

Living in America

Differences between America and Australia

Seattle, April 2006 to November 2008

1) Most obviously, the food is very different. High fructose corn syrup is in everything, yoghurt and bread can be sickly sweet, but after a few months you can't taste it any more. Chilli is just soup, it doesn't contain any chilli, and marinara sauce is Neapolitan sauce, it doesn't have any seafood in it. Biscuits are called cookies, they really don't understand scones. Most cereal has marshmallows in it. There is no cordial in supermarkets, but they will sell a couple of sachets of "Crystal Light", a powered cordial. Despite being next to some of the most fertile land in the world, actual fresh food is extremely expensive. All the agriculture is industrial, based on producing the maximum amount of food per unit of time (to get the government subsidies), rather than the cheapest healthiest food. So there is a glut of corn produced using more calories of fossil fuels than comes out in the corn, and a lot of cows feed



antibiotics to counter the sickness they develop when they are force-fed corn. None of it is edible though, so it all goes into extremely cheap fast food, making fresh food a gourmet item. Oh, except pizza - which costs more per slice in the US than it does per pizza in Australia.

2) Bus drivers won't give change.

3) Banks here post out spam mail, dodgy companies pay to include offers with your statements, which doesn't invoke much trust in the integrity of your bank. But the whole banking system is archaic - transferring online between your own bank accounts takes three days to be processed, everyone still uses checking accounts (which you get zero interest for) and write each other checks, and you have to have a separate credit account rather than a debit card that works from your savings. I get a credit-card offer at least once a week.

4) American girls bleach their teeth.

5) Americans are extremely generous (probably to compensate for the total lack of social infrastructure) but don't always direct their generosity in particularly useful ways (eg. \$27 million to build a Creationist Museum in Kentucky). My first week in Seattle I watched a very serious 17 year old girl on CNN who had started up a charity for those poor 17 year old girls in New Orleans who lost their prom dresses to Hurricane Katrina, and their parents can't afford to buy another \$500 prom dress for them to wear. By working really hard and raising money with all of her friends she succeeded in sending an emergency truck full of prom dresses to New Orleans.

6) Public health only kicks in after your health bills have forced you to sell your house and have pushed you into poverty. Health insurance isn't something you get for next to nothing which covers designer glasses - it is a matter of life or death. 47 million Americans have no health insurance (it is really expensive), and a million people every year lose the gamble and become bankrupt due to medical expenses. Even with decent health insurance a trip to the GP to get antibiotics cost me ~\$150.



"Universal health care" is actually considered a bad thing to many Americans. They seem to think it means politicians pick our doctors and tell them what medicine to give us, and don't realise they have lower life expectancies than us. They still have tuberculosis and a high infant mortality too.

7) There are more homeless people than you can imagine, out on street corners begging. At any given time there are around 1 million homeless, every year 3.5 million Americans are homeless at one time or another (more than 1% of the entire population). Especially over-represented are military veterans (23%), African-Americans (49%), and ex-convicts (54%). 22% have severe mental illness, the majority have mental health issues. Oh yes - there is no public mental health support in America at all, unless you are in jail.

8) A lot of people are in jail - one in every 32 American adults is in jail, making up 25% of the world jail population.

9) Kids are entertainment. The big thing in country fairs at the moment is Mutton Busting. Regular rodeos are so blasé,

who wants to see professionals safely at work? Far better to sign a waiver, strap your three-year onto the back of a sheep and see how long they can hold on before the sheep throws them off. Sure, the kids often have tears running down their faces and occasionally get badly injured, but if they win - free movie tickets. For the more sophisticated, they can watch kids being traumatised on cable. "Kid Nation" took 40 kids, aged 8 to 15, and put them in a desert ghost town and told them to run the town by themselves in front of the cameras. Four kids accidentally drank bleach that had been left in an unmarked soft drink bottle, one girl sprained her arm and another got facial burns from boiling grease while trying to cook. They taught the kids a lesson about American society too - the producers assigned each kid a caste at the start of the show, which they could not change. Four kids were selected to be the town council, with the power to award \$20 000 to a kid at the end of each episode. The rest of the kids were divided into four castes - the labourers/cleaners (green team), the cooks (yellow team), the shopkeepers (blue team) and the upper class with no job to do (red team). Of course, the different castes each got different amounts of money to spend.

10) There are hundreds of television stations, but only two or three shows worth watching.

