

Dear Family and Friends,

December, 2005

Well, we're back from our year-long European vacation. . . er, um, sabbatical. If you wondered why you didn't get a Christmas card from us last year, it's probably because the German *Polizei* intercepted it. Either that or we couldn't afford the overseas postage.

2005 in Germany began with a rude discovery: it snows there. When we moved to Karlsruhe, we had *no* idea that it got cold in the winter; Geoff had promised us that Germany had weather "just like L.A." But when Xandie discovered the city's outdoor ice rink, all was forgiven. She quickly learned that falling down never hurts as long as you first ensure that your Daddy is underneath you. After his first time trying to catch her by the skates, Daddy quickly learned where the Band-Aids were kept.



Shortly thereafter, we realized that we had only six months left in Europe, and we had hardly traveled at all. This set off a frantic attempt to visit all of Europe during Xandie's brief school vacations. It's amazing how much territory you can cover if you don't actually try to *see* anything. We visited Barcelona, Paris, Berlin, Prague, Salzburg, the Rhine, Venice, Florence, Pompeii, and Rome—and that was only on the first day. Xandie developed a uniquely sophisticated approach to travel: she decided that it was her job to quality-test the ice cream in every city. Meanwhile, Pat and Geoff spent their time in laundromats (somehow, every one of Xandie's shirts had chocolate stains). Between the three of us, we even occasionally managed to see a few tourist attractions and take several thousand (count 'em) pictures, four of which actually came out pretty well. Of course, we no longer remember exactly where we took them, nor what they show, but that's OK. We're pretty sure the Eiffel Tower is in Prague, so we can just write notes on the photos after the fact. (You can read more about our travels on our Web page. Google for "Adventures in Karlsruhe".)

We came back to the U.S. in July, having delayed our return by a week so that after waiting 30 years, Geoff could finally see a stage of the Tour de France. This was an experience not to be missed: you stand for hours, fighting for space at the barrier, after which the pack of 150+ racers zooms by in exactly 18 seconds (we have photographic proof). Somewhere in the middle there was a brief flash of yellow: Lance Armstrong. Or perhaps another rider was discarding a banana.

Returning home after a year abroad is an unforgettable experience. Tears came to our eyes at the sight of our beloved cats, the smells of our beloved yard, and (especially) the sting of our beloved L.A. smog. We eagerly dug into the boxes stacked in the garage, searching for the essentials needed for our first night in our own home: an air mattress, sleeping bags, a few pots and pans, paper plates, and (critically important!) cat litter.

We found it a bit hard to readjust to American life. Every day, we would frantically rush to the grocery store at 5:55 P.M., only to realize that it would be open for six more hours. Geoff couldn't shake the habit of walking to work, even after the local police stopped him for being a suspicious character. ("What are you? A terrorist? Real Californians *drive* anywhere that's farther than 50 feet away!") When Pat shopped, she would smile broadly at the clerks, point to what she wanted, and say "Ja, ja," forgetting that they all speak English.

Of course, one of the major chores was to retrieve all the stuff we had stored in the garage. This is where the wives all say "Oh, goody" and the husbands say, "Oh, *no!*" Because for some reason, women are constitutionally incapable of unpacking a box and putting things exactly where they were a year ago. It's not that they have forgotten which shelf was used for what; to the contrary, they remember that sort of thing much better than the men ("Honey? Do we keep the pillowcases in the office or the dishwasher?"). But the female approach involves making an assumption that no matter where something *used* to be, and no matter how many years you spent getting it there, that is the one place that is absolutely, completely inappropriate for storing that thing. If you have always kept the firewood right next to the fireplace, then that simply proves that there *must* be a better place; for example, at the bottom of the Jacuzzi.



So each afternoon, Geoff would lug a heavy box labeled “Bedroom” into the house and set it down in—the bedroom. Pat would immediately pick it up, carry it to the living room, and unpack two items. Then she’d put it back in the garage.

“What about the other stuff?”

“I haven’t decided where to put it. Besides, we can get along without your underwear for a few more weeks.”

As fall approached, we began to settle into a more normal life. We registered Xandie for the local elementary school, which due to an unfortunate misunderstanding meant hiring someone to translate her German transcripts into Urdu. But we eventually got it all straightened out, and the Big Day arrived.

The first day of school is an impressive event in California. Californians don’t believe in walking to school. No sir. We’re a car culture, and it’s just not *safe* to walk. It might snow or something. You never know. This is early September, and I heard that last year it actually got *cloudy* once in September. Better take the SUV just in case. One family who lived directly across the school trooped out into their driveway, climbed into the Hummer, and *drove* the 16 feet to the school’s curb. But then they discovered that there wasn’t any parking there, so they kept creeping down the street, looking for a spot big enough to park their mini-tank, until finally they found one four blocks away. Then they hiked back, kids in tow, beaming at their cleverness.

We walked.

Once we arrived, we found proud parents swarming the campus, taking pictures of everything in sight. (“Look, there’s his *drinking fountain!* Isn’t it just precious! It even has water! Darling, take a picture of me by his drinking fountain.” “I can’t, honey. I’m busy taking a picture of the asphalt playground.”) Happy teachers stood outside their classrooms, welcoming all the adorable little tykes. (“Johnny! You take that frog out of Susie’s ear or I’m going to put you in Mrs. Haggerty’s class *all year!*”) Meanwhile, the kids are making new friends (“That’s *my* ball and I’ll hit you if you try to play with it!”) and eagerly seeking out the only mud within five miles so they can mess up their brand new school clothes before Dad poses them by the classroom door.

Finally the bell rang and our little girl disappeared inside the classroom. But as we tried to leave campus without tripping over a camera, we heard a sudden whoop. “A music teacher!” yelled a voice. “It’s a real live music teacher! Grab her!” Before we could react, a well-dressed woman came bolting out of the office and tackled Pat around the ankles. Then she sat on Pat, holding her down and brandishing a contract. “I’ll let you up as soon as you sign. You’re not getting away like the last one did!” So Pat signed on the dotted line, and now she’s teaching general music to 650 kids at Xandie’s school. She thinks her own daughter is one of the 650, but we can’t be sure because most third-graders look alike behind the start-of-the-flu-season snot and the magnetic dirt.

A few weeks later, Xandie started piano lessons and joined the local children’s chorus. Then, on the way home from the piano lessons (so Geoff was told) Pat and Xandie stumbled across a stable, so Xandie started riding lessons as well. Geoff is still trying to figure out how they found the place, since it’s in *the other direction* from home. But when it comes to women and horses, it’s probably best not to ask.

Fall has melted into winter, and Christmas is coming. Xandie is working on her wish list (11 pages so far), Pat is preparing for winter concerts, and Geoff is in the garage, looking for his underwear. We hope the holidays find you equally happy—and better clad.

Love,

*Geoff Pat Xandie*



Prague

Barcelona

Karlsruhe

Rome

Berlin

Paris