

22 January 2000
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Dear everyone,

It is now a full year since our last letter and so we have a lot to tell you but most of our news is only a month or two old.

This letter is our first intended for online delivery. It is quicker and cheaper for us, it will get to you sooner than one in the mail, plus you get hyperlinks and more photos, in color, than I can provide in the printed version. If you haven't already seen it, take a look at our web site at <http://lanpeter.homepage.com>. There are over 70 pages of fun. If the pictures are too small on your printed copy, go back to the web and click on "bigger" and you'll get just that.

Activity report

The US Immigration Service has effectively determined what we have—and have not—done this year. Since Lan is still waiting to get a "green card" (permanent resident status) through her employer, she is committed to stay there until everything is finalized. We thought it would be over by now but it seems we must wait until the end of 2000. She works for US WEST Dex, a section of the local phone company and while there has not been much news there, she has recently transferred to a different group and moved to a cubicle 2 rows away from the old one. More importantly, she is now a DBA (database administrator) instead of just a database designer.

As I indicated last year, the Immigration Service would not let me work during 1999, so I decided to study computers instead. By taking a heavy course load and getting a few credits for my engineering degree, I very nearly finished a 2-year course on Internet development in 1 year. I am annoyed that my engineering career never went very far and I feel a bit of a loser having to take an entry-level job at 35 but the industry is booming and the prospects for rapid advancement are good.

Best of all, I already have a job! One of the guys from my previous job here in Denver helped me get an interview for what I believe was an unadvertised position and my boss offered me the job on the spot! I am very lucky. It is a "dream job" since I'll be working with Visual C++, Java and Cold Fusion. Someone like me without a full degree might expect to get stuck in a big company doing tedious maintenance work

but this is a small company, so I'll get to do a bit of everything. [Premier Data Systems](#) does mapping software for oil and gas companies and the government. My second week was demoralizing as I battled with my first real task but I found out that my boss expected me to struggle. Amazingly, when the currencies are converted, my entry-level job here pays the about same as my last engineering job in Australia, to which I brought a decade of experience.

Those of you who have read our earlier letters will know I've often been misunderstood when giving my name. Somehow, *Peter* becomes *Pleaser*, *Plato*, *Pleter* and so on. I was thinking that if I started a new job with people I didn't know, I would save myself the trouble and be *Andrew* instead but since I know Steve from my previous job, I've stuck with being me.

Most American 17-year-olds have a better car than ours but our little [Hyundai](#) has served us well, recently passing 100,000 miles (160,000 km). Right now though it has a rough idle and taking it to the dealer only made it worse. We expected that we would need to buy a second car so I could get to work and to provide more room and comfort (i.e. air conditioner) for travel, particularly when we have visitors. However, I can catch the bus to my new job, so we can put off that decision a little longer.

While I was looking for *Visual C++ for Dummies* on the library shelf, I stumbled across a fascinating book that I'm working my way through now. It is actually a book about other books. It's *The New Lifetime Reading Plan* and it gives the authors' opinions of all the [books we should read some time in our life](#), not necessarily for pleasure but to be a fuller human being. I've read a few of them but that was because I was forced to at school. I'll probably never read most of the rest but it great to know a little about each and why they are considered important. There are even a few that I'm inspired to attempt.

I was disappointed that we didn't elect to toss out the Queen in time for Australia's Centenary. It seems absurd to me that our head of government is unelected, is not a citizen and doesn't even live in the country. Having seen the circus that accompanies American Presidential elections, I favored the proposed model of a President chosen by a 2/3 majority of Parliament. However, I can also understand people's reluctance to accept it.

I'm sure we will get to vote again within a few years.

Our neighbors across the corridor gave us a wonderful and unexpected Christmas present—they moved out! Without going into details, they made life very tense and we considered moving. Lan looked at perhaps 20 houses but I wanted to postpone buying until after I got a job so we could choose a convenient area. Now that issue has gone, we just need to worry about the building falling apart.

