemeanours, more tomorrow.

June 22, 2005.

Otago

In his eagerness to explore Dunedin, Ben was up at half five. Our motel room was dark and cold and it felt like a long way from home. The place we were staying was huge, it was a two-bedroom suite, the biggest problem was heating it with little more than a hair dryer and a packet of peppermints. Bec asked the question 'how did we ever go camping?'. It was a good one. We must be turning soft in our old age.

The only discovery we have made in respect of keeping warm is the marvellous electric blanket. They are all the rage over here and all the beds seem to have them. Waking up in the morning with deep fried buns is delightful. It just makes getting out of bed all the more difficult. Still, the children help with that part.

We packed up the car and made it down to the Otago museum in town. It was superb. Lots of stuff for children to do and pretty interesting for grown ups too. I still can't believe how the Polynesians got thousands of miles across the Pacific in dugout canoes. It's another thing to add to my list of conspiracy theories.

We left Dunedin at lunchtime and drove very carefully to Timaru. It was two hundred kilometres and I drove all the way at 99.8 kph. After the first twenty kilometres I had a six-hundred vehicle convoy in my wake. Still I was the leader of the pack. And that's where any further comparison to Gary Glitter ends.

We arrived in Timaru two hours and fourteen seconds later. There's a nice beachfront named Caroline Bay and a high

street but not much else. We had pre-booked our accommodation and were delighted to find we'd been given the Heartbeat themed room. All that was missing was that cheeky Nick Berry. It was the most incredibly old fashioned room I think I've ever stayed in. It was retro, but not in a good way.

We ate out at a miserable restaurant where Bec ordered and then sent back green-lipped mussels. We then went back to the room and cried.

Actually that last bit's not true. We put the telly on, which to my surprise wasn't black and white, and sucked on peppermints wrapped in electric blankets.

Us, not the peppermints.

June 23, 2005.

Back To Christchurch

Ben woke early again. I've stopped looking at my watch when he wakes up and instead use what little energy I can muster to establish the temperature. Our motel this morning was particularly chilly, and so we had to lift Ben from his cot and bring him into the grown-up's bed to defrost. He then spent an hour playing keepie-ups under the duvet. That boy sure can kick a ball.

Breakfast was unusually civilised. The children were so cold that their survival instinct was telling them to eat anything they could fit in their mouths. It's a useful technique, and as a consequence I'm thinking of putting the central heating on eBay when we get home.

We were glad to be leaving this particular motel. It was worse than I described it yesterday. It's one of the very few

places where the thought of stealing the towels has never ever crossed my mind.

After having checked-out we decided to drive down to the beach. We felt that perhaps the accommodation had unfairly clouded our view of Timaru and thought that we should spend at least the morning giving it a second chance. And we were pleasantly surprised. There was a skate park that Lottie and I visited and a more traditional playground. The skate park was fun, even without a skateboard; we threw ourselves around it making skateboard noises. It's much safer that way. Thurrrrrrrrrrcccccccc.

The beach was pretty cool too. Sand, shells, seaweed, a dead bird. Lots to pick up and put in your mouth. When we mentioned a spot of lunch I was sure Ben turned to us and said, 'No, I couldn't possibly eat another thing.'

We ate lunch at a local café and engaged in some banter with the locals. Everyone over here is very friendly, but the opening gambit right now is always 'Yere fetha footy?' which roughly translates as 'Have you come to New Zealand to follow the Lions Rugby Union tour?'. Whilst we're not part of what is comically referred to as the 'Barmy Army' it's good to be here during the tour, and it seems like the media are talking of nothing else.

Lottie gave her rendition of the song 'Jonny Jonny Jonny Jonny Wilk-in-son'. It's one of those songs where the title, the verse, and the chorus consist of the same five words. Two words I guess. But it goes on forever. Still, it kept the locals amused.

When we got back to the car, the lights had been smashed the windscreen stoved in.

No, again that's not true either. But you've got to be careful over here. These guys sure love the 'Orl Blix'.

After lunch we got in the car and drove back to Al and Susan's in Christchurch. It was great to be back. A family to eat out of house and home, a washing machine to abuse and a fridge full of Al's beer to drink.

They looked delighted to see us again.

June 24, 2005.

An Incredible Day

Today was a most incredible day. I can't even think of a way to put a comedy spin on it all. So I'll tell it straight.

When we woke up today, the weather was superb, a perfect winter's morning. The sky was blue and there was a light dusting of frost. Al was particularly enthused by the fine conditions and so, during breakfast, he called Susan's parents to see if Harle was taking his plane out.

Turns out he wasn't, but Al strong-armed him into suggesting it was the perfect day for a sightseeing trip. So, in little under an hour we arrived at their house and the Cessna four-seater aircraft was being put through its checks.

Bec and I were a little nervous about both being in the air at the same time. Probably not as nervous as Susan who would have been left with four children for the rest of her days if anything untoward had happened. Harle asked us our weights, and did some calculations to work out whether we'd be able to take off. For reference, this is a good time not to lie about your weight.

Anyway Al, Bec and I climbed into the plane with Harle at the controls. We taxied down the airstrip in front of their house, and within a few seconds we were airborne. We flew to an unmanned airstrip fifteen minutes away where we filled up at a fuel pump by swiping a credit card. Just incredible. We

then flew for a further hour and a half across what seemed like the whole of South Island. This was really flying. Forget all your jumbo nonsense, a single prop is what you need.

The scenery defies description. The Kiwis correctly describe it as 'fintistic'

On our return leg there was a beautiful moment where Harle called his airstrip on the radio. Coral answered, there were a few words of serious sounding radio protocol exchanged and then she said 'What time will you be back love? I'll get the kids lined up to watch you come in'. Superb.

Whilst we were up in the air, Al's phone rang. Small planes are pretty noisy and in a curious spin on the ridiculous 'I'M ON THE TRAIN' conversation, Al had a similar conversation. Anyway, it turns out that the call was to let us know that there were two tickets to this evening's rugby up for grabs.

And so in the late afternoon Bec and I were picked up and taken to see the first test in the Lions tour. The weather was awful, as was the Lions' defence. But the atmosphere was superb, and it was great to watch the All Blacks on their home turf.

Some guys in front of us had a double-sided banner. On one side it said 'It's feeding time!' and on the other 'Don't panic, we've brought our boots'. It stayed on the 'Don't panic' side throughout.

The weather was dreadful. And do you know what? It didn't matter one bit.

June 25, 2005.

Chores

The odd thing about this trip is that despite the high fun factor that persists most of the time, there are still chores to be done. More unusual still is the fact that I actually quite like doing them. There is comfort in routine.

And so today we spent the morning doing jobs. There was stuff to sort out in terms of booking ahead for the next leg of our trip, there was the Internet banking to sort out and there was lots of catching up to be done on this journal.

Best of all was a real DIY job to help with. What I hadn't mentioned yesterday is the bloke that gave us a lift back from the rugby reversed into Al's gate on his way out of the drive. So we had a wrought iron gate to uncrumple.

Luckily Al has more tools than Bob the builder. And I make a pretty good Wendy. I stood about having good ideas whilst Al got his hands dirty. An hour later we had almost brought down the national grid with our overzealous application of power tools, but the gate looked great.

The gate thing was important as it then meant we could effectively corral the kids and stop Ben from attempting to make his own way home. Once the ladies were confident we could safely leave four children with two easily distractible parents they fled into town to do some shopping.

In the afternoon we all drove out to Bottle Lake Forest at Burwood. We took mountain bikes and rode round in the mud. It was the best dedicated mountain biking area I'd ever ridden. It was truly outstanding to ride through beautifully prepared tracks from forest to the sea. As ever, I ended up in the car park covered in mud in just my undies.

The evening was spent eating, drinking and putting the world to rights. This was our last evening in New Zealand and so this was our last opportunity to eat and drink them out of house and home.

We didn't let them down.

June 26, 2005.

NZ to Oz

Today was to be our last day in Christchurch and so we spent the morning packing our things and going through our hosts' laundry pile to search for socks. When we last stayed with friends I came away with the right number of socks, it's just a shame they all belonged to a five year old boy. So I was extra careful this time.

Al and Susan have been absolutely perfect hosts and it was sad to be leaving. We've put a thousand miles on their car, caused their gates to be trashed, eaten all of their food and woken them up before six most mornings. And they've not batted an eyelid. We will miss them.

We took a taxi to the airport, checked in for the flight to Sydney and then walked across the car park to The Antarctic Centre. This was quite good fun if you dig on penguins. There was even a huge walk-in refrigerator which simulated a minus 25-degree Antarctic storm. Cool.

The flight was three hours. It's odd now that all of our travels now take us closer to home. Nevertheless, we've still got a whole month left on the road and so we're determined not to let this leg of the trip feel like the last lap.

There is a two-hour time difference between Sydney and NZ so we landed at bedtime but kept the children awake for the next two hours in an attempt to get them into the right timezone. When they finally got to bed they went to sleep instantly.

So we're in Australia. Just to prove it, we're staying in a suburb called Woolloomooloo. My pronunciation made the taxi driver smile. And he was Korean.

Unless I'm hit by a boomerang, bitten by a funnel web spider, eaten by a croc or stung by a box jellyfish, more tomorrow.

June 27, 2005.

Sydney Harbour

Despite the timezone change, the children woke up only just before six. They must have adjusted their watches just as the captain suggested.

The place we are staying is scruffy but central. It's difficult booking hotels over the Internet. They don't often show pictures of the mould in the grout round the bath. Still, the location almost makes up for the en suite penicillin factory.

Lottie and Ben ate about ten slices of toast at breakfast this morning. In an uncharacteristic show of gluttony the kids ate almost a whole loaf of bread. For the first time ever we looked like one of those families that unbutton their trousers before sitting down at the all you can eat buffet. We had to entice them away with the promise of a mid-morning snack.

After breakfast we set off walking. We knew that we'd be putting a few miles in on foot and had bought a cheap buggy to push Lottie in when she started to fade. I was initially sceptical of buying yet another item of luggage to deal with at airport check in, it already looks like I've won a trolley dash at BigW. Bec was right though; the extra buggy saved the day.

And so we walked from our hotel to Woolloomooloo bay, along to Farm Cove, through the Botanic Gardens to the Opera House, on to The Rocks, under the Sydney Harbour Bridge and then down to Darling Harbour.

It was a fantastic walk and whilst the weather was showery, it was warm. It felt almost tropical. When we arrived in Sydney Lottie was perceptive as ever in suggesting it even smelled warm.

