

Dear Family and Friends,

December, 2003

As with most families, another year has brought many highlights, so at first we thought we'd bore you with the usual Christmas-letter recitation of activities. But instead we decided to bore you with one particular experience that will be forever etched in our memories because of the magic, the exciting adventures, and of course the credit-card bills that will outlast our grandchildren: our trip to Hawaii.

For those who have never visited the 50th state, we cannot recommend the trip too highly. Where else can you find—in one place—deserts, rain forests, abundant sea life, active volcanos, bankrupt housing developments, roads buried in lava, a Costco, world-class surf, cheesy tourist traps, and insects that carry away Clydesdales, all at prices that any billionaire can afford? I think it was when we paid \$145 for lunch at Denny's that I realized just what a precious—and I use the word advisedly—vacation we were having.

It all started in the spring, when I found myself making far too many business trips in a desperate (if belated) attempt to convince the college that I'm a useful professor. (This is part of the "tenure track," in which you are guaranteed to be either promoted or fired after devoting six years of your life to your job. I think the idea was invented at Wal-Mart.) The problem with business trips is that they take you away from home, and the only way to atone to a five-year-old is to return with a gift (stuffed animals work fairly well, although Xandie really prefers diamond rings).

Everything was going swimmingly until it came time to plan the family vacation. "How about July?" Pat asked. "Um, I'm going to Pittsburgh in July. Maybe you guys could come with me and then we could vacation in Pittsburgh. We could pay for it with the money I save on diamonds."

In retrospect, that probably wasn't one of my brightest suggestions. With visions of steel filings dancing in her head, Pat immediately set about finding an alternate location. I tried pointing out that Pittsburgh has a baseball team, but somehow that didn't convince her. Nor did the thought of visiting Carnegie Mellon University's computer science department. I'll never understand women.

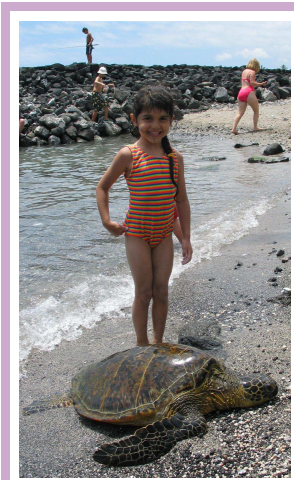
After discarding several possibilities, she came up with Hawaii. She reasoned that Southern California is much closer than anywhere else, Xandie is old enough to remember the trip (at least for a couple of weeks), and we could save money by avoiding expensive hotels and staying in expensive B&B's instead. Before I could express a contrary opinion, she executed the *coup de grace*: renting a copy of *Lilo and Stitch*.

In case you've been away visiting the Galactic Federation, this movie is a Disney cartoon. But Xandie thinks it's a documentary. So when the characters went surfing, she figured that was what we were going to do. Likewise for the chase scene in the spaceship. She was instantly on Pat's side. As the traditional head of the family, I did what every good leader does: went along with the program.

A tremendous amount of planning, anticipating, and packing ensued. Pat has a very simple approach to packing for a two-week vacation: she sets aside everything we use on a daily basis, like toothbrushes and pajamas, and then crams the remaining contents of the house into a suitcase. Xandie is her mother's daughter: every one of those danged stuffed animals wound up in her bag. I put on a pair of swim trunks and calmly waited in the car.

The flight was a revelation. The constant ads on the airplane's video introduced us to thousands of new ways to spend our money, including helicopter rides, submarine rides, 4-wheel-drive rides, glass-bottom boat rides, horseback rides, airplane rides, and even "wiki wiki" rides. "Wiki wiki" is a native Hawaiian term meaning "You give us all your money and we let you walk." By the time we arrived in Kona, Xandie was ready to ride anything. Especially a luggage cart.

The next day, we went to the beach. That was when Xandie discovered that surfing involved getting wet. Since she doesn't swim, that presented a small problem. But she solved it in typical little-kid fashion: she threw one of her stuffed animals in the water and let *him* surf while she made the acquaintance of a native Hawaiian. At least we *think* it was a native; perhaps it had swum from Polynesia. Or Pittsburgh.