11) There is no social infrastructure. No public toilets and picnic tables in parks or shopping areas or even petrol stations - you have to buy something from Starbucks and get a code. Maybe it is because of the huge homelessness problem in the US - by making a neighbourhood where there are no public facilities you make it a desert for homeless people, who end up crammed into the one or two places that have the bare minimum for them to survive (a bus shelter and toilet).



12) You are never quite sure that the crazy guy shouting on the bus isn't heavily armed.



13) You have no idea how much anything costs. Don't trust price tags, they don't include tax (which varies item to item and state to state). Also tip. Don't bother collecting pennies, you'll never know how much anything costs to enough precision to actually use them. Unless of course you want to melt them down and sell them on the copper market - there is 1.4 cents of copper in each 1 cent piece. All the notes look the same and are made of paper.

14) Their politics is polite on the outside but cut-throat behind the scenes. Don't expect a politician to call other politicians a "conga-line of suck-holes", but massive electoral fraud and rumours of illegitimate black babies is almost expected. They don't have a Queen, but at least half the population looks upon the President as semi-divine and omnipotent.

14) Their politics is polite on the outside but cut-throat behind the scenes. Don't

15) The alcohol laws are really odd - not only do you have to be 21 (and they really enforce it, asking ID from anyone who looks like they could be under 30) but it is sold in odd places. Beer and wine can be bought everywhere, in the supermarkets, 7-11s and servos (but they have to stop sales at 2am or something), but spirits can only be bought at government shop-fronts.

16) Flags. Everywhere. They love their flag.



17) They also love their military. They have 1.4 million active military personal and 1.5 million reserves (nearly 1 in every 20 American adults). Airports have special lounges for US military, many places give active-service military people discounts, and basically anyone in uniform instantly gains respect. The love of the US military is so great that it is often assumed that everything the US government tells the military to do must be okay. The closest the US gets to helping citizens is to military veterans, who get partial aid in education and health care (but not mental health, which is why half of all the homeless Americans are veterans), making it one of the few options for low income youth.

18) They don't tend to take holidays that much - Federal holidays are only automatic for Federal employees, most jobs only give you two weeks a year, and you are strongly encouraged not to take them. They certainly don't take sickies.

American-Australian Translations

They'll complement you on your accent a lot, try to be kind and not mention theirs. They'll be surprised when you say you are from Australia - since we don't say "crikey" like Steve Irwin they assume we are English.



President Teddy Roosevelt was a terrible speller, and gave an executive order in 1906 to make American spelling simpler, such as dropping the "u" in labour, honour, colour and so forth. He also changed "-ise" to "-ize" and wanted to change dropped to dropt, learned to learnt and so forth.

They won't have whipper-snippers, they have "weed-wackers".

What they call a "truck" is really a ute. I'm still not sure what they call actual trucks.

You buy "gas" from a "service station", rather than petrol from a servo.

They call textas "sharpies". You really don't want to hear them pronounce aluminium or acclimate. They pronounce bouy as "boo-ee" not "boy".

They call gumboots "rubber boots", thongs "flip flops" and g strings "thongs". They don't know a dole bludger, feral, yobbo or a bogan.

They don't know what a fortnight is. They don't even have the concept, being paid twice a month rather than every two weeks.

They don't know what busker means - they call them "street performers". An apartment is only called an apartment if you rent it, if you own it it is called a condo.

They have a 25 cent coin called a quarter (the most valuable form of currency in the US, because most apartments don't have a washing machine or drier, so you need the quarters for the building's common machine), and they call the four parts of a football game "quarters". There are four quarters in an academic year and they even call a quarter of a gallon a "quart". But when it comes to using fractions, they always say "one fourth", never "a quarter".

They call lollies "candy" and hundreds-and-thousands "sprinkles". BYO is called a "potluck". Capsicum is "bell pepper", rockmelon is "cantaloupe", porridge is "oatmeal". They think that chips means "crisps". They don't know what soft drinks are, they call them either "soda" or "pop" depending on what part of the country they are from. They've never heard of fritz. They call their main meals an "entree", even though they are bigger than a normal main.

"Lite beer" means low calorie beer. All their beers are low alcohol. They put their beer in a "cooler" instead of an esky. They don't have stubbies or long necks, and don't know the difference between a tiddle and a night, or a pony, a middie, a butcher, a schooner, a pot and a pint. They don't know what a bottle-o or a bottle shop is, and don't realise that a hotel is a pub. They couldn't tell you what grog, cleanskin or goon is. Actually, they have an extremely limited vocabulary for all things related to alcohol compared to us.