In the afternoon we visited the Sydney Aquarium. Although I don't like eating fish I'm big on aquaria; there's something spooky about fishes' googly eyes that I find engaging and unsettling in equal measure. Anyway enough insight into my

emotionally imbalanced state. The place was fantastic. Nearly as good as Dave's Aquarium off Tonge Moor Road.

Ben was totally in his element as we were wandering round the aquarium. I'm not sure how we didn't end up losing him. The place was dark and crowded and it was often only the light from those embarrassingly awful flashing trainers that gave away his location.

Best of all was a wacky warehouse style play area with a two-dollar entry fee. We presented our children and four dollars and told the man on the gate we'd pick them up on Saturday.

In the evening we found a short cut and strolled home along the hard shoulder of Sydney's central motorway.

Road maps for hiking. You can't beat them.

June 28, 2005.

Singing For Our Supper

I'm very conscious that just like Viz, Oasis and Eastenders this journal isn't as good as it used to be. Lots more spelling mistakes, fewer gags, no one falling into ponds. Despite this it seems we've had almost three thousand visits to the site since we set off, so it seems you're still tuning in. So thanks for that.

We seem to have been away for a long time now. Our underwear has turned from white to grey, my one pair of shoes has almost fallen to pieces and the children have stopped asking 'are we there yet?'

On a trip like this there is an unidentifiable but critical point where you stop looking like you are on holiday and start looking like you're on benefit. We've reached that stage. There was a moment today when Bec was inside a shop and

the rest of us were sat on the step outside. Ben was asleep in his waterproof suit that he's long grown out of, I was covered in dried-on chicken and sweetcorn soup, busy trying to glue my shoes back together and Lottie was chewing on an apple whilst working on her dreadlocks.

We looked bloody awful. Once she'd finished her apple Lottie even suggested that if we'd had a hat we could put it down on the floor, sing songs and buy chocolate with the proceeds. I liked her style although I would probably have kept on singing until I'd had enough for a new pair of shoes.

Apart from our brief spell as down and outs we revisited The Rocks, we escaped from the rain in downtown malls, we dropped by the Sydney Observatory, we got the digital camera fixed and visited the Sydney Museum. We wished, today, that we had attached an odometer to the buggy at the start of the trip. Or an engine.

In the evening we ate at the world famous Café de Wheels pie cart. Allegedly it is world famous and is a big draw for visitors to Sydney. Still, it's just a pie cart, and you have to sit on the pavement to eat your purchases. So for the second time today we ended up huddled together on the pavement. Nevertheless, the pies and the view were superb.

Once the children were in bed I set off in search of an Internet café. There is a lack of unencrypted wireless networks for me to log into around here. Unlike New Zealand the networks are present, but unlike North America they're better protected.

We still have to arrange a campervan for the next leg of our trip and I wanted to compare prices. It seems that campervan world has now moved from winter to shoulder season and the rates have doubled. I still think we will hire one; we'll just not be able to afford the fuel to drive it anywhere.

Maybe we will have to put that hat down and start singing after all. Swing low, sweet chariot...

June 29, 2005.

Rain Rain Go Away

During the night it poured down. I lay in bed listening to raindrops bounce off the windows thinking 'this can't go on much longer'. How wrong I was.

Over breakfast we watched the television news that told of flooding all over New South Wales. One area not too far away had experienced nearly four hundred millimetres of rain overnight.

Well the rain continued throughout the day. It was atrocious. We sat it out in the hotel room and phoned a few campervan rental places and then decided that we couldn't keep Ben contained any longer and that we would have to go out.

It was the sort of rain that gets under your eyelids and runs down the back of your pants. The wind was howling and the trees were shaking their heads at us. Luckily the temperatures were mild so it wasn't unlike being in the shower. We got well and truly PWT.

We caught a bus into town. The windows were steamed up and everyone was dripping and glum. Part of the problem is that no one in Sydney owns a coat. It's evidently not like this much of the time. They all rely on umbrellas that were too busy inverting themselves in the wind today to keep anybody dry. Umbrella carcasses were scattered all over the place.

Once we were downtown we visited the Singapore Air ticket office to change our flight out of Australia from Perth to Cairns. We've decided to abandon the west coast; too much to see over here on the east. The whole process took over an hour, during which we all got bored and cranky.

In the afternoon we walked down to Darling harbour and visited the Maritime Museum. Whilst none of us are big on nautical memorabilia, it was close by, dry and free.

On the way home we took the monorail. This runs through the centre of town and usually affords great views of the downtown area. The trouble was that the windows were so steamed up there was no view at all.

We ate dinner back in our hotel room this evening where I made pasta slop. I didn't make enough and what little I made ended up stuck to the carpet.

Today hasn't been the finest day of the trip. Still, we held it together pretty well in the circumstances.

It is winter after all.

June 30, 2005.

Manly

Today was to be our last full day in Sydney. Thankfully we woke to a much drier day, when the sun came up there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Thanks to all of those who sent commiserations and prozac following yesterday's entry.

Bec had been collecting dollar coins all week and I was beginning to suspect she'd developed a slot machine habit. It turned out last night that they were for the hotel laundromat. Clean clothes. Jackpot!

So with blue skies and fresh gussets we all set out with a spring in our step this morning. We were headed out to Manly beach via a ferry from Circular Quays. As usual we were on foot and walked down to the quayside through the Botanic Gardens. The place is fantastic, parrots flying overhead,

hundreds of huge bats hanging from the trees and heaps of great looking botanic stuff.

There was an Australian rainforest section which you could walk through: lots of tall ferns, a dense canopy and the lure of the bush tucker challenge. Lottie, Ben and I walked through this section leaving Bec with the buggy outside. The track through the forest was narrow meaning we had to walk single file. At about half way I stopped to do a headcount and realised we were missing a small boy. We retraced our steps and discovered Ben had fallen off the track head first into the rainforest. All we could see was a short pair of legs flapping in the ferns. We retrieved him without too much bother, but Lottie was laughing so much I nearly had to resuscitate her. I then had to pick the grub larvae out of his hair before we met back up with Bec. Turns out they taste like chicken.

The ferry ride over to Manly took about twenty minutes. We were conscious of Lottie's declaration last time she stepped off a boat, but she climbed aboard without hesitation. This time despite appearing a little pallid there was no barfing, which was a bonus.

Manly was a good venue. We ate a half decent lunch, browsed the largely surf oriented shops and then hit the beach. Sand pies, sand flies, sand in the eyes. By now we all know the drill and no one deviated from the script.

In the late afternoon we retraced our steps and ended up back at the Café de Wheels pie cart for dinner where we took our usual table.

Tomorrow we fly up to Cairns and pick up a campervan. Tune in for a truckload of chemical toilet shenanigans tomorrow.

July 01, 2005.

King Of The Road

This morning we checked out of our hotel in Sydney. Checking out of anywhere after a few days is always a major exercise; our stuff gets so scattered about it's amazing that we've only lost a handful of things along the way.

Well, actually, it's not amazing, it's due to the fact that Bec generally packs up rather than me. And so, as usual, I was sent off to entertain the children outside. Now here's a tip. The worst possible game to play in a foreign city whilst you are supposed to be looking after two small children is hide and seek. The first few goes were fine, and Ben was never much of a problem. But Lottie has turned into a hide and seek professional. I was even rehearsing the conversation I thought I might be having with the police. 'So when did you last see your daughter sir?' 'Oh just before I leant against a tree and counted to a hundred'.

Anyway, eventually I did find her, and luckily it was before Bec reappeared. We then made a fleeting visit to the Sydney Art Gallery that Lottie pronounced 'too boring for children'. Ben didn't think so. He thought it was the best place for mischief ever. We narrowly escaped pulling the legs off a marble statuette. Fleetingly I thought if those legs really do come off the best course of action would be to stuff any liberated limbs in my rucksack, calmly exit the building and then run like the wind.

We took a taxi up to Sydney airport and checked in for the flight to Cairns. Bec was stopped by security for trying to smuggle a Swiss army knife on board in her hand luggage. The Swiss lovingly refer to this particular model as 'The Picknicker'. This is surely a euphemism for the knife has the longest blade of the entire series. If this knife had been of any other European provenance it would have been called 'The Hooligan' or 'La Guillotine'. Suffice to say we carry it for slicing apples, but even Bec didn't try explaining that to the man with the AK-47. It was an honest mistake and rather than confiscate it they let us go back and check it in.

We arrived in Cairns three hours later and picked up our campervan. Oh my giddy aunt. What on earth were we thinking? It's not much bigger than Bec's car. Almost three hours of total full-on gongery ensued.

It all seems very simple when they are explaining it all at the depot. And then you're ten minutes down the road and everything's rattling about, you can't see out of the rear view mirror, it's thirty degrees outside and you can't find the air-con.

We made it to a campsite a whole kilometre from the depot. Fortunately they had a plot for us. Unfortunately I had to reverse into it. We are now parked with some wheels on and some wheels off a concrete slab. I'm not sure whether the slab is for parking on or sitting on, so I'm hedging my bets. Suffice to say that my father-in-law, a fifth Dan in the black art of caravan levelling would have fallen on his sword. Sorry Barry.

I then set about trying to open all the doors and hatches on the van to try and hook up with the simple pleasures in life like running water and electricity. Each hatch had been locked with a different key from a bunch of about a thousand I'd been given at the depot.

Meanwhile big bugs, the like of which only live in places where it gets this hot were busy taking chunks out of my flesh. To compound matters it was almost dark. For the first time ever on this trip I began to question the sense of us being out here at all.

We dined on jam sandwiches for dinner and in the absence of running water wiped our fingers on the caravan curtains. Sorry Barbara. We put the children to bed in an entirely unsafe suspended sleeping platform arrangement and I was sent directly to buy beer.

It transpires we have arrived in the real Australia. The off licence was a drive through affair where people pitch up in

their trucks, throw a keg in the back, hop out barefoot to pay for their grog and speed off half-cut into the distance.

Imagine their amusement when a Pom turns up on foot asking for just four bottles of beer and some chocolate. 'Yeah you can buy just four bottles mate, but we've no chocolate 'cos that fat bastard's eaten it all' he said, pointing at his colleague.

I think, had I arrived in the car that they would have made me buy an entire keg. I just think they'd worked out that it was unlikely that the pale looking Pom was strong enough to walk home with an eighty-eight pint keg under his arm.

I am hoping that tomorrow we might manage to exceed today's distance and break the thousand-metre barrier. At the current rate it's going to take us three years to get to Brisbane.

Unless we've spontaneously combusted, more tomorrow.