We ended the year with a big splash. Putting aside any Y2K concerns, we saw Neil Diamond at a New Year's Eve concert. I have never seen anyone so famous, the nearest being *Midnight Oil* at the Horden Pavilion, so it was quite an experience! Unfortunately, it was held in a sports arena rather than a concert hall—the basketball and ice hockey players were gone but the lousy acoustics remained. There was absolutely no stereo effect, so it was like listening to the TV turned up loud.

Travels

In May, we had the pleasure of a visit by two of my cousins, Neville & Diana and since Neville is a geologist, we did a quick geological tour of Colorado. Perhaps the highlight was seeing some tree stumps! These are no ordinary tree stumps though. About 15 million years ago, a volcanic eruption showered 15m of ash on a forest of massive redwood trees. The trees were killed but the bases of the trees were protected and eventually fossilized. The intricate structure of the wood is clearly visible and though less spectacular (but of more interest to the scientists) thousands of insects were preserved in fine detail.



Diana admires a very large tree stump. See [bigger](#) picture.

Since we had time available and Frontier Airlines started flying to Orlando at discount prices, we decided to take a trip to Florida as soon as my exams were over until the end of the year.

The first thing to know about Florida is that, among the Europeans, the Spanish got there first, claiming it in 1513. Of course, Mr. Columbus arrived in the New World in 1492 and the Spanish quickly claimed most of Central and South America.



Where we went. [Bigger](#)

Our first stop was St. Augustine, which the Spanish established in 1565, making it the oldest permanent settlement in the US. I understand that school children were once taught that the first settlers were the Pilgrims who landed in what is now Plymouth, Massachusetts but this reflected the Anglo-Saxon view of history, as they didn't arrive until 1620, 55 years later.

Treasure ships on the way to Spain sailed up the Florida coast in the Gulf Stream and so could be vulnerable to pirates operating from coastal bases. It was therefore essential for the Spanish to retain control of Florida. French Protestants settled near present-day Jacksonville in 1564 but when they came south in 1565, the Spanish seized the opportunity, killing nearly all the attackers and then capturing their town.

However, the British were a bigger threat. After several British raids on St. Augustine, the Spanish built the massive *Castillo de San Marcos* using "coquina", the soft, local stone made of seashells. It is very impressive and we were lucky to see a demonstration of a cannon being fired, though in the interests

of local boat owners, it was just gunpowder and no cannon ball.

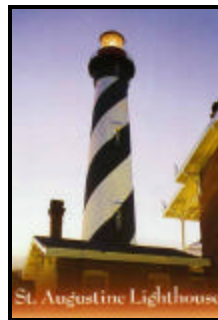


Castillo de San Marcos. [Bigger](#)

Some of you may be aware that I lived in Washington D.C. in 1969/70. My parents brought me here on a trip and it made such an impression on me that I still remembered it 30 years later.

The fort survived British sieges in 1702 and again in 1740 but when the British captured Havana in what is now Cuba, the Spanish gave up all of Florida in 1763 to get it back. At that time, Florida was everything south of the Savannah River, which is now the border between Georgia and South Carolina. However, since the Spanish supported the Americans in the struggle for independence from Britain, the Americans gave Florida to Spain in 1783 as a reward, only to buy it back again in 1821.

We saw a few other things in the area including a lighthouse, the "oldest house in the oldest city" (which is newer than one in Santa Fe, New Mexico) and another smaller fort further south.



St Augustine lighthouse. [Bigger](#)



The inside of the lighthouse is just as interesting as the outside. [Bigger](#)



Fort Matanzas. [Bigger](#)

We drove north to Charleston, famous for its magnificent houses though it is worth noting that the region's wealth was generated by slave labor on the plantations. We went to see Magnolia Plantation, which once grew rice and I expected to see a huge house in the style of *Tara* in *Gone with the Wind*. It wasn't there. We were to learn that firstly, plantation owners built their main houses in the town to escape the malaria on the plantations and secondly, as with *Tara*, Union troops burnt nearly everything as they came through at the end of the Civil War. The house we saw was built later but they did have an interesting "swamp garden".



Spanish moss on the trees. [Bigger](#)



The "Swamp Garden". [Bigger](#)

The houses in Charleston are outstanding though. We did a walking tour of the old town and toured one house that George Washington briefly rented.