They don't understand cranky or crook.



They call chemists "drug stores". They don't abbreviate university into uni. They've never been to woop woop.

You'll start to notice that you shorten everything and add an "e" on the end of it when people start in bewilderment. No brekkie, dinky, barbie, daggy, tanty, pokey, pressie, chockie, trackies (or trackie daks), truckie, yewy, vegies or mozzie. There is also no sickie, but that is because no one ever takes days off.

They don't know what an ambo is - and it is not because of their lack of health care, they call them "ambulance drivers".

They don't understand the subtle and varied meanings that bastard and bugger can have. They also think that calling a good friend a bastard is mean.

They call their super "401(k)". Catchy name.

They don't know that a slippery dip is a slide, but they call a seesaw a teeter totter.

City of Roses, the Beaver State

31/5/2007 Portland

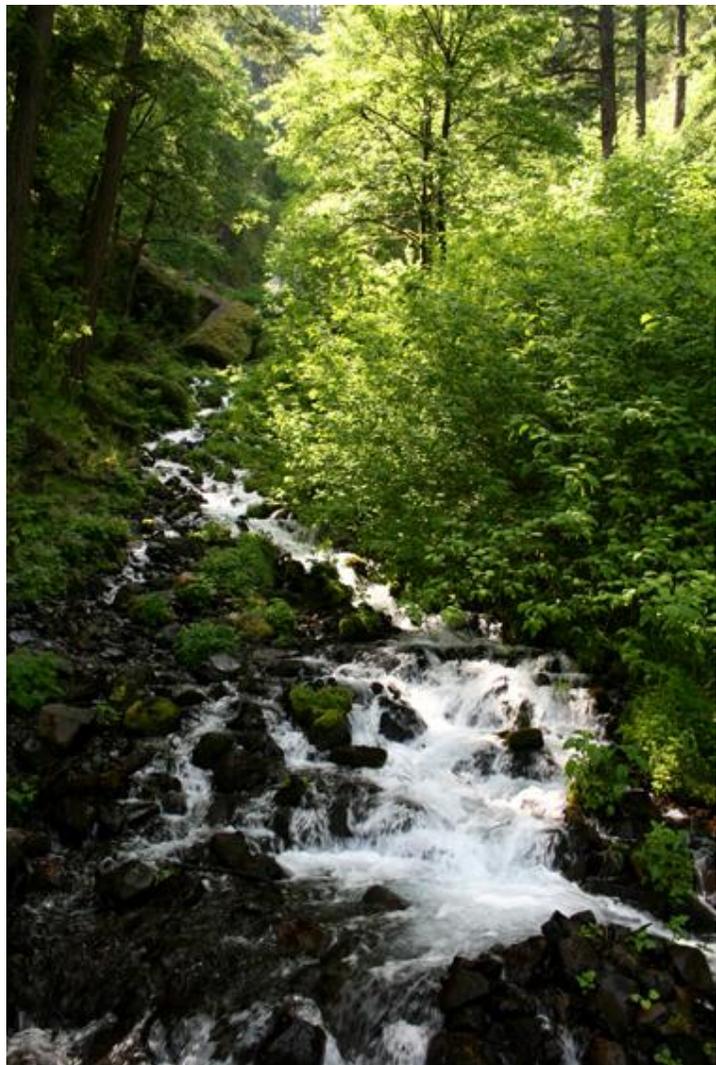
To celebrate much good news, we spent last weekend in Oregon. We started by catching the train Friday night from Seattle to Portland, with a long delay due to a fallen tree on the tracks. We pulled into the city at Union Station, which was opened on Valentine's Day 1896, and is the oldest continually operating train station in the US, still with the original hand-wound clocks.

Portland was incorporated in 1851, after being founded by Lovejoy and Pettygrove. They actually flipped a penny over what to call the site - Lovejoy wanted to call it Boston (after his hometown), while Pettygrove wanted Portland (after his hometown). They still have the original penny in the Oregon History Centre. We found Portland to be a really liveable city, easy to walk around (with half-sized city blocks) and very community minded with lots of parks and public art. They provide good services too, such as free take-and-leave yellow bikes and good public transport (including the deepest subway station in North America, the 79m deep Washington Park MAX stop). Portland is notable for having more microbrews (and, I'm guessing, tattoos) per capita than any city in the US, making self-serve petrol illegal, and allowing public nudity. Its birthday is the 6th of April.