July 02, 2005.

Port Douglas

It seems it is only the grown ups that are phased by our transition to trailer park trash. Ben and Lottie love it. Where else can you roll out of bed at twenty past six and be at the playground by 06:21?

And so that's exactly what happened. Better still we were breakfasted and in the pool by eight o'clock. What a busy morning. I remember wondering whether it was the children's bedtime, checking my watch and discovering it was only half past nine. Boy, life in a campervan is full-tilt.

Which brings me neatly to the handling properties of our camper. It's the wobbliest, most unforgiving, unbalanced

heap of junk I have ever had the misfortune to drive. In straight lines it's frightening to drive. Point it at a roundabout and you're in the lap of the Gods. The van is essentially a Bedford Rascal with a Portacabin blu-tacked to its roof. The chances of me being stopped for speeding in this baby are remote.

Despite all of this we've driven North today. No, the map wasn't upside down and yes this does mean we've got nineteen hundred kilometres to drive to Brisbane now, but at least we're moving. Albeit in the wrong direction.

We've arrived in a place called Port Douglas. Quite a pretty resort with a pleasant holiday feel about it. We lunched at a restaurant on the main strip and bumped into one of Bec's old classmates from medical school. We knew that she now lived in Australia, but it turns out she was up here on holiday from Melbourne.

I was sure we'd meet someone we knew unexpectedly along the way. I just didn't know whom. Bec was convinced we would bump into this particular individual. Oh to be married to a witch.

Later we walked through a market to an estuarine beach and were put off by the signs warning of crocodiles. We're only just getting over bears.

And so we found a campsite for the night. We've no water or electric hook up on this site, and so it was just a matter of turning the engine off and putting up four deck chairs. Both activities fall well within my sphere of competence, and so tonight I looked like a professional.

Ben and Lottie are going the whole hog with their traveller lifestyle. They have given up hygiene and I'm sure Ben is trying to grow a goatee. Lottie, meanwhile, is running about in just a summer dress and beads. I'm eager to dissuade them both from running about barefoot and have convinced

Lottie that the spiders will get her if she doesn't wear shoes. The difficulty is now getting her to remove her shoes in bed.

Tomorrow we hope to find a beach free of crocs. And spiders.

Oh and bears.

July 03, 2005.

Four Mile Beach

The morning started, unusually with a haircut for Bec. One of the other residents of our trailer park was offering haircuts. All styles ten dollars. To be fair when she came back it didn't look like a four quid haircut. Well, at least not from the front.

We had decided by this stage that Port Douglas was nice enough to warrant a two-night stay. So we left the campervan exactly where it was and walked down to Four Mile Beach.

We did all the usual beach style stuff, built castles, knocked them over, buried the children and ate sand. It was a very windy day but warm enough to go into the sea. Before long we had two fully clothed children in the water. What is it with them? If Ben had been in his trunks to begin with there is no way we'd have even got him even damp.

What was particularly unusual was that we were swimming less than a mile from where the crocodiles live. Just around the corner there was an estuary allegedly full of salties as they are affectionately known. Turns out they don't leave the estuary. Or so we are led to believe.

In the early afternoon we returned to the campervan and put the children down for a sleep. They were sufficiently cranky to warrant it, and they both delivered a full two hours. I might have even had forty winks too.

When they woke we walked back into town, ate ice-cream and found a playground. For a couple of hours we felt ourselves gradually coming round to the campervan way of doing things.

By this stage we had not eaten out for a full thirty-six hours and decided that Tapas would be just the ticket. Imagine Daddy and Lottie's delight when Mummy and Ben were scoffing handfuls of whitebait. I had to keep reminding them both that it's rude to talk with fishtails hanging out of one's mouth.

During dinner it started to rain. It's not supposed to rain up here at all, so we felt a bit cheated. Particularly after our experience in Sydney last week.

Campervans aren't much fun in the wet. Although it's almost watertight, the place is so small it soon mists up and the place begins to feel and smell a whole lot nastier than it really is.

So nasty, in fact, that we couldn't find the wherewithal to open the bottle of wine we had bought earlier in the day. Unheard of.

Anyway, we're currently feeling that this part of the trip is harder than we'd bargained for, not least because of the constraints of the campervan.

Icecream, beaches, tapas. Hard work? I can hear your hearts bleeding from here.

July 04, 2005.

Things That Go Bump In The Night

Thud. Then a half-second pause. Then a loud and miserable wail. We both knew exactly what had happened. The little guy had fallen out of his bunk. It wasn't far, but when you're only one, making your first night jump and forgetting to pack your 'chute is a painful business.

It was about half-past three and by this stage all of us were wide awake. All of us miserable, most of all Ben. To his absolute credit he didn't wail much and was the first back to sleep. He does however, have a spectacular bruise on his forehead.

Bec and I spent most of the rest of the night re-considering the appropriateness of a campervan for this leg of the journey. It wasn't supposed to be like this. The travel guides suggested we'd surf all day, drink cocktails in the sunset and the kids would take themselves off to bed not long after they'd finished cooking and washing up.

Campervans stink. At least this one does.

By the time it was light it was still raining. In fact it was persisting down. We stuffed everything loosely in the van and trundled off clanking our possessions behind us.

Less than ten kilometres down the road Lottie told us that she had tummy ache. A few moments later she was feeling sick, and in the time we could say 'There's a jug to your left if you need to use it' she was holding her breakfast in front of her. And bless her, not a drop spilled.

Not to worry Lottie, not much further I lied. Just another one thousand eight hundred kilometres in the rattling slow stinky barf bus I thought as I strapped her into the front seat next to me. Worse still, I'd just swapped my navigator, a member of the Royal College of Physicians, for a four year old.

Nevertheless, we had decided that a good wet weather option would be the local crocodile farm. And we were right. It was a great venue and we all loved it. The big attraction was the bump on Ben's head, 'Hey how d'you get a bump like that little guy?', oh and the crocodiles.

They make no bones about why they are farming crocs, it's for the meat and the skin. I'm sure my mother would have been busy liberating these grotesque creatures from their enclosures had she been there, but from a practical perspective is it really any different from farming cattle? And she's just gonna love the handbag I bought her in the gift shop.

We dined on croc burgers for lunch. And do you know what? It tastes just like chicken.

Later we climbed aboard the stinky barf bus and drove a short distance further south to Ellis Beach. We parked at a campsite that is just metres from the sand and started to unpack. Seconds later it started to pour down so I left Bec to it and locked myself in the toilets for long enough to get pins and needles in my feet.

Later we splashed in the sea, swam in the pool and covered ourselves and our belongings in sand. For a few moments it wouldn't seem so bad, then it would start to pour down again.

Due to the rain we ate dinner in a communal feeding shelter. Luckily it's an unwritten rule amongst trailer trash not to ask each other where bruises and scars have come from. So we ate in relative peace.

The highlight of the evening for everybody was when I went to wash my feet. Those we have stayed with along the way know that I'm determined to do this trip in just a single pair of shoes. Well, it's fair to say they don't smell too fresh right now. Worse still I can't leave them outside at night for fear of a funnel web spider or similar making one of my sneakers

their home. I've made plenty of schoolboy errors in my time but that won't be one of them.

And so I stink, the van stinks, our children are sick or injured and it's a long way to Brisbane.

Right now I want to drive the camper off a cliff and book into the nearest seven star hotel.

Which I think is in Dubai.

July 05, 2005.

Back On Track

We did a headcount first thing. Everyone was present and correct; nobody had woken up injured. It was an early start and we'd not had the best night's sleep ever but it didn't feel quite as hopeless as it had this time yesterday.

For the first time during this phase of the trip we ate breakfast outside. It made a huge difference not to all be cooped up together inside. The weather was still showery but not sufficiently so as to cancel our al fresco breakfast.

A huge bug came to join us at the breakfast table. I don't really like creepy crawlies; I certainly couldn't eat a whole one. This fellah was like a grasshopper the size of my arm. The kids didn't really seem to mind though so I pretended I didn't either. I was glad when he bounded away in a series of twenty-foot leaps.

I've properly communed with nature only twice. Once in Nepal and once in Tanzania. By this I mean I've got to the stage where my hygiene standards have fallen so precariously low that the wildlife consider me one of their own. It seems like it might be happening a third time.

You'll be pleased to hear that we are still showering and aren't yet out of soap or deodorant. The trouble is that conditions are so warm, damp and muddy that the only time we are properly clean are those few seconds between stepping out of the shower and reaching for the towel.

Ben in particular looks like he's itching for an ASBO. He swaggers round with a bare chest and a scarred forehead. He wears his baggy shorts rapper style with the top of his nappy two inches above the belt of his shorts. Snot continues to dangle from his nose and on occasion his chin.

We took a long hard look at ourselves this morning and decided we would have a family makeover. So we drove back down to Cairns, did three loads of washing, emptied the toilet and cleaned out the camper. We felt much better for it and the sun began to shine.

In the afternoon we drove to downtown Cairns. The beach there isn't much to write home about, it's muddier than Morecambe. Additionally it boasts mud crabs, stingers and crocs making it possibly less attractive as a beach resort than the Gaza Strip. Nevertheless Cairns has created an artificial lagoon on the esplanade that looks incredible and attracts hundreds of bathers to its shores. Down from the lagoon is the world's best playground as confirmed by Lottie and Ben. It's huge, full of water features and makes children cry when they have to leave. It was spectacular and what started out as a fifteen-minute bribe turned into an all-afternoon session.

For those of you following the round the world in a single pair of shoes story, I have some sad news. They've had it; they're in pieces and the bits that are left are particularly malodorous.

I've failed in my quest but at least I smell a bit fresher.

Anyway, socks with sandals. I think it looks okay.

July 06, 2005.

A Grand Day Out

Throughout this trip we've mostly made our own fun. We've generally avoided the tourist attractions, not least because we can't afford them. We usually turn up on the periphery and watch the throng whilst sucking on a sausage roll.

Today however, was different. We had booked a trip by train and cable car through the rainforest. We'd convinced ourselves that it was the sort of thing that the children would love, forgetting of course, that all they are really interested in are stickers and mud.

We caught the train at Freshwater station not far from our campsite in Cairns. The engine and carriages were charming in an old fashioned sort of way, until I tried climbing aboard with two buggies whereupon I remained wedged in the doors. I stayed there some time, in fact until a Japanese tour guide pushed me through the doors bullet train style.