Greeting a native

A big highlight of the trip was visiting the live volcanos. We had watched footage of spectacular eruptions and reserved three days in the “Volcano Lava Lodge” so that we’d have plenty of time to see them in person. Hah! It turns out that all those movies were filmed fifteen years ago, and “Volcano Lava Lodge” is a native Hawaiian expression meaning “You give us all your money and we show you rocks.”

Undaunted, I walked up a mountain to see the flowing lava. Pat and Xandie stayed behind, since it was supposedly a strenuous hike. I wouldn’t call it easy, but I did see two babies, six kids Xandie’s age, and an old lady with a walker. The lava was oozing, not flowing, but it was still a very impressive experience. Especially if you like breathing lava fumes. For those who don’t know about them, let’s just say they’re kind of harsh. When I got to the bottom of the hill, I found that Pat and Xandie had headed back to the car when they saw the park rangers put on their gas masks. (I’m not making this up.)

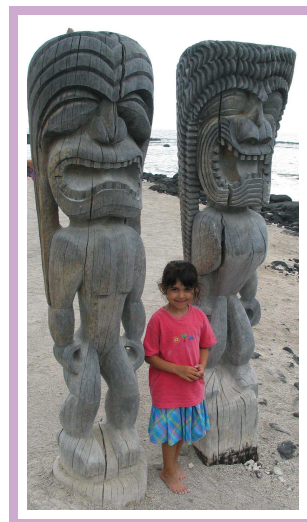
Two days later, all three of us repeated the trek, fortunately without the fumes. Xandie was a little trouper, scrambling a mile over broken uphill terrain as if she’d been doing it all her life. I let her carry me back down.

By this time, we were so sunburned that two different kids mistook me for Santa when I was swimming. The impersonation was greatly aided by the standard Hawaiian diet, which is based on the theory that “starch” is a gourmet food. Where else can you order ahi tuna with fries, potato salad, macaroni, bread, taro root, and your choice of two starches? And mashed potatoes for dessert!

We forged onward, seeking new adventures. At the Hilo zoo, a little girl pointed at us and told her mommy, “There’s Mrs. Kuenning, my music teacher.” Pat poo-pooed the idea, of course. What are the chances of running into somebody you know in Hawaii? Or four somebodies?

Toward the end, we did the “touristy” things and stocked up on souvenirs. Xandie came away with a stuffed humuhumunukunukuapuaa (I’m not making that up either), which is a native Hawaiian fish whose name means “You give me all your money and I’ll bite your toes.” We skipped the submarine and helicopter but rode the glass-bottomed boat. We had native Hawaiian ice cream (\$50 a scoop) and went to a luau, where Xandie and Pat took a quick hula lesson while I tried native Hawaiian pickup lines on the teacher. She hit me with a native Hawaiian canoe paddle.

Eventually, of course, it had to end. Our two weeks were up. Besides, we were out of funds. To get home, we peddled Xandie’s stuffed fish to an arriving tourist, telling him it was a native Hawaiian dish called “Gimmeallyourmoney.”



With guardians

Since our return, things are back to normal (more or less). Xandie started kindergarten and new dance lessons, and renewed her fascination with dressing up and hiding from her parents. Pat continues her endless garden projects while still finding time to teach and to play in quartets and the local orchestra. I filed my tenure papers and then waited patiently (if patience is defined as gnawing on your wife’s leg) for an answer. Thankfully, Harvey Mudd College was completely fooled. Next summer, we will be going on sabbatical in Europe. I also received a grant from the Mellon foundation to spend some of my time studying opera, which just goes to show that sometimes even big goofs get lucky.

Despite—or perhaps because of—our excellent Hawaiian adventures, we are well and happy, and we hope that the same is true for you. We look forward to hearing your own news soon.



Hula pose

Love,

Geoff Pat XANDIE