Columbia River

We spent Saturday on a tour along the Columbia River Gorge and Mt Hood. The Columbia River is the fourth largest, by volume and length (1954km), river in the US, the only to cut through the Cascades (starting in the Selkirk Mountains of British Columbia) and the largest in the Americas to flow into the Pacific. Our guide told us about the history of the region, very amusingly (and also sadly) prefacing every comment with "according to geologists" (sigh... even in liberal Portland). The Gorge formed 20 000 years ago when the lake covering 8000 square kilometres of Montana (and 600 metres deep) burst out of its ice-dam and rushed down the river in a flood 370 metres high, pushing 2000 cubic kilometres of water down the river to carve out the Gorge.

Our guide was very impressed with the highway, which was built by Samuel Lancaster between 1913 and 1922. He built the highway to be very scenic, topping at lookouts and waterfalls. Our first stop was Vista House, built in 1917 as a pit-stop on the scenic highway, where we saw our first Turkey Buzzard hovering overhead. After Vista House we plunged into the Douglas Fir rainforest. Our next stop was the first of



many waterfalls, Latourell Falls (76 metres high).

The next waterfall we visited was Multnomah Falls. At 189 metres it is the second tallest year-round waterfall in the US after Yosemite Falls. We also visited the Horsetail falls, named as such because of the way it weaves in the wind.

Along the Columbia River we stopped to see Beacon Rock, standing in the middle of the river. At 850



feet high, it is the second highest free-standing monolith in the world (after the rock of Gibraltar).

For lunch we went to the classy joint the *Char Burger* with their thoughtlessly offensive mascot, Chief Char. It was painfully full of Americana and stereotypes, but we had nice burgers and the view out over the Columbia River was fantastic. It was just by the Cascade Locks, where the level of the river was raised 60 feet, to

fuel a hydroelectric dam and to cover over the rapids in the region. The locks did force them to raise the Bridge of the Gods though, because it was below the new waterline.

We drove inland from the Cascade Locks into the orchards of the Hood valley. The area was beautiful and fertile, but sadly enough their technique focussed on turning oil, rather than sunlight, into fruit, with each peach tree having a small propane burner to stop damage by frost, and powered windmills to keep the air moving over the crop. The area makes one million boxes of fruit each year, with the advantage that the high altitude retard the growth, giving fruit later into the season.

Once we were over the peak of the Cascades the foliage changed from Douglas Fir to Ponderosa Pine (better able to grow in the drier conditions), with Alders in areas of secondary growth. We wove up to Mt Hood, getting many peaks of her as we wove through the mountains. Mt Hood (3429m) is the second most climbed mountain in the world (after Mt Fuji). We got to walk over the snow together, look up to the craggy mountain (framed with an American flag - you can never forget which country you are in here) or down the valley to the tree-line, and explore Timberline Lodge.

Timberline Lodge was built in 1937 and dedicated by President Roosevelt. The lodge was beautiful inside, with elaborate animal carvings and iron-work on every surface, and an enormous multi-level fireplace warming the whole building.



Portland

In the evening we looked around Portland. The 1% for art rule (1% of all building projects must be spent on public art) has certainly endowed the city with great sculptures all over. We started at the Pioneer Courthouse Square (the oldest public building in the Northwest, built in 1869), which contains a weather sphere to give forecasts - Helia indicates a clear day, a dragon shows it will be stormy, and a Great Blue Heron indicates rain.

Portland has over 700 parks, including Mt Tabor, the only dormant volcano within city limits and Forest Park (the largest city park in the US at 5000 acres, complete with elk and black bear). Our favourite park, however, must have been Mills End Park, which at 60cm wide is the smallest park in the world.

To top off an excellent day we watched *Pirate of the Caribbean* in a very comfy cinema (every chair was a reclining couch). A fantastic movie - "do you think he plans it all in advance, or just makes it up as he goes along?"