The train ride took about hour. During the journey an audio commentary was accompanied by some hokey PowerPoint slides on plasma screens in each carriage. About fifteen minutes into the journey I asked Lottie why she wasn't looking out of the windows. 'Because I'm waiting for the movie to start' came the reply. Oh how Virgin Atlantic have spoiled her.

At the summit station we picnicked on pies and then spotted a butterfly enclosure. Lottie was keen to go inside, but we were wary of paying the entrance fee only for her to start crying the moment the butterflies started flapping round her head. And so we spent ten minutes with her establishing the parameters of the visit, that these insects might fly close to her and that she wasn't to be scared. She told us she understood and that she still wanted to go inside.

So we paid the entrance fee and went inside. I was pushing Ben in his buggy and Lottie walked by my side. The walkways

were narrow, it was hot and there were thousands of butterflies everywhere.

A few moments into the visit one landed on Lottie's head, then her face. Here we go I thought, meltdown. But guess what she just chuckled bless her. Lottie was loving it.

Then the outsized insect jumped off Lottie and landed on my head. And I nearly soiled myself. It was awful, this huge flapping killer moth, the size of a small horse, was flapping in my hair and at my ears. I couldn't resist the survival instincts that were telling me to swat this dusty winged predator into oblivion.

So there I stood like a man possessed, taking swipes at these delicate endangered creatures and only managing to connect with my own head.

Other visitors just looked on aghast. 'I'm sorry, I have to leave' I announced as I pushed Ben carelessly over the other lepidoptera lovers' heels.

I heaved a sigh of relief as I emerged through the slotted vinyl curtain that stopped the winged beasts taking over the entire world. The next section of the attraction was much improved; in here each of the critters had been pinned to a board and secured behind glass for good measure. I was much happier here.

Later we bought the children an ice-lolly. I made the fatal mistake of asking Ben if I could taste his lolly. Without hesitation he offered it up whereupon I took a bite. As my jaws closed I immediately knew I had overstepped the mark. His face crumpled and he thrust the entire thing back at me crying 'Don't want, don't want'. It took some agile nibbling of the frozen dessert-on-a-stick to restore it to its original, if a little foreshortened, shape. And the little guy bought it for a while, until he decided that just like Lottie he didn't, in fact, like the taste of it at all.

Entirely uncharacteristically, we relented and went on to buy conventional ice creams. And guess what, I ended up eating most of those too. How many points is four ice creams on weight watchers? I suspect I'll be finding out.

Fuelled on a cocktail of frozen sugar and hydrogenated fat I herded my family through a crowd of sozzled aborigines along a rainforest trail. Turned out it was the wrong trail, so imagine my wife's delight when we had to turn round and reverse the pincer movement. Either that or walk all the way to Darwin.

The return leg of the excursion was via cable car over the rainforest canopy. The ride was almost as impressive as the construction of the cable car towers in dense forest. Apparently all of the material for the towers was airlifted in. A good, if expensive effort.

There were lots of trees again but from a superb perspective. Just incredible.

The rest of the day was a breeze by comparison. The evening was warm and the children sleepy.

We all went to bed and dreamed of butterflies.

July 07, 2005.

Bruce Highway

We spent the early part of the morning grinding cereal into the floor. Today it didn't really matter as we were eating breakfast outside under promisingly blue skies.

Lottie and Bec packed up the camper whilst Ben and I smashed the handles off a few cups in the name of dishwashery. I'm hoping we'll not lose all of our six thousand dollar deposit on the strength of two smashed teacups.

Once we were packed we set off towards Cairns centre. The children and I spent time in the world's greatest playground whilst Bec did some shopping chores. At one stage I had to simultaneously field Ben who had his head under water looking for his plastic crocodile and Lottie who was teetering at the top of a seven metre tall climbing frame. I didn't know where to turn, so I videoed them both in the hope that if we did have a disaster then at least I'd be two hundred and fifty quid better off.

When Bec returned we moved down to the lagoon, an artificially created beach environment where the children got wetter still. We shared a pizza lunch by the water's edge and then sedated the kids.

We then bundled them into the camper where, unsurprisingly, they slept for almost the next two hundred and fifty kilometres. We stopped at a playground where Lottie tried to shake off her Medised hangover, and then drove another hundred kilometres. This section of road is really called the Bruce Highway. Cool huh?

And so we've arrived in Townsville. We've not explored much yet. It was dark when we arrived and we've only been as far as the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. Which was a grease fest. Still, I narrowly avoided wedging our 2.8 metre high campervan in the 2.4 metre drive through channel. Which was a bonus on every level.

Pizza for lunch, KFC for dinner. I look like I ate all the pies. Unless I'm spirited away in the night with cholesterol poisoning, more tomorrow.

July 08, 2005.

Water Wonderful Day

Bug central. That's where we are parked up. Parked up eh? Listen to me, we've been in a camper just a week and already I have an entirely new vocabulary.

Sorry, back to the entomological thread. We stepped outside the door of the camper this morning to a throng of angry beetles. These guys are huge and hiss at us when we try and move them along. I'm no expert but these are Herculean in size and look like they'd snip off your toes given half a chance. Boy am I wishing I hadn't moved to open toe sandals.

The giant grasshopper things are back too, along with flying beetles and the odd possum. I can deal with all of these as long as I keep my butterfly net at my side for comfort.

We spent almost the entire day today playing at an open-air swimming pool and water park. The Strand in Townsville is a free but exceptionally well-designed area for having fun with children. The water in the pool is seawater and can't be guaranteed 'stinger' free, so despite it not being jellyfish season we kept our wits about us. The information panels take the whole stinger thing very seriously. This isn't just a case of transient smarting; the word on the street is that these jelly babies can cause victims to require resuscitation.

Regardless, we had a great time today, and for the first time in ages felt like we were on a summer holiday. We now seem to have got the campervan routine sorted out and are spending less time stopping the children from turning on the gas or drinking from the chemical toilet. The weather has improved dramatically too and the dry weather makes a significant difference.

We are staying in Townsville for a second night and plan to drive down to the Whitsunday Islands tomorrow. We still have a long way to travel, but all of a sudden it seems a feasible objective.

More tales of campervan chicanery tomorrow.

July 09, 2005.

Toilet Humor

I'm afraid that today's entry contain elements of a lavatorial nature. Those with a low tolerance for what can only be described as 'knob gags' should look away now.

Oh. You all appear still to be here.

Okay, here goes. One of the issues with campsites on this trip has been the communal bathrooms. It's not the fact that I'm averse to sharing my daily ablutions with complete strangers. No, quite the reverse, it's the fact that I have to share them with members of my family.

Take this morning for instance. We were up bright and early and very keen to get the show on the road. To expedite proceedings I had agreed to take Lottie into the shower with me whilst Bec took Ben. These days Lottie is keener to go with mum to the ladies toilets as apparently they smell better. I've not spent much time in ladies toilets, but I can't fault her logic.

Anyway, reluctantly Lottie came with me today as there was a baby bath in the ladies bathroom that was better suited to her smaller brother. Getting Lottie into the shower was straightforward. We sang a few Bob Dylan choruses, complained about the water temperature and engaged in a little baritone flatulence. Nothing out of the ordinary.

The other users of the facility had an average age of about a hundred and six, so were quite taken with the general brouhaha we were causing.

Then, just as we were drying off, the place fell silent and I saw her looking at my nether regions. In her loudest voice she said 'Dad, that thing dangling underneath your wee-er...', 'Yes,' I replied in my quietest voice. 'Well it looks like the underneath of a chicken's neck doesn't it Dad'.

The punch line was delivered with such perfect clarity and timing that we had to stay in our cubicle until the chuckling in the other eighteen stalls had died down.

This is just a hunch but I'm guessing she's been looking at some big chickens.

Once showered and preened we set off to the centre of Townsville. Where yesterday there had been nothing but tumbleweed the streets were filled with market stalls. The place had been transformed and so we spent a jolly morning walking between playgrounds perusing a largely useless bagatelle of items on sale.

We ate a picnic lunch in the heat of the midday sun. By this stage both children were generally tired, hot and bothered. We abandoned proceedings before 'gong show lite' turned into 'gong show classic'.

We bundled ourselves into the camper. Ben, by this stage wanted to drive. No amount of reasoning would persuade him that a two hundred and fifty kilometre drive in a two-ton camper wasn't the best environment for your first driving lesson. Particularly as he can't see over the dashboard. The tears lasted all of fifteen seconds, whereupon he slept for the rest of the journey.

The drive wasn't much fun. The wind had picked up and so our white-knuckle camper was even less stable than usual. We even took luggage off the campervan beds and placed it on the floor to lower the vehicle's centre of gravity. I'm not sure it made any difference at all, but it made us feel better. And that's what counts.

We arrived at Airlie Beach, gateway to the Whitsunday Islands at around four in the afternoon. We visited a tourist office and booked a ferry over to one of the islands. We leave tomorrow and will stay on Daydream Island for three nights. Unfortunately motorised vehicles aren't allowed on the island and so we'll have to leave the camper on the mainland. Jackpot!

Tonight we are staying on a campsite in Airlie Cove. In the spirit of sharing our progeny it was my turn to take Ben into the shower this evening whilst Bec dealt with Lottie. Ben isn't big into showering, much preferring the whole pantomime that is broadly described as bath time. However, tonight there was no bath available, and therefore I'd taken him for a shower.

I undressed Ben and then left him at the dry end of the cubicle and went to mix the water to a suitable temperature. I was fully clothed, but had taken the precaution of removing my shoes in order to keep them dry. Regular readers won't need reminding that these shoes are only a few days old and were a reluctant purchase. Nevertheless, as they'd cost a king's ransom I was keen to keep these as pristine as possible and prevent them getting wet.

I'd just about got the water to the right temperature when I turned round to see Ben, belly out, wide open grin, shouting 'Daddy, Shoes, Wee'. He'd peed in one of my shoes. It seems that like his vocabulary, his aim is improving.

I guess I should be thankful it was only one shoe and not the pair.

And so today I've learnt two valuable lessons that I'd like to share. That it's best to go to the bathroom on your own and that open toed sandals do have some advantages.

July 10, 2005.

Daydream Island

As luck would have it my shoes had almost dried out when we woke up at dawn. Nevertheless, there is always something unsettling about putting on even slightly damp footwear. At least I squelched only a little as I set about packing up the campervan this morning.

Today we were going over to Daydream Island and so had to pack our bags with the things we might need for the next three nights. And guess what, it turns out we need everything. Well, just about everything, we did leave the smaller buggy behind.

