

Dear Family and Friends,

Tis the holiday season once again and tis time to count our many blessings. This year we have been very blessed with visits from and trips with family and friends around Asia and the United States, as well as a “short” (by our standards) trip on our own across the vast lengths of Russia and Mongolia. Where to begin



Late last January, Karin and Bill (Lars’ parents) made a special long trip to Malaysia to witness and join the Maung-Goh family usher in the Chinese Lunar New Year – welcoming the year of the Goat. This visit was made even more special as Karin was born in the year of the Goat (but we will not tell you which one - and she would rather think of it as a Ram rather than a Goat!). Both Karin and Bill joined Jacqui’s family at their home in Penang as we all steamed over the traditional steamboat dinner on New Year’s Eve. Then, on the following day, began the long process of visiting the extended family as we went door-to-

door in Penang, and all the way to the northern state of Kedah, handing out “ang-pows” (red packets filled with money) to the children and bachelor/ettes and offering mandarin oranges (as a sign of wealth) to others in the household. The celebrations only ended 15 days later with Chap Goh Mei when the extended family sat down at our home in Kuala Lumpur for the traditional “yue-sang” (a dish made of raw salmon and shredded vegetables which is tossed high into the air before being eaten), a round of fireworks and, the time-honored Chinese tradition on any given occasion, gambling.



During Karin and Bill’s month long visit to Asia, we also made a short trip to Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), together with Elaine, Jacqui’s mother. After a brief stay in Yangon, Karin and Bill pampered themselves spending four days on the luxurious Road to Mandalay, cruising up the famous



Irrawaddy River from Pagan to Mandalay. During this time, we took Elaine on a pilgrimage trip, visiting as many temples as possible on a trip from Bago to Kyaiktiyo to Mawlamyine. Elaine endured our style of budget overland travel in a rickety old car on bumpy dirt roads staying at flea-bag hotels and eating the local street hawker food. We seriously doubt if she would join us a second time on such a trip – poor Mummy!

and with Karin and Bill once the beautiful Shwedagon Pagoda, the Sule Pagoda, few other touristy sites. We, of course, had a drink Myanmar will always have a special place in our Pagan that Lars proposed to Jacqui, but we do hope enjoyed the wonderful, unspoiled beauty of Myanmar.



Back in Yangon, again, we all visited Scotts Market and a at the Strand Hotel. hearts as it was in that our parents

Another guest from afar joined us in Malaysia in March. Paolo, on his travels around the world, had been with us on our trans-Africa, South America and Central Asia trips. In addition to reminiscing about those wonderful trips, we were happy to share with him the sights and sounds of Kuala Lumpur, the endless servings of delicious (okay, perhaps we are biased) Penang hawker food, the old colonial past of Malacca, and a personal encounter with rural living in the kampung of Megat Dewa at Jacqui’s uncle and aunt’s home. April was soon upon us and it was time for Jacqui’s annual girly time with two of her best friends, Susan and Carol, in Bangkok - the days were filled with shopping, eating, having massages and late night chats. Lars came up to Bangkok a few days later for some boy’s time with Greg, checking out all the old watering holes, finishing off the week with the massive annual water fight that takes over the whole country during Thai New Year – we were like children with our large water guns (this seems to be an event fast becoming a ritual in our lives).

Back in Malaysia, we participated in Buddhists, especially amongst the (similar to All Soul's Day), and it was participate in this ritual of cleaning with colourful papers and flags, and mobile phones, playing cards and even know what you may need in the after-and coke' as an offering to Jacqui's it apparently made them very happy (or with tosses of a pair of coins). Jacqui, (white guy) helping clean the gravesites

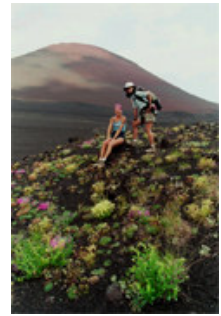


another ritual observed by many Chinese, called "Cheng Beng" the first time for Lars to witness and family gravesites and decorating them burning paper money, clothes, shoes, mahjong sets as offerings (you never life). Lars decided to burn 'whisky deceased maternal grandparents, and at least that was what was indicated however, felt that having an "ang mo" is what brought a smile to their faces.