We had a bizarre lunch at *Burger King* that day. The local senior citizens use it as a their bingo hall! Also notable was the bathroom—when the door opens as

someone enters, diners in the main room get an unobstructed view of the mens' urinal! It seems impossible that the architects drew it that way, that the building codes allowed it and that it was never fixed after construction.

However, the most memorable meal of the trip was at the *Feng Lin Chinese Restaurant* that night. I had beef with broccoli for just \$3.50 but it was the girl behind the counter that was special. A family business with mum and dad cooking but their 12-year-old daughter took the orders, presumably because she spoke the best English. She and her younger sister had their homework on one of the tables and would go back to it when there were no customers.

I intended visiting Fort Sumter at the mouth of Charleston Harbor where the first shots of the Civil War were fired. However, I misunderstood the boat schedule and we couldn't get a ferry before we had to leave town to visit Lan's sister and her family in Charlotte, North Carolina. We were there only from about 3pm one day until breakfast the next but it was well worth the trip to see them.

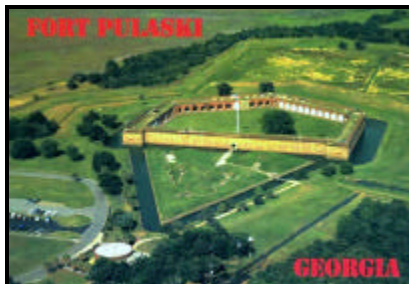
Coming south again, we stopped in Savannah, Georgia, which is also famous for its plantation-era houses, though they are not on the scale of those we saw in Charleston. The town layout is based on a grid of 24 small square parks which is attractive. Unfortunately, the city government didn't understand the value of its heritage early enough and there are too many ugly, modern structures next to beautiful old buildings.



Watch out for pedestrians! [Bigger.](#)

The next morning we toured nearby Fort Pulaski, which is significant for its complete failure! The American government built it as part of a coastal defense system and it was considered one of the best of its day but it was overcome with new technology, signaling the end of masonry fortifications. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the Georgia governor ordered that the fort be seized

from the Federal troops and it was taken without a shot being fired. The defenders naturally felt secure as the nearest land on which attackers could mount large guns was one mile (1.6 km) away, more than double the effective range of standard smoothbore cannon. What they did not know was that Union troops had ten new "rifled" cannons and after a single day of bombardment, the fort's commander realized the situation was hopeless and surrendered.



Fort Pulaski guards Savannah ... or so it was thought. [Bigger.](#)

(Rifled cannon have spiral-shaped grooves cut inside the gun barrel so the projectile spins giving it greater accuracy and the bullet-shaped projectile is more aerodynamic than a spherical cannon ball giving it greater range.)

The next day, we saw a river coming out of the ground and the local mermaids. The spring at Weeki Wachee discharges 170 million gallons (643,000 m³) of water a day and it is now part of a mini-theme park. Girls in costumes perform *The Little Mermaid* swimming around underwater and breathing from air hoses when necessary. We took a short boat trip and saw lots of birds like herons, pelicans and egrets but we also saw a manatee, a large aquatic mammal that is now endangered.



King Neptune & mermaid. [Bigger.](#)

Unfortunately, it started raining so St. Petersburg was a washout but it was beautiful the next morning as we were leaving. The bridge across the mouth of Tampa Bay is graceful and fairly new—a ship hit the old one in 1982 and brought it

down. It is "cable-stayed" like the [Glebe Island Bridge](#) in Sydney but the cables support the bridge only along the center double-yellow line instead of the edges.



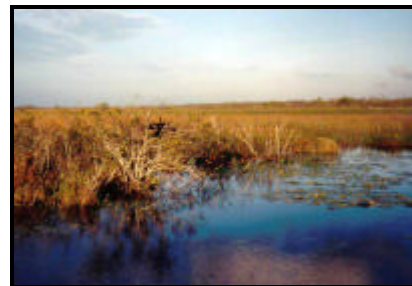
Skyline Bridge over Tampa Bay. [Bigger.](#)

After getting a flat tire fixed (thank you K-Mart), we stopped in Naples to visit the beach and collect some seashells before driving on to Homestead, our base for the Everglades National Park.