Bec did a splendid job of packing everything into just two, instead of the usual three bags. At last, a manageable amount of luggage I thought to myself. Until I turned round to see the pile of carry-on items that included two buckets and spades, a box of wine, a packet of nappies, a book, three different types of sun cream, crisps, a coffee, four fully inflated armbands and two infants.

We tipped all of this stuff out at the drop off point at the harbour. Most of it spilled into the road. It was too much for me to handle so I jumped back into the camper to find a parking spot. Now that I'm a professional gypsy, the thought of paying sixteen dollars a day to leave the van in a car park left me cold. So I found a grass verge at the top of a cliff and abandoned the van up there. If there is so much as a stiff breeze I suspect we'll return to a pile of chipboard splinters floating in the detritus of a chemical toilet at the bottom of a ravine.

Special note to my in-laws. Don't panic. You won't have to resign from the caravan club in shame. We emptied the toilet before we left the van.

Anyway, we got on the boat and enjoyed the fifteen minute ride over to the island. Despite mummy having taken the

precaution of feeding Lottie an ice-cream less than an hour before we set off there was no seasickness. Quite a result.

When we landed on the island we were each presented with a shell necklace. I turned the offer down and was immediately accused by the redcoat of being a party pooper. I suddenly felt the combined panic of hi-di-hi style guest participation and costume jewellery. It was an anxious moment.

I was then accosted by Bec and Lottie who told Ben and I that we should never turn down free jewellery. Besides they would make great gifts to take back home. Apologies to those of you holding out for a shell necklace on our return.

I need not have worried about the redcoat thing, the resort turned out to be quite upmarket. So much so that I look like the bloke who has come to clean the swimming pool in my ripped jeans and tomato ketchup stained t-shirt.

The rooms are large; there are three swimming pools, coral beaches and the world's largest artificially created reef complete with sharks. There is also bingo, mini golf and an Elvis impersonator so it's not all good news.

We spent the afternoon swimming. That's pretty much all we did. Swim. Swim. Swim. It was great, and the children loved it, even the usually hydrophobic Ben.

All things considered, this is a pleasant change from the confines of the campervan.

Anyway, must wrap up. It's eyes down in ten minutes.

July 11, 2005.

Desert Island Discs

If the lovely Sue Lawley ever manages to twist my arm and get me on to Desert Island Discs I now know what my two luxuries would be. Some cable ties and a set of earplugs.

I'd use the cable ties to handcuff the children to a palm tree, and then insert the plugs so I couldn't hear them crying.

Ben was awake during the night and as a consequence is tired out today. He is probably also teething. That boy has more teeth than a crocodile and is exhibiting particularly reptilian behaviour. He has spent most of the morning chewing his hands, fighting with Lottie and falling over.

In an attempt to restore some balance to the day we had an early lunch and split into two teams. The girls went to get Lottie a hair braid and catch up with their scrapbook. The boys wrestled and then went to sleep. Reinforcing gender stereotypes. You can't fight nature.

In the afternoon the weather took a turn for the worse. Grey skies turned to rain. Not to be deterred we borrowed a sea kayak. I thought initially the plan was to escape from the island but it turned out that the wind was too strong to get far from the shore. Nevertheless it was fun and the children enjoyed it.

When we were back on dry land a couple of wallabies hopped by. Lottie was over the moon shouting 'Look, real live Kangaroos'. They do look just like 'roos but they're just a bit smaller. Apparently there are just eighteen on the island so we were pleased to have seen them.

The weather continued just to get wetter and so we retired back to our room and watched cartoons for an hour or so. Cartoons on a desert island. I can hear the despair from here.

Better weather is forecast for tomorrow. I do hope it's right. I'm just not sure I can stand any more Spongebob Squarepants.

July 12, 2005.

This Is The Life

Ben is back on an early shift. Today started at half five. Still, it does mean we're first down to breakfast. We were in pole position by the poolside too. There is something curiously optimistic about being laid outside in the dark covered head to foot in factor thirty.

Despite the early start the morning went well. The children splashed around in the pool quite successfully. Even Ben joined in. The weather was hot too with barely a cloud in the sky. At one stage Lottie turned to me and said 'This is the life isn't it dad?'. She was spot on.

At eleven o'clock Bec had booked a guided snorkelling trip. It all looked quite serious with wetsuits and assorted paraphernalia. It was all a bit too fish oriented for me and they didn't supply harpoon guns as standard so I opted to stay ashore and keep the children's lungs free from water.

As mummy paddled out the children could see her out at sea lying face down in the water. It took some effort from me to persuade them she hadn't drowned and that in fact we didn't need to call for a helicopter. Bec loved it. I don't think there were any fish out there at all; I just suspect she enjoyed an hour away from the constant demands of her travelling companions. She even stayed out there despite the guide warning of potential shark danger, so we must be hard work right now.

Meanwhile we were able to see tons of fish just by wading out into the shallow water. There were even people feeding the

fish causing even biggish fish to swim in amongst our feet. The children and I were especially brave and didn't flinch much.

After lunch Bec did more snorkelling whilst the children and I had a postprandial nap. Awake and fully refreshed I took the children back out to the pool. Lottie and I swam up to the swim-up bar and ordered fizzy drinks and chocolate. We were the coolest couple at the bar until Lottie fell off her submerged barstool, grazed her foot and howled like a banshee. I think we're barred.

We did more swimming in an attempt to tire the children out completely. I think we were almost successful. Back in our room Ben ate a banana and then discarded the peel on the tiled floor. I've not seen anyone slip on a banana skin in years, but like all classic comedy moments it's always funnier than you remember. We were all in tears. Especially Ben.

We ate dinner and then danced to the tunes of the resident easy listening lounge quartet. They were great. The quartet consisted of two guitars, a double bass, and a percussionist. The percussionist had a set of bongos and a cowbell. What you can't play on bongos and a cowbell isn't worth playing.

Tomorrow we have to abandon all this rich living and move back into the campervan. Stay tuned.

July 13, 2005.

Back On The Road

This morning was our last on Daydream Island. It's been great. Even when the weather was lousy it was still good fun.

And so we woke up, ate breakfast and collected coral from the beach until midday. I'm not sure of the rules for taking coral out of Australia but I have a sneaky feeling it may be

prohibited. So if Lottie gets stopped at the airport I suspect she's going down for a long stretch. It should save us a few quid on nursery fees.

We took the boat over to the mainland and recovered our campervan. It was intact and refreshingly odourless. It made me wonder whether the campervan smell of which I have been complaining is in fact emanating from its malodorous occupants.

For some reason the camper seemed smaller than it had when we left it. I knew it wasn't big enough when we first picked it up, but with the ton and a half of coral on board its difficult to find a place for anything.

We gave Ben and Lottie a prophylactic dose of Medised and drove two hundred kilometres south to just below Mackay. The drive was unremarkable. Miles and miles of sugar cane and the odd road kill kangaroo.

We arrived in a two-horse town named Sarina. There's little to report about the town but our campsite deserves a chapter all of its own.

We arrived to find one of the residents knocking out tunes on his old bontempi. A small crowd had gathered around in their deckchairs to watch. Some were sleeping, some I suspect were already dead, and yet bizarrely the remaining third seemed captivated. The guy was pure John Shuttleworth. Even the children looked sideways at him before turning to me to try and work out what I was thinking.

We set about preparing dinner and were bombarded by the deluge of word-processed notices full of campsite rules and regulations. Notices were pinned to every available surface. Font selection was generally random and poorly considered. Everything was underlined and uppercase. It was as if he thought that without the ceaseless use of CTRL+U we really were going to urinate in the pool.

Best of all there was a lock on the male toilets that requires a key code to gain entry. There is something excruciatingly painful about fumbling around in the dark with a keypad made in Lilliput when you are bursting for a pee.

I think the rationale is to prevent non-residents from using the facilities. Well, I'll teach him. The code for the blokes' toilets on the Tropicana campsite in Sarina, Queensland is C240Z.

Two billion Internet users can just look this up now. I suspect he's going to have to stock up on dunny roll.

July 14, 2005.

Strewth Bruce

Despite the comedy campsite I described yesterday we had a reasonable night at Sarina. Ben woke early as usual and we were outside eating breakfast at seven o'clock.

This early al fresco breakfast came complete with a kangaroo floorshow. A group of four came hopping through the bush about a hundred metres from where we were sat. We almost kicked the table over in our excitement and ran towards them to get a better view. Unsurprisingly the 'roos just bounded away back into the bush. Nevertheless, it made a change to see real live kangaroos rather than the Michelin embossed variety we've been seeing by the side of the road.

We left the campsite and headed out to Sarina beach sixteen kilometres to the east. The beach lies within a small bay about a mile long and offers perfect sand. Lottie built castles, Ben knocked them over, Bec helped rebuild them and I went for a run along the beach. Everybody was occupied and largely happy.

We ate a picnic lunch and then prepared the children for an afternoon of driving south. Our target destination for the day was Rockhampton. There was nothing we really wanted to see there, but it was about three hundred and fifty kilometres down the road and therefore seemed like a reasonable stopping place.

There is very little of interest on this section of the Bruce Highway. In some respects it's a pretty dull drive. And strewth Bruce, it goes on for ever. Just miles and miles of bush and sugar cane.

The afternoon's drive seemed long and boring. Nevertheless, the thrill of being overtaken by double-trailer wagons and the crosswinds that these monster trucks create added a little frission to the journey.

We arrived in Rockhampton in the late afternoon. By this stage, despite having arrived at our target destination we felt we should try to get a little further south. We were still a long way from our ultimate destination of Brisbane.

In order to break the day up, we did spend a few hours in Rockhampton. We visited the botanic gardens where we collected fallen coconuts and visited a playground.

Now I don't pretend to be anything like as accomplished as Ray Mears, but I did think I would be able to get into a coconut using just my hands and the odd stone. Well let me tell you, I've changed my mind about my desert island luxuries. I'm now going to take either a machete or a manservant.

If any of you have ever successfully got into a coconut using just your bare hands then I salute you. And I don't just mean the breaking into the shell bit, I mean removing the endless hairy husk thing which surrounds it.

I tried until my fingers were bleeding but didn't even get close. Lottie was very disappointed that I'd failed. So much

so that I had to promise that we'd take them back to the campervan and open them later with a knife. So now the nature table in the van comprises a ton and a half of coral and three coconuts.

That evening we ate at a restaurant called Sizzlers. It was an 'all you can eat' affair. Luckily, I'd taken the precaution of arriving in elasticated trousers. It was unlike anywhere I'd ever been before. The food was served on plastic plates and yet people were ordering wine with their meal. And best of all, every five minutes a new plate of unsolicited cheese on toast would be delivered to our table.

