

Dear Family and Friends,

December, 2012

One of the great American summer vacation traditions is the road trip. Immortalized in countless Hollywood movies, this involves packing the family into a car, setting off across our famous highways and byways, and robbing a string of convenience stores en route to a thrilling finale at the Grand Canyon. An additional benefit is the opportunity to burn large quantities of fossil fuels, thereby contributing to global warming, which makes Geoff happy because he still hasn't quite recovered from the frigid Montana winters of his childhood.

So when Pat pointed out that it had been quite a while since we visited her sister in Seattle, a mere 1200 miles away, and that on the way we could "swing by" to see Geoff's mom in Great Falls (another 650 or so), naturally we all jumped at the idea. Off the roof. Off the Empire State Building.

One of the big advantages of a road trip is that as you go along you can stop anywhere, anytime, and as many times as you want. So if you're eager to see famous out-of-the-way tourist attractions like the Japanese dock that floated across the Pacific after the tsunami, or can't wait to visit old friends who live in obscure places like San Francisco, driving there is the way to go. We got right on the job, e-mailing people all over the country to tell them we'd be dropping by to mooch off them. We knew we wouldn't be passing within a thousand miles of most of those folks, but it made us feel good to know that we were welcome.

Except, to our dismay, we weren't. Reply after reply came back: "Sorry, we'll be in Oregon." "I'd love to see you, but I'm on vacation in Greece." "Oh, darn, we made plans to wash our hair that night."

Undeterred, we came up with an alternate plan: we'd bring a gift bottle of shampoo! And so, after spending \$350 to join AAA so we could get access to \$20 worth of free maps, off we went.

At this point, as you well know, the standard Christmas letter devolves into a dull blow-by-blow list of people and places visited. Of course you've never heard of any of those people, and the places are either (a) boring, (b) obscure, (c) obscure AND boring, or (d) such dream destinations that you detest the writers for making you envy their escapades. No worries! We won't stick you with one of those letters.



Leaving the house, we got onto the 210 Freeway westbound at Towne Avenue. We quickly passed Fruit Street, then Foothill Boulevard, the 57 Freeway, and Sunflower. "Isn't this fun and exciting?" exclaimed Pat. "We're almost to Grand Avenue! Wait until our friends read about this in the Christmas letter!"

Xandie, in the back seat, said nothing. Like all self-respecting teenagers, she was plugged into her iPod. But she rolled her eyes. Not that she could hear us; she just rolls her eyes from time to time as a matter of principle. That's what being a teen is all about.

On Highway 1!!!

But California is full of fun places to visit. There's Disneyland, for example (you may have heard of it). And the San Diego Zoo. Hollywood Boulevard. The Golden Gate Bridge. Santa Barbara. Hearst Mansion. Mount Shasta. Chinatown (two of them, in fact). The Winchester Mystery House. We drove right by all of them and straight to a beach. Not just any beach, though. This beach had *rocks!* Xandie had picked it out of a tour book. "Look, a beach with rocks! I can add more to my collection!" So now our car, which was already getting 4 miles per gallon because of our 3.7 tons of luggage, was filled to bursting with hand-selected pebbles. Because apparently the ones from the quarry near our house just aren't good enough. ("Those ones have *dirt* on them. Yuck!")

So California was a crashing bore. We visited some people (you've never heard of them) and saw some sights (boring and obscure). However, things got a bit more interesting for a while when Geoff misunderstood the GPS and turned on Second Street in the wrong town ("Who knew there two different towns with a Second Street?"), leading us on a short detour through Denver.

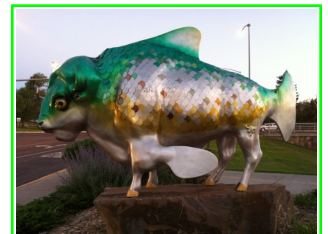


Fiberglass mountains

We eventually got back on track and ended up in Seattle, where we visited more people you don't know. We also thought about seeing the Space Needle, but you've heard of it so we skipped it and instead checked out the sidewalks on Second Street. ("Wait!" exclaimed Geoff. "There are *three* places with a Second Street?")

A drawback of a three-week road trip is that you get kind of tired of hotels, even when you're staying in a \$1,000-a-night suite at Motel 6. So we were glad to finally connect with friends (you don't really care who, do you?) who were willing to put us up in a real house—or at least in a tent in their driveway. Too bad we could only stay one night.

Great Falls, Montana was a perfect destination on our trip, since you have probably never heard of it. And deservedly so, because it's absolutely *filled* with people you've never met. Some of them are pretty nice folks, and we visited with those ones, including Geoff's mom. She recently took up skydiving—a neat trick, since she's in a wheelchair now. But she just pushes the chair out of the plane, leaps after it, and then shouts "Where did you say that ripcord is again?" (At 92, she's getting a bit forgetful.) We stayed several days there, most of which were spent picking up scattered wheelchair parts.



Great Falls art

On the way back to California, we violated our obscure-places-only rule and drove through Utah so we could visit Zion National Park. It's an amazing place; the people who designed it built these amazing fiberglass mountains that are thousands of feet tall. If they weren't so beautiful, you'd swear they were real! Xandie and Pat went on a horse/muleback ride while Geoff climbed a steep trail to see whether he could give himself another heart attack (he failed).



Ready to skydive

And so, after three weeks, we returned to a stack of bills and a very disgruntled cat. But as it turned out, our summer wasn't quite over. While on the horse trail, Pat (who is one of the friendliest people in the universe) had struck up a conversation with a very charming lady named Michelle. They really hit it off, and we wound up with an invitation to visit her family "whenever you're in town." So after feeding the cat, we set off once more for the East Coast, where we spent a fabulous weekend with Michelle and her equally charming husband, Barack.

You don't know them.

Love,

Geoff Pat Xandie



SoCal girl



Trail ride



Hiking



With our new friends