Treasure hunting on the beach. [Bigger.](#)

The Everglades is a "river" 50 miles (80 km) wide but often only a few inches deep. Water flows out of Lake Okeechobee, moving only 100 ft (30 m) per day, until it eventually reaches the Gulf of Mexico. There are huge areas of "saw grass" and then mangroves in the areas where fresh and salt water mix. We saw lots of birds and alligators. Most impressive.



Fields of saw grass are a haven for birds and small fish. [Bigger.](#)

However, it was sad that the ecosystem has been greatly damaged by activities outside the park. Water flow into the park is now regulated and huge canals carry

“excess” water away. I’ve been struck by the difference between the word swamp, which makes me think of unproductive land that must be drained to get rid of mosquitoes and alligators, and the word wetland that makes me think of fish, birds and biodiversity. Actually, they both describe the Everglades.



Mangrove roots trap silt flowing past, building up the land. [Bigger.](#)



An alligator taking a nap. [Bigger.](#)

Bridges link a series of islands (keys) south of Florida, allowing comfortable travel 100 miles (160 km) from the mainland. Almost all the original road bridges have been replaced and now stand derelict, often with sections missing (an earlier railway was blown away in 1924). I don't know if it was Hurricane Andrew in 1992, or just corrosion that did the damage. We stopped at one bridge and saw a fish about as big as Lan. I'm sure it will be the biggest fish I'll ever see in the wild and I was happy to see it there.



The Seven Mile Bridge. Note the old bridge on the left. [Bigger.](#)



A bridge too far. [Bigger.](#)

Key West is as far south as you can go in America without getting wet. It was warm (86°F/30°C while it was freezing in Denver), picturesque and full of history. Once a base for pirates extracting wealth from passing ships, it is now home to merchants extracting wealth from passing tourists. The Customs office meets all construction regulations for Federal government buildings, including the one that demands that the roof support 4 ft (1.2 m) of snow! After taking the bus tour we took a ride in a glass-bottom boat to see the coral reef but the reef is virtually dead. Apparently, the reef along all the Florida Keys is nearly dead for several reasons but essentially we are the problem.

Sloppy shipbuilding and a hurricane caused the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* to sink near Key West in 1622. It would have been forgotten except that it was carrying gold, silver and emeralds from Spain's conquests in the New World, but the wreck was not found until 1985. The *Mel Fisher Museum* details the search and the treasure they found and that was fascinating but I was surprised and disappointed that the courts allowed him to keep most of it. Both the State and Federal governments made claims since it was in their waters but there was no mention of the original owner, Spain. I thought they would make a claim too, just as the Egyptians and Greeks are trying to recover their treasures from the British Museum.

The highlight of Miami was the Parrot Jungle with a wonderful variety of macaws and other birds, including cockatoos from Australia. Further north at Palm Beach, we spent a wonderful afternoon at the John D. MacArthur State Park getting to understand the fragile ecology of the Florida coast and getting to know two of the wonderful volunteers who ran the park.



A “banyan” tree has hanging roots. It is impossible to see where the tree started. [Bigger.](#)

On Christmas Day we drove back to the Orlando area to see the local attractions, the best of which was Lan's aunt Tuyet. We had a great time at home and away. Lan particularly enjoyed eating proper home-cooked Vietnamese food again and I had the pleasure of getting to know Tuyet, her daughter Khanh and friend Jim. Lan had met Khanh before and we all enjoyed each other's company.

We saw Disney's *Epcot Center* (great if you like crowds and entertainment pretending to be educational) but we were interested to learn that Orlando was a sleepy town until Disney arrived in 1971 and the city has since boomed.



Epcot Center. [Bigger.](#)

The next day we visited the Kennedy Space Center, the base for the moon missions and the current [space shuttle](#) program.



It is hard to capture the scale of the Saturn V rocket in a photograph. [Bigger.](#)

They had a Saturn V moon rocket there and it was truly awesome but we couldn't

get closer than 3 miles (5 km) to the shuttle being prepared on the launch pad. In fact, I had hoped to see a shuttle launch as the original launch date was delayed several times until it was to have been the night we arrived in Orlando. Unfortunately, it was delayed twice more so we missed it.