They let anyone in. All you need is sixteen dollars ninety five cents and something on your feet. No shoes and you're not coming in. It says so on the door.

We left the restaurant and waddled breathlessly back to the campervan. We put the children to bed and we hit the road again. By this stage it was dark; in addition to avoiding the other drivers I had rogue Kangaroos to avoid. Allegedly they don't come out in force until one in the morning, but we did see a few hopping by the roadside rather than on the carriageway.

We drove for almost another three hours and pulled up in a dark car park in a place called Miriam Vale. We turned off the engine and were in bed about fifteen seconds later. Ah the freedom of the road.

About sixty seconds later I realised I had parked just metres from Australia's busiest railway line.

Nice work Daddio.

July 15, 2005.

To Tin Can Bay

We listened to the sounds of the railway all night. I consoled myself with the fact that although this campsite wasn't perfect, it was at least free.

When we finally got out of the campervan in the morning I realised just what a jaunty angle we had been parked at. It was a surprise that we hadn't all rolled into the glove box during the night.

Lottie stepped out of the camper, surveyed her surroundings and announced 'whoa, nice car park Dad'. Ben, by comparison, was just pleased that this latest campsite came with its own railway interchange.

Bec suggested that we all go across the road to the Miriam Vale Hotel for our breakfast. The hotel in question looked like a place you would go for a fight rather than for a brace of kippers and a pot of Darjeeling. Still I had no better suggestion and so sent Bec off to investigate.

Bec came back having discovered a purveyor of sausage sandwiches and so the hotel idea was abandoned. A handsome feast was quickly rustled up and very soon despite our night in the car park we were restored to our former glory.

With little else to do in Miriam Vale we set off south again. We stopped briefly in a place called Childers and then continued on to Tin Can Bay. The attraction here is dolphins that we hope to see tomorrow.

The children have been really well behaved considering that we've driven seven hundred and fifty kilometres during the last day. Particularly as we are travelling at an average of less than 80 kph.

It's not much fun for any of us to be stuck in the campervan for such a long stretch, but at least now most of the journey to Brisbane has been completed.

Anyway, I'm goosed. More tomorrow.

July 16, 2005.

Pelican Shags Dolphin

It was a relief today to wake up knowing that we didn't have to drive anywhere. We've made up some considerable distance in the last few days and as a consequence we had decided to stay two nights in Tin Can Bay.

The reason we had driven here was to come and watch the dolphins that are reputed to swim up to a small jetty where they stay and chat for a while in exchange for a few fish. It seemed a reasonable deal to me and far cheaper than a trip to Seaworld down in Brisbane.

The children were quite excited about the whole thing, as were we. I'd not seen dolphins in the wild, only in cheap tins of tuna, and so even I was keen to see what a whole one looked like.

Despite turning up at the required time of eight o'clock there was no sign of them. So we bought drinks at the local café. And then we discovered that they may not turn up until eleven o'clock, so we bought more drinks. Then we discovered they'd not been seen since Wednesday last week. Worse still, or better if you're a dolphin, it's mating season, so they're all too busy bumping uglies to entertain the assembled masses.

Anyway, I think it's a ruse perpetuated by the local café owners. They do sell a lot of drinks between eight and eleven.

Despite not seeing any dolphins, we did see lots of other creatures. There were pelican on the beach, shags on the foreshore and rainbow parakeets in the park. Lottie made a point of collecting discarded parakeet feathers for her scrapbook. No doubt the entire family will come down with bird flu quite soon.

The most unusual discovery of the day was the solider crabs out on the mudflats. Thousands and thousands of the tiny critters huddled together in formation. The noise of millions of crustacean limbs clacking across the sand was amazing.

By midday the kids were largely bored with wildlife and were tired from their excesses at a nearby playground. So we locked them inside the campervan whilst we enjoyed a glass of wine. For just a moment the trip seemed quite civilised.

In the afternoon we visited yet another playground and watched the children exhaust themselves. It wasn't the most action packed day of the trip, but it made us feel a little less travel weary than we have of late.

In the evening we barbequed fish fresh from the local trawler. Although I don't generally like eating fish this stuff was fresh enough to put back in the water and tasted quite good too.

Despite not seeing a dolphin today we've had fun and we're going to see if they turn up tomorrow. By which stage I hope to have thought up another suitably tabloid headline. Don't go away.

July 17, 2005.

Glasshouse Mountains

We tried again this morning. We were at the jetty by eight o'clock. This time we even bought breakfast at the café. But still no dolphins. By nine o'clock the children had lost all interest in any form of marine life and had engaged in some sort of mud pie hurling contest with some other children. Our offspring walked away victorious.

Following the script from yesterday we visited the playground, fell off things, bumped our heads and collected rainbow parakeet feathers. We now have enough feathers to reconstruct our own ostrich sized parakeet. They're in the van with the shells and the stones and the coral. I'm thinking of opening the doors to other tourists and charging a modest entrance fee. We're driving round in a mobile natural history museum.

When we got back to the campsite our neighbours were eager to tell us that on departure I had reversed the campervan over one of the children's buggies. Worse still I hadn't noticed a thing. So I tried to shrug it off as though it was something I did all the time and set about trying to untangle the mass of aluminium tubing and wheels.

When I began wrestling with the buggy it looked like something I'd just fished out of a canal. When I'd finished it looked like something I'd bought at a car boot sale for fifteen pence. Still, it now works after a fashion, even if Ben does have to sit in it with an arm hanging out dragging along the pavement.

We ate lunch and climbed in the camper and drove about 160 kilometres south to the Glasshouse Mountains. These are curious geological beasts and are essentially the remaining central cores of volcanoes. My favourite is Mt Coonowrin, which is a particularly slender peak and is now closed to climbers. In a show of particularly ridiculous scaremongering the authorities have changed its name to Mount Danger. I ask you.

We drove to the mountain lookout point and then had afternoon tea in a colonial style teahouse with a fine view over the mountains. Most of these peaks are only five hundred metres high, with the tallest standing at about seven hundred and fifty metres. So they are tiny in the general scheme of things, but their form and general topography makes them seem much grander which is unusual.

On our return to this evening's campsite we bought vegetables from a local farmers' market and left Bec to transform them into a veritable feast. My side of the bargain was to entertain the children whilst mummy was preparing dinner.

And so I set off towards the campsite playground. On the way we passed an aviary containing a parakeet of some description. Both children were quite taken with the bird and so I started to whistle at it whilst Lottie and Ben had their noses pressed up against the cage.

For a moment the bird humoured me. Lottie even dared to suggest that it was smiling and must like us. And then it bristled its head feathers, fixed all three of us with a beady eye and then screeched. This was no ordinary bird sound, this was possibly the loudest noise I'd ever heard in my entire life. This was the noise I would make if I got my parts trapped in the hinge of a car door.

The children both squealed and burst into tears in unison. Ben was wide eyed, open mouthed and running on the spot, his little arms and legs flailing about as if he was on the set of Thunderbirds. I had to pick both children up and carry them to the playground where they stood still, eyes fixed on the aviary. They were both well and truly traumatised.

The usually bullish Ben curled up into my arms for the rest of the evening whispering 'scary bird, scary bird'.

Most of them are son, I thought to myself, most of them are.

July 18, 2005.

Australia Zoo

We're quite pleased that we've managed to make it this far in the campervan. When I think back to when we picked the blunderbuss up two and a half weeks ago, Brisbane seemed an awful long way away.

But now we really are like a well-oiled machine and can wake up, eat breakfast and be on the road within two hours. To those of you without children of your own this must seem like a period of geological proportions. To everyone else, we hear your applause.

And so we set off to the Australia Zoo. This is the place that is owned and managed by Steve Irwin, the self-proclaimed Croc Hunter who is often seen wrestling dangerous creatures on TV. It's a curious place, and although it's billed as a zoo, it's more of a shrine to Steve Irwin and his madcap antics. Nevertheless, there is a strong conservation theme, and it's possibly the cleanest place in the whole of Australia.

At the centre of the zoo is the Crocoseum, a five-thousand seater stadium where animal shows take place. There is a pantomime element and when Steve Irwin showed up in person to wrestle, sorry, 'liveshow' a croc there was a slight feeling of Victorian travelling show about the whole affair.

Apart from the pantomime the most amazing thing at the zoo was a tortoise that had been picked up by Charles Darwin on his travels 174 years ago. She's called Harriet and she's still alive. Crikey.

We spent over five hours there, during which we handled snakes, stroked koalas, fed kangaroos and elephants. Do the animals like it? I guess we'll never know, but many of them

would be stuffed and on a mantelpiece if it wasn't for the Croc Hunter and his chums. And we had a great day out.

We got back to the campsite and went berserk in the playground for a while. We ate dinner in the cleanest-ever camp kitchen and then put the children to bed.

In the absence of anything else to read in the evenings Bec has taken to reading the Mills and Boon novels that are exchanged anonymously amongst frustrated wives in the campsite laundry. They have titles like 'My Dreamboat Chiropodist' and 'The Handsome Bingo Caller's Apprentice'. It seems the romance of the open road and a warm glow of a calor-gas stove just doesn't cut the mustard anymore and she's turned to chick-lit for comfort.

Not to worry, I'm off to brylcreem my hair and slip into a smoking jacket to try and lure my wife away from her book.

July 19, 2005.

Brisbane

The plan today was to visit downtown Brisbane. We had it on good advice that driving and parking a campervan in the city was simply not worth the hassle. So we decided to take the bus into town. This pleased the children, particularly Ben who spent most of the journey shouting 'nice bus' and pressing the next stop button all the way into town.

Despite this, we managed to get all the way into town without being thrown off. We arrived at the cultural centre, a hub of galleries, theatres and things. Whilst it all looked quite grand at ten o'clock in the morning there wasn't much going on. So we followed a walkway down by the river that took us over a footbridge and into the downtown area.

It was all very pleasant. There was nothing of particular note, but then we're getting slightly travel weary now and we're more likely to stumble across attractions rather than actively hunt them down.

There was the usual mix of playgrounds, drink stops and frog-marching of infants. We shopped only briefly and bought paracetamol and superglue. The tablets to remedy headaches and glue to repair the campervan before we take it back tomorrow. Had we not been travelling with children, it's unlikely we would have needed either.

On the way home we stopped at the Red Rooster for dinner. On the way out Bec and I argued about whether it was better or worse than KFC. We couldn't agree but neither of us are keen to perform any additional research.