July marked the start of yet another of our adventure overland travels – this time across the length of Russia and around Mongolia. We started with 2 weeks of hiking through the stunning volcanoes of central Kamchatka in the far east of Russia. We were awestruck by Kamchatka's natural beauty of majestic volcanoes and flourishing colourful wild flowers amidst black barren volcanic ash at Lunakhodchikov, where the Russians tested their lunar vehicles. We climbed two

volcanoes, Tolbachick and Bezemyanny (the latter still very much alive and active with stinking hot sulfur, and loose and rolling rocks), and saw a few big brown bears (one walked by Jacqui's tent while she was having a sleep-in) – it was just awesome! We would most certainly go back there in a heartbeat if it weren't for those gazillions of gigantic, monstrous blood sucking mosquitoes. Jacqui thought that they might have been large enough to eat all the mosquitoes back home alive!



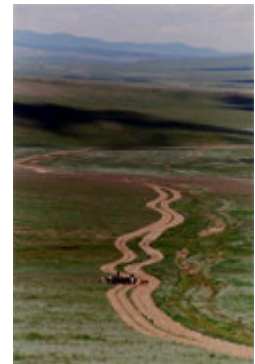
Mongolia certainly isn't a place for the either the faint of heart or vegetarians! But we absolutely loved this country! Equipped with gas stoves, tents, freeze-dried food, gallons of drinking water and a genial, giant driver named Gerlee who spoke no English (we, of course, didn't speak a word of Mongolian), we explored this remote, wild country in a lean, mean Russian army jeep. We were enchanted by this wonderful birthplace of the great Genghis Khan, who today is revered as much as he was centuries ago. His people are still pretty much nomads living in gers (albeit with some equipped

with satellite dishes and cow with long hair) and and more meat! Their ignorant tourists into have, including rock without refrigeration),



milk) and dry, hard biscuits. A few families were even kind enough to prepare lunch for us poor hungry souls (not many restaurants in this place). We would watch them prepare the meal from start to finish (and we mean the whole shebang, from slaughtering the poor goat to cleaning to chopping on the bed to cooking on the one burner dung fired stove). Fortunately we had alternatives to the stew made with the goats entire head and hooves – but that seemed to be a favorite of our driver. Two weeks in Mongolia and we hardly scratched the surface. From Ulan Baatar we headed out onto the steppes of Mongolia, first north and west to the volcanoes and mountain lakes and hot springs, then south to the Gobi desert with its Khongorin Els (dunes) and the Flaming Cliffs and finally back to the capital to experience the spiritual monasteries and be captivated by the rich culture of dances, music and deep-throat singing. Mongolia is highly recommended before the Mongolian "highways" are turned into asphalt roads.

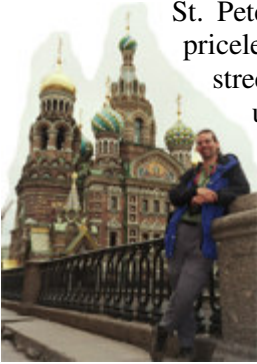
solar power), rearing goats, sheep, yaks (like a horses). Their staple food is meat, meat, meat hospitable nature extends to inviting curious, their humble gers sharing whatever they may hard cheese (made to last a very long time mare's milk tea and "airag" (fermented mare's



