

11 December 2007 – Tucson, AZ

I can see snow from where I'm sitting. I know, that will seem hard to believe by the end of this letter, so before we get into what's going on now I suppose we should review.

Those of you who saw us at Christmas last year know that we were planning to go to Asia at the beginning of the year. We found ourselves in Taiwan just a few sleeps after New Year's Day, and about a week after being snowed out of Denver (like around 75,000 other people had been that week). Despite this setback, we managed to enjoy Taipei. Mary Margaret helped run a research meeting, and Jon took pictures and worked on the DARPA Grand Challenge. It's about 14 hours to Taipei by plane. You can watch a lot of movies on that flight. On the way home, we squeezed in a short stay in Hong Kong. We enjoyed touring around where East meets West.

Jon had about a week back from Taipei before he was back across the Pacific—this time to Australia. He spent ten days there, working on the DARPA Grand Challenge with his teammates in Sydney. It's 14 hours 40 minutes to Australia by plane. Think: *Lord of the Rings* Marathon.

Mary Margaret kept herself busy during Jon's away-fun-time by preparing for her research-group's yearly review. And by planning for packing. We knew by then when we'd be moving to Tucson, just not exactly where. Nonetheless, there was plenty of organizing to think about, which included ensuring that we bought biodegradable packing peanuts that dissolve in water.

In mid-March, Jon found himself on another plane to Australia. All the *Star Wars* movies won't fill up a round trip. *Lawrence of Arabia* is a mere commercial. Massive. You can take two full-blown naps, and compose an epic poem before dessert. The Oscars aren't that long. He stayed in Sydney for about a month, and produced a 5-minute video of a car driving without a human inside. It's amazing to see this video. You could watch it 163 times in a row on the flight.

Mary Margaret came to Australia to wrap up the trip with about two weeks of relaxing. We climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge (see enclosed photo), drove to the Blue Mountains¹, and visited some wineries in Hunter Valley. It was a lot like Napa Valley, except without the crowds.

There are lots of stars in Hunter Valley, since it's out in the middle of the country. Of course, you can see the Southern Cross, but what's really funny is that you can't see the Man in the Moon in Australia. It would take too long to write down why, but if you want to fly down, I could tell you all about it.

Most of April and May was a sprint for Jonathan to the June 27 autonomous car demo. Mary Margaret used this time to work with the new Executive Director (who replaced her, as you remember from last year), and to manage the iCAST Program (an exchange program with Taiwanese students)(now you see why we were in Taipei in January). However, we still made time for a trip to a conference in Florence (Italy, not Alabama). We also visited Rome, San Gimignano, the Cinque Terre, Assisi, Orvieto, and we cruised through Pisa. I tried to make a "leaning tower" joke, but I just couldn't get a great angle. We must be slipping.

As late June approached, Mary Margaret trained her successor(s) (there were a few people who were taking over the things she handled), and courageously packed up our whole apartment, while Jon spent (nearly) every waking hour managing the unmanned car project, though we did make enough time to have lunch or dinner with nearly all of our friends. We also had a few trips to Tucson to pick out houses. We found one that we liked (in the best school district in town), but had to walk away from the table to get the

¹ Like the Great Smoky Mountains, the high humidity and tree oils make evening vistas take a blue tinge. Of course, all the trees are upside down, since you're in Australia.

seller to accept. Luckily, we'd had time to watch home-buying negotiation videos on the way to Australia. We closed on the house on the 26th of June. Jon and his team demonstrated the car on the 27th: while the rest of the team partied up, we went home to finish packing. Jon packed all day on the 28th. The moving van came at 8:00 am on the 29th. We were barely ready.

We were supposed to drive on to Southern California on the 30th, and on to Tucson July 1st, to pick up the keys to our new house. However right after we turned in the keys to our landlord, nature intervened, by inflicting fatigue, the bubonic plague, or something of similar effect on Jon. Our gracious friend, Shankar, took us in while Jon slept and had a few gallons of Saul's Deli's Matzo Ball Soup. It was time well spent, and a touching farewell to our time in Berkeley.

So, we did the two-day trip to Tucson in one day (a long haul, but like a quick game of checkers compared to a flight to Sydney) and it would have been much more fun if the air conditioner had worked the whole way. We got into the house the next morning, and realized that we didn't have any furniture. Tile is hard to sit on. We usually ate on the stairs. After a day or so, we flew off to Edinburgh for a business trip, and we spent time with some Berkeley colleagues to whom we hadn't been able to properly say good-bye. Jon flew back through Berkeley, where the BBC had come to film the unmanned car driving around. It was great fun, and you can watch the video online (see his work webpage). He tried out his Monty Python impressions. Funnily enough, he was not featured in the video.

The rest of July was dedicated to the house. It is so wonderful to live in a place that we have all to ourselves. Mostly because if something isn't right, we can change it. And there were several dozen things that weren't right, so that was pretty much July. Mary Margaret replaced all the door handles. We got a new washer/dryer. We got a new fridge. We replaced the dishwasher. We checked our bank balance. We installed an alarm. Jon installed 3 ceiling fans². We installed 2 new fans on the back porch, with Jon running new wire. A gas grill under those fans was required. Now, we can sit in comfort on the back porch, and watch the wildlife wars on the walls in our backyard. We have hummingbirds, lizards, quail. And views of the mountains. And stars.

Tucson has a reputation for warm weather. Funny, though, we realized after spending a few days that the thermometer read the same in Tucson as it did in Berkeley³. Of course, if we ever wanted to cool off, we could just run the dryer for a few minutes and stick our heads in. Seriously, though, we could generally expect highs over 110° F. Of course, since our new house has a *pool* we could jump in to cool off. Swimming is awesome, but it's crowded after pouring in all of those biodegradable packing peanuts.

Of course, there's not enough space, or time, to say everything, so here's the quickies. We grilled out almost every day August-October. Jon's Mercedes is back in action with three new ingredients (a/c, motor mounts, and antique plates). We flew to Denver to make up our lost trip from last New Year's. We fixed a hole in our roof the month after we moved in. We killed a spider the size of a young polar bear outside our bedroom. We found a rattlesnake in our water meter box. Then we found out that all the rattlesnakes found in town are brought a few hundred yards from our backyard. We learned to play Killer Bunnies when the Eames visited. We learned Jon's car wasn't accepted to the autonomous car race. We hosted Mary Margaret's parents in October. We read the last Harry Potter. We cried. We loved it.

So that brings us back to the snow. The mountains in our backyard get a coat in the winter, though you can still play tennis in town. The views are spectacular. The contrast is amazing.

To all of you who have left us, or whom we have left: Merry Christmas. Our thoughts are with you, and our prayers are always there when you need them. To those of you with us now, thanks for giving us these new times; we know that in years to come our eyes will well remember, and the words of *Auld Lang Syne* will bring us back to now.

Jon and Mary Margaret
<http://sprinkletoday.com/>

² There were actually 4 installations for these 3 fans; some redecorating was "recommended"

³ Of course, you had to read the Celsius side in Tucson, and Fahrenheit side in Berkeley