On an entirely different note, just a word to campsite owners about securing your toilet rolls. Everywhere we stay there seems to be a different system of dispensing dunny roll. There is, however, a consistent theme. The owners all seem keen to ensure the security of their rolls at the cost of impeding efficient egress of paper from the dispenser.

Picture the scene. I'm sat with my trolleys round my ankles with one hand swatting at a swarm of tropical bugs with a well thumbed Mills and Boon. The other hand is halfway up a plastic toilet roll dispenser like a vet trying to calf a cow. When finally the paper is dispensed it usually comes out in pieces so finely shredded that they are only useful for throwing at a wedding.

So remember this campsite owners. If I really was of criminal persuasion, please understand that I would be more interested in the grand prix; diamonds, bullion and famous paintings rather than half-inching your shiny single-ply bog roll. I implore you, set your dunny roll free.

July 20, 2005.

Six Thousand Bucks

This morning was to be our last in the campervan. There were lots of chores to be done, mostly revolving around restoring the van to its former glory.

Despite their best efforts, Lottie and Ben weren't much help with any of this. So Bec and I took it in turns to either occupy the children or glue the campervan back together.

As I was knelt on the top bunk attempting to repair a pelmet that Ben had pulled off some weeks earlier, the tube of superglue sprang a leak. I can now testify that the words 'bonds in seconds' are entirely accurate. Approximately one tenth of a minute later I was simultaneously attached to a curtain, a duvet and a double mattress. At that stage I did consider just pulling the other pelmet off too and tossing both in the bin. At least then both sides of the van would match.

We managed to dispose of most of the shells, sand and coral that we'd picked up along the way without Lottie noticing. When we finally drove away from our pitch we had left quite an attractive artificial beach in our wake. No doubt the campsite will add it to their list of amenities.

We drove up to a place called Redcliffe where we had planned to spend a few hours before returning the campervan. I was petrified as I drove the short distance north; I'd managed to drive the last 2172 kilometres without so much as squashing an insect on the windscreen. So the six thousand dollar bond was all riding on these last few hours of driving where, at the very least, I was destined to roll the thing over.

Redcliffe is a quiet seaside town with, amongst other things, a fish restaurant complete with its own playground. We ate lunch there, played awhile, and then drove back to return the campervan.

I'd taken the precaution of leaving the rest of my family at a motel for this part of the proceedings. With Lottie and Ben on

board there was a strong possibility that during the short drive back to the depot they could have undone the entire morning's work.

I shuffled into the reception with my hands in my pockets. I didn't want them to notice my webbed hands, the only evidence of the glue-fest. And what do you know, despite my concerns they were so impressed with the state of the van that they gave us our six thousand dollars back. I can safely say that I skipped off the forecourt.

As I was leaving they asked me how I'd found the van. Now that I'd got my money back there was no need to pretend that I'd enjoyed driving the hunk of junk at all.

So I told him straight, that it was hopeless to drive, it wobbled around, it was slow; I'll not bore you any further, you've heard it all before. And do you know what he said? 'Yeah, that's what everybody tells us, we're scrapping that model'. He did go on to say that they'd not had any tip over, but he said this in a puzzled tone as if the fact had quite surprised him.

I walked back to the motel a liberated man. The campervan had done its job, but it hadn't been the romantic experience that we had hoped it might be. And I use the word romantic in all of its senses.

In contrast to the campervan we had just handed back our hotel room this evening was positively palatial. We had two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and a bathroom, all extending over two floors. All four of us lay like starfish on the floor, taking up as much room as we possibly could, and we still had space left over. Tremendous.

The evening was spent washing clothes and packing four bags worth of belongings into three bags. Tomorrow we leave Australia and it's time to climb on a plane for the last leg of the trip.

July 21, 2005.

Singapore Bound

We packed up and shipped out of our motel room and headed to the airport at 07:30 this morning. Getting taxis to and from airports is now a well-rehearsed procedure. Bec jumps in and secures the car seat, Lottie amuses Ben whilst this is going on and I load the rest of our stuff into any remaining space. About fifteen minutes later we are generally ready to set off with a bemused driver apologising for having had to start the meter running.

Today we arrived at the airport with ten pieces of luggage. Five were to go in the hold, three were carry on, a buggy that is dropped off at the gate and a car seat which Ben is strapped into. It's a lot of stuff but ten is a nice round number to count up to each time we get on or off any form of transport.

The flight took seven and a half hours. The children were exceptionally well behaved. This was due, in part, to the return of the personal TV screen in the headrest and so Lottie watched telly for a full 450 minutes. She paused only briefly to hail the stewardess for more apple juice.

We arrived to find Singapore overcast but warm. It was thirty degrees when we landed and as we suspected it wasn't long before Lottie was wandering round the place in just her pants. Ben, as usual, was dressed for a nuclear winter.

It's been a peculiar day, not least because we haven't really done anything but travel. Still, all things considered we've had a reasonably relaxing journey.

The real test of course will be tomorrow's wake up time. We turned the clock back two hours as we moved to Singapore time. On current form our wake up call is likely to be quarter to four. Up with the lark I think they call it.

On that basis that's all for now.

July 22, 2005.

Hot And Humid

We had a forty-five minute lie-in against Ben's predicted wake up time. I was trying to convince myself that this was something I should have been grateful for, but it's hard to be grateful about anything when it's half four in the morning.

We sat up in bed, drank milk and tea, and then watched the Cartoon Network until dawn broke. The only way we can get Ben to be quiet before sunrise is to convince him that there's a baby asleep in the next hotel room. 'Shhh... Baby sleeping' has become something of a mantra.

Breakfast was a very splendid affair. Ben has quite taken to the spirit of the orient and is currently transforming himself into Sumo baby. He polished off four plates of pancakes, maple syrup and bacon this morning. He ate the biggest breakfast of any of us. Best of all, because he's only one, his pancakathon was provided at no charge.

We spent the rest of the morning in the hotel pool. We were determined to tire both of them out in the hope that they would have a long nap after lunch. It seemed the best way of getting them adjusted to the local time zone. And so we stayed in the water until our fingers had turned to prunes.

The children slept for two and a half hours and I went out to get my hair cut. The heat and humidity were playing havoc with my bountiful locks.

I chose a particularly insalubrious looking salon in the bowels of the Lucky Mall on Orchard Road. Two sour looking ladies were sat glaring at themselves in the mirror as I stepped inside. 'I'd like a haircut please' I announced in my best John Cleese accent. To my horror one of the ladies started shouting 'You not need haircut, you very greasy scalp, make

all your hair fall out'. Admittedly I'm no Lawrence Llewellyn Bowen but this did take me a bit by surprise. It didn't look like the place where I could complain to a customer services representative, so I just sat quietly whilst they got on with the business of cutting my follically challenged scalp.

Once the children had woken up we walked into Chinatown. It was a fantastic place with stuff going on everywhere we looked. I think Lottie had sensory overload and sat very quietly in her buggy as we passed stalls selling all manner of things animal, vegetable, mineral and electronic.

After dinner at Clarke Quay we returned to the hotel and put the children to bed. As we were reading stories there were thunderous roars overhead. The noise was slightly worrying, not least because of its unidentified origin. Lottie in particular seemed keen to identify the source.

Once the children had been despatched I snuck over to the Funan Mall. It's like a sweetshop for computer nerds. Seven floors of wall-to-wall electronic whizzkiddery. As I was walking to the mall I identified the earlier noise as yet more military aircraft flew overhead. Suddenly the police stopped all the other traffic as forty tanks and other associated camouflage vehicles sped down the highway bedecked by gun toting soldiers.

Great I thought. A military coup. That'll be something to write about this evening.

For a small country Singapore has some gnarly looking fighting apparatus. Nevertheless it's not often that I find myself taller than everybody in an entire army, so there was some comfort in that.

I really couldn't work out what was going on and started to think that if there was unrest on the streets then I should scurry back to the hotel and lock myself inside the minibar.

I approached a soldier who was busy directing a row of tanks. He looked too busy to be disturbed really, but on this basis I thought he'd give me a reasonably concise answer. And so moments before I was squashed by several pairs of caterpillar tracks I was told it was a practice for the National Day parade in a couple of weeks. Phew, just for show then. In that case point your weapons at the floor why don't you?

Anyway, more hot and humid antics tomorrow.

July 23, 2005.

Allez Lance

It was another early start; the day began at just after five when, as usual we ended up serving warm milk in the warm glow of the Cartoon Network.

After breakfast we jumped in the pool. It was full of similarly timezone confused children and their dazed parents. We have now taken most of the air out of Lottie's armbands: they seem now only to serve as a talisman rather than offering any form of buoyancy. Despite the floaties being as flat as a pancake, if we take them off her lungs fill with water.

A little later we took a short ride in a bumboat up to the harbour. It's not that they only take bums you understand, it's what they're really called. And regular readers will be pleased to know that Lottie held on to her breakfast.

After lunch I stayed with the children during their lunchtime sleep whilst Bec took the underground railway, the MRT, over to the Raffles hotel. On the way she popped a piece of chewing gum into her mouth. This was potentially more dangerous than her previous law breaking antics involving the penknife on the aeroplane. Chewing gum is outlawed in Singapore with masticators facing fines of thousands of

dollars. Luckily she dispensed with the gum before the cops caught up with her.

On her return, Bec was still walking in a straight line, so I was pretty sure she'd not spent the afternoon in the Long Bar quaffing Singapore Slings.

We roused the children from their nap and headed back out on the MRT to Orchard Road. This is possibly the cleanest public transport system I've ever used. It looks like it was opened just an hour ago. No rubbish, no graffiti, no stench.

Imagine my surprise therefore when I discovered a single piece of gum stuck to the underside of my seat.

We trawled up and down Orchard Road admiring the curious mix of things on sale. I can think of few places in the world where you can buy a real Prada handbag just metres from where you can buy a live frog. Admittedly the frogs aren't alive for long after you buy them but they do fill a gap between lunch and dinner.

Ben was quite taken by the whole notion of the amphibian tank in the café and spent the rest of the afternoon practising his new phrase 'eating frogs'.

The family consensus was that no-one was hungry for frogs and so we raced back to the hotel for what was billed as 'High Tea'. We had a notion that this would be a very colonial affair with iced buns, cucumber sandwiches all washed down with Darjeeling and ginger beer.

We arrived back at the hotel as a sweaty ensemble just as they were clearing tea away. Nevertheless, we successfully negotiated a place at the table.

Imagine my horror, therefore, when High Tea turned out to be an oriental fish fest. Fishy treats as far as the eye could see. Lottie and I spent our time picking marine life out of the noodles whilst the others scoffed the lot.