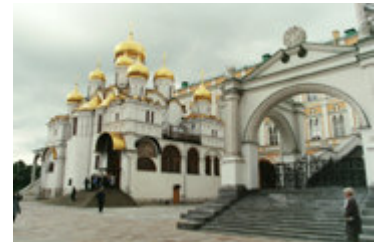
A Russian told us that Russian homes are reminiscent of its people – cold and hard on the outside but the warm and pretty windows are a reflection of their soul. And we couldn't have agreed more. Travelling on the Trans-Siberian train all the way from Vladivostok to Moscow and St. Petersburg (for a total of 13,500 kms by train), we had some friendly locals show off their once closed country and simple but rich culture. Neither of us spoke Russian nor did we have a dictionary with us but we trotted through the vast country learning why one “Russian” hour is longer than one ordinary hour, why the Russian women were always in stilettos and dressed like they were going partying at 12 noon (not to mention looking drop-dead gorgeous); why the “militza” took us to the police station for intense interrogations and have a unhealthy fixation for documents, and why the a Tsar declined an offer to convert Russia into an Islamic country. We learned about deep and cold Lake Baikal and the exiled Decembrists of Irkutsk (and the dedication of their privileged wives who gave up everything - including their children - to join their husbands in poverty in exile), went to the site where the last Romanovs were murdered, and saw the destruction Stalin's iron fists did to the county's churches. Our hearts where touched when we visited the gulag (political prison camps) museum at the former Perm-36 camp. At one time, we were told, there were more Gulag prison camps than villages in Siberia.



St. Petersburg, Venice of the north, was as beautiful as we had imagined. Luxurious palaces, priceless art and, simply, a charming city (except a bit expensive). We spent 6 days wandering the streets and museum corridors and taking local trains and hydrofoils, yet we still left so much unexplored. The home stay that we had was just amazing (better than the others we had in Russia) – two minutes to the Admiralty and Nevskiy Prospekt and five minutes to the Hermitage and Winter Palace. The Church of Spilled Blood was absolutely stunning, and so was St. Isaac's. We managed to catch the ballet “Swan Lake” at the Alexandrinsky Theatre, as well as squeezing in the Yusupov Palace where the infamous Rasputin was murdered. And the palaces of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great were stunning.



Finishing the trip at the luxurious Ararat Park Hyatt in Moscow was a treat for us. And the visit to the Kremlin, especially the armoury, was fascinating and definitely worth the hassle and the extra security we had to endure. We also watched an opera at the famous Bolshoy Theatre, really enjoyed it even though it was in Russian. On days when the weather wasn't very cooperative, we roamed the underworld of the grand metro system like true tourists. To our disappointment, the Red Square was closed to public in preparation for Moscow's city day and a performance by the Eagles. Hence, we didn't get the chance to see Lenin's embalmed body, sigh... But we enjoyed the unique St. Basil's cathedral with its very unique nine domed chapels.



After traveling for in Kuala Lumpur, our long journey to York in time for Carl we drove south to National Park and fall colours. Along college buddy Tom



almost 10 weeks, we were glad to finally be back home even if it was only to unpack and then repack again for visit the Bespolka side of the family. We flew into New Jr's 7th birthday party in early October. From New York Florida with Karin and Bill through the Shenandoah along the Blue Ridge Parkway to witness the beautiful the way we stopped in Atlanta to visit Lars' old MIT and his family – great to recall the old university days.

Now back in Florida, Jacqui has been keeping busy with tennis and Lars has had a few golf lessons and played a few rounds of golf. We also went to a Halloween party, thrown by seniors, attended by seniors, but boy were they wild and crazy – something we can all learn from!



The Valhalla Bepolkas came down for Thanksgiving – we picked them up at the airport and spent a fun day at Sea World (Lars rode the roller coast at least three times in a row). Ro cooked up a storm for Thanksgiving dinner; doing almost everything herself while the kids had a thrilling time in Nana and Grandpa’s pool. The Winchester Bepolkas

are back in town for Christmas and New Years – oh, how the children have grown, especially Sienna. And Christmas this year will be made extra special because the Valhalla Bepolkas will be back down for about a week - we’ll have all the Bepolkas together. It’s been eighteen months since our last Bepolka gathering in Italy.



Come January, we’ll be heading back east to Malaysia to celebrate Chinese New Year with Jacqui’s family and we are already very excited about everything that 2004 has store for us. We wish you all the very best for the coming year.

Have a Blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year!