The coast

Sunday we went on another tour, this time down to the Oregon coast. Our most interesting stop on the way (safely surpassing the pseudo-historical logging Camp 18) was the Kloutcha Creek Giant, the largest Sitka Spruce in the US (once the tallest, but the top crashed down in a storm, still the largest biomass). The tree is the oldest living thing in Oregon at 750 years old, and is 61 metres tall, 3.6 metres in diameter and 1.4 metres in diameter. It is too unstable to walk under it (although considering we were allowed to walk within 61 metres of it, it can't have been that unsafe), but its smaller neighbour was largest enough to walk under the root system without ducking.



After the Sitka Spruce we made it to Canon beach on the coast. We had lunch in the small town, then walked along Canon beach down to Haystack rock. The coast was beautiful and rugged, but being used to Australian beaches didn't quite live up to the hype.

After Canon beach we wove down the coastal highway to Tillamook Bay. Our only visit was to the Tillamook cheese factory, where we tasted some cheese and ice-cream (I had marionberry icecream in a

cone made from choc-chip cookies, interestingly Marion Berries were invented in Oregon by crossing blackberries to logan berries). We also learnt the interesting fact that every year a dairy cow turns 15 000 kg of food and 48 000 litres of water into 7500 litres of milk. More gruesomely, each one of those litres of milk takes 320 litres of blood passing through the udder.

On our trip back to Portland we passed many agricultural farming areas, including blueberries (Oregon is the largest producer of blueberries in the US, the biggest purchaser is the Federal government to turn them into die to stamp meat with "FDA approved") and baby Christmas trees (again, Oregon is the largest exporter).

Portland

We spent another evening exploring Portland's public art. Today was for bronze animals, we played with bronze bears, beavers, ducks, otters and dears on the sidewalk.

We walked through Portland and looked at some beautiful old churches and museums, the old medical and dental building, and the central library inscribed with the names of famous philosophers, authors and leaders. We walked along Park Avenue, leafy green with many statues and fountains, including the Bronze Elk fountain, built as a water trough for city horses and still the primary watering hole for the Portland mounted police, and a fountains built for dogs to drink from (plus of course the many bubblers built to provide fresh water to the early residents and spur the 25% decrease in beer drinking).



We also found Portlandia on the Portland building. At 12 metres tall and 6 tonnes Portlandia is the second largest hammered copper statue in the US, but unlike her larger cousin she is based on Lady Commerce rather than Lady Liberty (I'm still unsure as to why Lady Commerce needs a trident). It was made in Washington DC by Raymond J Kaskey, then dissembled and transported to Portland by train in eight pieces in 1985. It is a magnificent statue, but rather hidden away.

We had a simply amazing dinner at Higgens, before an early night's sleep.

Monday morning we spent walking around the old town of Portland, starting with breakfast at Bijou. We didn't get to see them, but the old town sits atop a network of tunnels. Unlike Seattle, the tunnels were purpose built, and were actively used from 1850 to 1941 to Shanghai sailors. With 1500 people per year sent into slavery, Portland became known as the Unheavenly City and the Forbidden City. The old town also includes China town and the Chinese Gardens.



We also saw the old federal building and more public art, my favourite of which were the Chinese elephants.

Finally we visited the Pearl district, with Powell's City of Books (the largest independent bookstore in the US), beautiful condos, and tiny parks where little children diligently tried to refill the fluctuating pool with a small cup. Portland is a genuinely lovable city.

The Inside Passage

13/6/2007 Inside Passage, Alaska

This weekend we headed up to Alaska to cruise the Inside Passage. The trip started out well, with our hotel in Vancouver sharing a building with IHOP, making someone very happy. Our waitress Monica was charming, and made sure I didn't miss out on the final "drops of happiness" in the beer bottle. Friday morning we flew up to Prince Rupert, managing to hang on to our seats when they started kicking people off (the floods that cut Prince Rupert off by land means the plane had to fly with more fuel than normal to be able to make it back).



Our first taste of wildlife came about ten seconds after hopping off the ferry from the airport to Prince Rupert - sitting on the rocks only metres below us was a bald eagle, with many others circling overhead. With their scavenger lifestyle, Bald Eagles up in Alaska and BC were as common as seagulls, and filling pretty much the same niche.