In the evening I took a taxi back to the Lucky Plaza to try and negotiate a deal on an iPod. Singapore doesn't seem to be quite the bargain basement I remember from my last visit seven years ago. Either that or I've lost my touch at haggling. And so I left empty handed.

At the end of the day we lay in bed watching the final day of the Tour de France. We had to watch it with the sound muted in order not to wake the children. It wasn't the best ever televisual experience.

Allez Lance. What a guy.

July 24, 2005.

Little India

You'll not be surprised to learn that Ben woke at five again this morning. The little guy has created his very own timezone, and on planet Ben it's never too early to get up and party. As ever we drank milk and watched cartoons.

The Cartoon Network. What's that all about? In my day it was all cat chases mouse, mouse outwits cat, repeat to fade and that was all folks. It was a basic formula but it worked. Now all the cartoons are too cool for kids to understand but too fast for adults to follow. I blame Hong Kong Phooey. That was the beginning of the end.

After breakfast we rode the MRT out to Little India. This place is fantastic. It's like being on the subcontinent; bikes with milk crate panniers, second hand fax machines piled up for sale, flea-bitten dogs lying in the road. All of this played out against the olfactory backdrop of incense and drains.

Much to the children's delight we found a playground. Lottie and Ben lasted about five minutes before the heat and humidity left them both in a sweaty heap on the rubberised floor. We strapped them into their respective buggies and wandered through the streets with our glowing progeny.

We browsed market stalls and visited temples. It had such an authentic feel that it was hard to remember that we were in Singapore rather than Bangalore.

We ate lunch at a Southern Indian restaurant. We have a family rule which is never to eat a curry within twenty-four hours of boarding an aircraft. It's held us in good stead in the past and so we didn't feel entirely comfortable being so close to the threshold of our next flight. Still, we dispatched a handsome meal and about six hundred poppadoms, most of which remain in the creases of Ben's pushchair.

After lunch we continued our browsing of ethnic curios. In a moment of bohemian parenting we had Lottie adorned with a

henna tattoo. Oh my giddy aunt. Still it doesn't look like anything a box of Brillo pads and a tube of Ajax won't sort out.

After we'd defaced our daughter we walked over to Raffle's Hotel where we took tea and cake. It seems to have gone downhill since our last visit. This time we had to share our table with a tattooed youth and a hooligan. Oh how times have changed.

We returned to our hotel where we had planned to spend the rest of the afternoon in the pool. Unfortunately, by this stage it had begun to bucket down and so the pool was closed for fear of an electrical storm. I struggled to communicate the logic of the pool closure to my offspring and a minor revolution ensued.

To ease their disappointment we filled the bath and splashed water everywhere. It was almost as much fun as the pool without the threat of electrocution.

Tomorrow is our last day in Singapore and it will likely be a long one. Stay tuned for our last Asian instalment.

July 25, 2005.

Au Revoir Singapore

I guess it's all relative, but this morning the children slept in. Incredibly they stayed asleep until just after six o'clock. We were really pleased about this, as we had another eighteen hours of entertaining them before we were due to fly out of Singapore.

We did the usual stuff, milk, cartoons, breakfast, reluctant teeth cleaning and then headed back into town. It's almost always humid in Singapore, but the rain of the last few days

showed no sign of letting up and so the conditions were extra steamy. But not in a Mills and Boon way.

Indeed the atmosphere was sufficiently damp to warrant catching a taxi up to the Ngee Ann Mall. Go on, say it, Ngee. Ngee, Ngee, Ngee. Enough already.

Taxis in Singapore are very cheap, but better still, they are all air-conditioned. Ben in particular likes the whole taxi thing; he learnt to hail taxis in New York, and has spent much of the last twelve weeks shouting 'tax-eee'. So you can imagine his delight when his relentless hailing actually comes good.

Despite our relatively late start, we still arrived at the Mall about half an hour before it opened. And so we spent time drinking tea in the only place that was open, which happened to be MacDonald's. We then spent the rest of the morning explaining to our crestfallen children the algorithm behind the dispensation of a happy meal toy.

And once the shops did open, it really began to feel as if we were preparing to return to our old lives. The family shopping trip that included, amongst other things, a tortuous visit to a shoe shop, really drove this home.

In the afternoon we returned to the hotel. We swam in the pool, had a nap, packed up our bags, and generally waited around. No matter how long the holiday, it seems the last day always involves some element of loitering. I even nipped out to the Funan Mall to drool over gadgets; but despite my best efforts, I wasn't shopping, I was just loitering. I just couldn't help it.

At six o'clock we dragged our luggage out of the hotel and took a taxi to the airport. Even the drive out to the airport seemed to take longer than it should. The day was starting to drag, and we still had another six hours before we boarded the plane and sedated the kids.

The airport was full of itchy-eyed children and their parents, most of who were mid-way through some horrendous twenty-four hour hell in the air extravaganza. This gives licence for under-tens to organise a junior rave, and their parents, most of whom are slumped in a corner somewhere, licence not to do anything about it.

Our offspring were only too delighted to join the party, which was being held at well intentioned, but much too small play area. And following the general consensus, we slumped in a corner for some laissez-faire parenting too.

And so at almost midnight we retrieved our children from the all-nighter and climbed onto the plane that was to be our home for the next fourteen hours.

July 26, 2005.

Fly By Night

Ben and I were asleep before the plane took off. So you can imagine my delight when ten minutes into a dream about the thin one from 'What Not To Wear' and a snapped fan belt I was woken for the sake of a hot flannel and a packet of Japanese crackers.

I surfed the in-flight movie channel. *Alive*, *Skyjacked*, *Airport*, *Crash of Flight 401*. There wasn't much I fancied watching, so I sucked on a Japanese cracker for the next seven hours. She didn't seem to mind.

The children both woke about halfway through the flight. In the circumstances, they were very well behaved, and I didn't have to use the cable ties I'd brought to cuff them to their seats. It was the longest flight we'd done with the little guys, and they dealt with it like consummate professionals. By contrast, the grown ups were less enamoured with the whole

thing, and Bec in particular struggled with the length of the journey.

There's not much else to report about the flight until it landed. Then it all turned to custard. On landing, we taxied out to a remote stand somewhere near Stafford. It was miles from the main airport terminal. After a few minutes delay the ground crew brought some steps to the plane, only they weren't long enough. So they sent someone down to B&Q for a loft ladder, or so it seemed. It took nearly three quarters of an hour from landing to getting off the plane, which is a pain in the deep vein thrombosis when you've been sitting on your ass for the last fourteen hours.

Anyway, we did eventually get off the plane, and retrieved our bags from the enormous pile that had fallen from the carousel. It wasn't a great advert for Manchester Airport, but at least we were home.

We were met by my dad, and Lottie was evidently delighted to see Papa as she bounded into his arms. We were equally delighted to see him, as we'd just about run out of money.

We drove to my parents house where the rest of the day was a bit blurry, and uncharacteristically for the location, none of the confusion was wine fuelled. The bigtrip was almost at an end, and there was a huge amount of relief at being in sight of the finish line.

The odd thing was the fact they'd been reading this log on a daily basis, so they knew exactly what we'd been up to. So we didn't have to tell them about what we'd been doing at all. They just kept falling about at the fact that I was scared of butterflies. Which admittedly, was funny for about the first hour and a half.

We did that 'What time is it where you've just come from?' thing quite a lot too. I began my tirade about how jet lag is just a fantasy condition like yuppie flu. I got about two

minutes in and fell asleep in my soup. I must have been coming down with a cold.

July 27, 2005.

Homecoming

Three o'clock in the morning is a great time to wake up when you are fresh as a daisy and your children are still asleep. It had been months since I had woken before the kids, and I had half a mind to get my own back by jumping on their beds and kicking them in the pants. Before you call the NSPCC, you'll be pleased to hear that I restrained myself and put the kettle on.

I drank tea, played about with a Sudoku puzzle and listened to the silence. It was great. As an aside, Sudoku puzzles are superb. Perhaps the most elegant puzzle I've seen in ages. And imagine my wife's delight in my discovering yet another pastime that is pointless and frustrating in equal measure.

The silence didn't last long. The children got up around four, whereupon we sat around scattering cheerios around their grandparent's kitchen. It's interesting to note that when you stand on an escaped cheerio on a tiled floor it disintegrates into about a gazillion atomic sized crumbs leaving devastation that is almost impossible to clear up using conventional gadgets. To this end, Papa has invested in a device specifically dedicated to the cleaning up of cheerio-nano-chunks. It's crying out for a patent.

At midday my Dad drove us back to our house. The journey was unremarkable, except for the weather, which was diluvian.

We arrived home whereupon the children tried to play with all their toys at once. It was a bit like Christmas morning without the hangover. Just after we arrived our neighbours

dropped by. Allison and Rob have been sorting out the post, cutting the grass and holding off the bailiffs in our absence so we were delighted to see that they were still our friends.

And soon we were left in the house on our own. The big trip was over. We'd made it. There was no great reflection, no sigh of relief, just a sense of completion and a pile of post stretching to the moon and back.

Welcome home.

July 28, 2005.

Epilogue

In the last three months we've flown around the world, driven over six thousand kilometres, monkeyed about at a hundred different playgrounds, walked hundreds of miles, scraped our knees more times than we can remember and written more than forty thousand words.

We have had a simply fantastic time. It's not always been easy, but we have managed to avoid getting ourselves into any serious scrapes, mostly through good luck rather than good management.

Most importantly we've spent three months together as a family. That was the overriding objective of the trip, and on this basis it's been a huge success. I've poked fun at them throughout the journey, but the reality is that despite two-thirds of them being under five, the rest of my family make fine travelling companions.

There are a few folks I would like to thank. My relatives Tania, Kevin, Rowland and Sheila for looking after us so well. Our fit friends Andy and Saira for our boot camp in Canmore. And our Kiwi mates Al and Susan for being such exceptional hosts that we now need another boot camp.

Most importantly I'd like to thank Bec who really conceived the whole idea of a bigtrip and who bullied me into going with her. I've not often given her credit throughout this journal, and that's hugely unfair. She's a honey.

And so what now? More adventures as a family I guess. We'll not be going very far for a few years, but we'll have adventures nonetheless. That much is certain.

Thanks for being part of bigtrip.



In the summer of 2005 family Leigh took a bigtrip. Together they travelled through America, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Singapore. This is their journal which was originally published as a weblog.

<http://trip.leighmail.co.uk/>