Cypress Gardens features a water ski show that I remembered from 30 years ago. Two army men came to see the gardens in 1943 and were interested in the new sport of water-skiing and so they asked the family that ran the gardens to do a demonstration. They liked it and asked if they could bring their friends the following weekend, which they did—700 of them! The show has been running ever since. Amongst other things, they also had huge cypress trees that grow partially in the water, beautiful gardens and a butterfly house.



A rare picture with both of us. [Bigger](#).

The surprise of the whole trip was *Splendid China*, which I had not noticed in the guidebook. Tuyet and Jim had been before and encouraged us to see it. If we weren't so tired, we would have seen the replicas of the Great Wall and other famous structures but we just saw the wonderful show of theater and acrobatics.

While we were staying with Tuyet, I read the first third of *In Retrospect*, a book by Robert McNamara on what went wrong in American government during the Vietnam War. He was the Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and so was helping to make many of the crucial decisions—it was depressing reading. He says they never really questioned their assumptions such as the famous "domino" theory, failed to recognize the conflict as primarily nationalistic and then failed to withdraw when it became clear that the war was unwinnable.

We flew home the next day exhausted but knowing we had used our time well and were further delighted when our car

started without hesitation after being left for almost 3 weeks.

America

Enough about us. What about the rest of the country and the world?

The big news in our area this past year was, of course, the shootings at Columbine High School. To me it seems inevitable that these sort of things will happen given the violence that is accepted in TV, movies and video games, the scant attention paid by some parents to their children and the easy access to guns. What I didn't know was how groups of children get victimized and the school authorities don't seem to know or care. Apparently the two boys never ate at the school cafeteria because they were beaten up if they tried. It's easy to see how powerlessness like this leads to resentment and ultimately tragedy. I read that 1.2 million kids go home after school to a house with guns and no parents.

What amazed me was how feeble the response was. Instead of outrage leading to major tightening of gun laws, as was the case after the Dunblane and Port Author massacres, a mild piece of legislation failed to make it through Congress. Most Americans believe the 2nd Amendment of the Constitution prevents any action being taken. This is what it says, in its entirety:

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

I don't believe most Americans know the crucial first half of the sentence though I'll agree it is an awkward sentence. At the time the Constitution was written, there was no national army, so to protect the new nation against the British who were trying to re-impose authority, it was essential to arm the population. The well-regulated militias are now the National Guard and the rest of the armed services. I also think the National Rifle Association (NRA) has now educated people to think of freedom in terms of being allowed to own weapons, not the ability to walk around a city late at night without fear of being attacked by someone, with or without a gun. The latter to me is real freedom. By the NRA's logic, I don't know where the right to bear arms stops as I assume they wouldn't stop me buying a Stinger anti-aircraft missile, or a 155 mm howitzer if I had the money.

While America does have its failings, it also has many things to be very proud of. You'll recall that Serb forces captured three American soldiers during the Kosovo campaign. It wasn't commented on but two of the three had Hispanic names. It was a brilliant demonstration that people from different cultures can live together and can be trusted in matters of national security, a point obviously lost on Mr. Milosovic.

Moving now to bumper stickers. I've seen a lot of them in the last year.

- **COLORADO:**
So much snow. So little time.
- *Tree doctors still make house calls.*
- *This vehicles stops at all garage sales.*
- *Hang up and drive.*
- *I wonder if you'd drive any better if that mobile phone was UP YOUR A__?*
- *Need a tune-up? Join a choir.*
- *Gun control is using both hands*
- *On earth as it is in Texas*
- *I love my job. I love my boss. I am self-employed.*
- *Yes, it is my truck. No, I will not help you move.*
- *Money isn't everything - but it sure keeps the kids in touch.*
- *England forever.*
Scotland a wee bit longer.
- *Visualize whirled peas.*
(There is another that says *Visualize world peace*)
- *On the eighth day, God created beer.*
- *Save the ales. (Instead of whales)*
- *My other car is owned by my ex-wife.*
- *Jesus is coming. Look busy.*
- *I @ the hate state*
(There's a "Please explain".)
- *God is too big to fit in just one religion.*
- *Man is not the only species on the planet - we just act like it.*
- *Human milk for human babies.*
- *I am not worthless. I can always serve as a bad example.*
- *The more you know, the less you need.*
- *I live with fear every day. Sometimes she lets me go fishing.*
- *Leaving Florida? Take a developer with you.*
- *If you @ NY, take I-95 north.*
(I think this was encouraging tourists like us to go away.)