We didn't stay in BC for very long, we met Russell and Mandy and hopped on the ferry, the M/V Columbia, that was to be our home for the next few days. We had a long day to explore the ferry, which had a great observation lounge at the bow of the ship, and a deck overlooking the stern. We had a few beers in the cocktail lounge, some of us took naps, wrote a few postcards, and caught up with Russell and Mandy. The ferry had a nature guide, who broke up the day with ten minute talks about the area. One talk was about the different types of salmon - sockeye (red), chum (dog), pink (humpback), silver (coho) and king (chinook). The salmon are the main reason why the pacific northwest is so rich - their lifestyle causes a massive transfer of nutrients from the ocean inland. When they leave the streams they weigh only a few grams, but for their terminal return they weigh 10kg of rich nutrients. These salmon provide 70% of the nutrients for surrounding foliage, and when there are bears around the effect of salmon can travel a long way from shore. A single bear will remove 150 kilos of salmon from a stream in a day, move it far inland, and then only eat a quarter of it.

The first stop of the ferry after Prince Rupert was Ketchikan, Alaska. We hopped off for a small walk around, where we found that the ravens had a weirdly melodic and metallic call, in addition to the normal caw. After Ketchikan we met Daniel, who was a linguistics Masters student from Toronto who goes up to Petersburg every summer to work in a cannery, to earn the money for his studies. It seemed like most people were using the ferry as public transport rather than sightseeing. We had a few more beers with Daniel, who was great to talk to (and kept on laughing at our Australian-ness) and finally went to bed (well... sleeping bags on the deck) at sunset, which was about eleven o'clock and lasted for an hour.



Sunrise was about 2:30am, so there wasn't too much sleep. We stopped at Wrangle about midnight, then at Petersburg at 5am.



The mountains here were much higher than in the lower passages of the Inside Passage. The entire region formed 250 million years ago when the North American continent changed direction, creating the San Andreas fault line along the Pacific coast. The lateral shifts created cracks running along the coastline, and during ice ages (most recently the Wisconsin glaciation 10-70 thousand years ago) the glaciers flowed along the cracks, carving out valleys. The increased water level at the end of the ice age turned the area into a series of fjords and islands. It is remarkable at how well the landscape reflects the geology - when we looked at the mountains surrounding us, all mountains below 6000 metres (the height of the ice-fields) are rounded and smooth, while all mountains above 6000 metres (immune to the erosion by glaciers) are still sharp and jagged.

In the afternoon we docked at Kake (the home of Alaska's tallest totem pole).

The final stretch of the ferry was Kake to Juneau, through Stevens Passage. This was the richest part of the trip for wildlife. At times we were seeing something every five minutes - a sea lion that stuck its head up as we passed, a pod of orca, harbour porpoises, Dall's porpoise, or a humpback whale. The humpback whales in the Inside Passage have a unique technique of fishing - a group of a dozen whales swim in circles around a school of fish releasing bubbles while others make vocalisations, to encircle the fish in a bubble-net that they won't cross. They make the circle tighter and tighter, then they all swim up through the bottom of the net with open mouths, and decimate the school.





Our final port was Juneau. We had good Mexican for dinner, then eventually found our way to our log cabin for the night (which took much effort). While we hadn't done much for the past few days it was good to sleep in a bed in a dark room, and even better to be able to wake up, and watch Bald Eagles on the lake. There were four or five around our cabin, including one which perched on the tree next to our cabin until it was chased away by a brave raven. We

made scrambled eggs for breakfast, then headed off to Mendenhall Glacier, originally known as Sitaantaagu ("the Glacier Behind the Town") or Aak'wtaaksit ("the Glacier Behind the Little Lake") by the Tlingit people.

Russell and Mandy had to hop back on the ferry after the glacier, so we had the rest of the day to explore Juneau. The town is in a spectacular setting, with the mountains and the fjords, but is actually quite ugly. The outer parts have charming log cabins, Nordic houses and stairwell roads, but the inside is all ugly modern buildings and roads, with no parks or trails (actually the whole area is impossible for pedestrians). The



waterfront is the worst - it looks more like Disneyland than a real town. I guess it is all due to the Cruise ships, which every year drop off one million tourists (who don't walk any further than the waterfront), for a town of only 30 000, equivalent to doubling the size of the town with new tourists every ten days.

We took the tram up to Mount Roberts, where we got to walk through the hemlock and spruce forest (threaded with Witch's hair lichen). We reached the tree line and saw a martin, before watching a very sanitised movie about the Tlingit people followed by offensive questions ("are you Eskimos?" "How many of you are there left?").