I've also seen some funny quotes:

- *Every time I feel the urge to exercise, I lie down until it goes away.—Mark Twain*

- *A dog will look up to you, a cat will look down at you but a pig will look you in the eye and consider you its equal.*—Winston Churchill
- *Traditionally, most of Australia's imports come from overseas.*—Former Australian cabinet minister Keppel Enderbery

Speed cameras were introduced in Denver last year but they are different to those in Sydney. Instead of photographing the back of the car and just sending the fine to the registered owner, the system here attempts to identify the driver by taking a picture of the front. Obviously, the sudden flash in the driver's eyes brings its danger too.

One of our local electronics stores had a "back-to-school" sale that included mobile phones. I thought it was ridiculous. We bought one, but only for emergency use and it stays in the car. While on the subject, I am pleased to report that Australia is one of just four countries in the world that prohibits driving while talking on a hand-held mobile phone. Apparently you are *four times* more likely to crash if you talk and drive.

I was pleased that the Australian Tax Office let us file our returns electronically last year and they even provided the necessary software. I thought it was an interesting example of the differing views on the role of government. You can get tax software in the US too but you have to pay for it since private companies produce it and you pay more to file electronically. I think it makes sense to have the government provide it free since electronic preparation and filing reduces the time they spend tracing and fixing errors. In the same way of thinking, the teacher of my business class surprised me by referring to England as a "socialist" country. How definitions change depending on where you are! Her argument (and it is a good one) was that many of the vital industries such as telephones, water, electricity and railways are (or now *were*) government owned.

In case you missed it, the sixth billionth person was born on October 12 last year. The UN Population Reference Bureau tells us that, *"In the next minute, 268 babies will be born"* (fortunately not to the same mother). *"In the next minute 98 people will die, so total population growth is 170 people per minute, or almost 90 million per year. That means that every ten years the world's population grows by the equivalent of all the people in China."*

Other things you may have missed:

- *Newsweek* mentioned that annual soft drink consumption has increased from 22.4 US gallons (85 L) per person in 1970 to 56.4 gallons (213 L) in 1998. Meanwhile, the Forest and Paper Association, tells us that total American paper consumption has risen from 86.8 million tons in 1990 to 99.0 million in 1998.
- Mice and rats make up 95% of the *23 million* mammals used in medical research each year.
- Every year in the US, 354,000 children are reported abducted or missing. (Think about that. The entire population of Canberra and then some.) Of this number 98.8% are abducted by family members (ex-spouse, grandparents), 1.12% by family acquaintances (neighbor, babysitter, coach) and just 0.07% are abducted by strangers.
- *"World grain production hovers at just under 2 billion tons per year. How many mouths that can feed depend on how much is eaten directly vs. being fed to livestock, an equation that varies widely by nation. With 2 billions of grain, you can feed 10 billion Indians. Or you can feed 5 billion Italians. Or you can feed 2.5 billion Americans. If we're all eating like Americans, we need another planet, basically."* - Lester Brown, President of the Worldwatch Institute."

The future

I don't know when we might be back in Australia to live but it won't be any time soon. I've given up trying to plan for the future, as it seems our circumstances keep changing but we won't be leaving Denver in the foreseeable future since I've just started my job. I plan to complete a proper degree here rather than just a "half-degree" and Lan is even talking about going to law school. I can also report that Lan has expressed an interest in living in New York sometime in her life and I'm sure we'll go and live in the UK one day.

Well, that's about all for now. Please write to us one way or another, as we do enjoy getting mail.

—Peter & Lan