We finished up the day in the Silverbow, eating excellent bagels and taking turns to walk around (there was no luggage storage facility for us to leave our bag after the nice girl at the information centre left her shift). After my shift I got to see the Alaska State Building and St Nicholas, a Russian Orthodox Church built in 1894.



Fremont solstice parade

16/6/2007 Seattle

Yesterday we had great fun at the Fremont Solstice Parade, the largest clothing optional parade in the world.

The parade started with the body-painted cyclists. It was actually a fantastic display, some had obviously been planning their costumes for months (others, I think, just took off their clothes on the day). My favourites were the "Where's Wally" team and the dragon tandem bike, but there were many fantastic displays.



Plenty of floats came afterwards, the leather boys BBQ, Bush and co. war criminals, Egyptian pyramid builders, Ents, corporate monsters of greed, recyclers, solstice hugs, and plenty more. It was easily the best parade that I have ever seen, even better because it is organised by the community.

Of course there were a few wackos at the parade with signs cursing us all, yelling into bullhorns that we were going to hell. I'm not sure exactly where in the Bible it says "God hates Parades" (although it is vaguely consistent), so we'll just have to consider these people successful examples of being brainwashed into hating their own body and sexuality, and being spiteful that others still have the capacity to enjoy themselves. Still, it takes an extra *something* special to take up a bullhorn and yell "you are going to be set on fire for eternity" at the float of five year-old girls on unicycles wearing fairy costumes. At least we live in a city liberal enough that everyone deliberately started cheering whenever he raised the bullhorn, to drown him out.



An enormous street fair afterwards, with tens of thousands of people, and a BBQ with friends. A day well spent.



Halloween
27/10/2007 Seattle

I think Halloween displays all the best traits of Americans.

The fact that Americans celebrate a heavily pagan festival at all says a lot - while many Americans are deeply religious, before that they are anti-authoritarian. If they enjoy something that their religion frowns upon they either ignore authority, or start up a new religion which allows it. American Catholics are more likely to support contraception use and the death penalty than other Catholics. Northern Baptists that dislike their church tolerating homosexuality just become Southern Baptists. This might be why much of the rest of developed world has become secular (when their ethics came into conflict with their religion, they gave up their religion), while America is still so religious (conflict? just start a new religion that suits you). So even heavily religious Americans are willing to throw themselves into this pagan festival.



And they really do throw themselves into it. 80% of adults give out candy and 93% of children go trick-or-treating. It is the one event where America seems like a community - kids will wander the neighbourhood and be greeted warmly by strangers with compliments and gifts. People go to a huge amount of effort, far more than Australians do for any holiday, taking months to decorate their houses, carve pumpkins, and set up elaborate garden displays. A lot of people hand-make costumes, planning months in advance.

We celebrated our first Halloween with our dear friends Luke and Shyla. We

went to a party in Pioneer Square hosted by Shyla's work friends. The entire apartment was decked out for Halloween, down to dry ice in the drinks and fake spider-webs over the lampshades. Everyone was so happy and having so much fun, we stayed out partying until 4am, and had an absolute ball, one of the best nights out I've ever had.

During Halloween Americans are generous with their time and money to friends and strangers alike. They let their hair down and really throw themselves into enjoying life, with an energetic zest that is uniquely American.

The danger of religion and nationalism to America today

1/11/2007 Seattle

There are signs everywhere that segments of America are becoming increasingly hostile towards Muslims. The hostility was deeply embedded into the American psyche by the religion of those individuals who attacked the United States on September the 11th. These attacks highlighted two of the dangers of religion. The first is the obvious one, religion can induce people to commit horrendous actions, because it places the authority of a God over that of human morality. To the extent that the terrorists were guided by faith, religion does indeed have much to answer for. The second danger of religion is less obvious and more insidious.

Religion is used as a boundary between in-groups and out-groups. The terrorists were not directly harmed by the United States, rather they identified themselves as part of an in-group, Islam, which they perceived as under attack. Likewise, the targets were not those directly responsible for the United States foreign policy, but rather those people who self-identified as the in-group, Americans, who included those in power. In effect, religion and nationalism neatly divided the world into "us" and "them", and 3000 innocents tragically died.

It is so important for us to not fall into this trap of using in-groups and out-groups to vent rage. If we move from anger towards terrorists who identify themselves as Muslim to anger towards all who identify themselves as Muslim, we plunge into a war which will not cease. Israel and Palestine, two countries thrown into conflict by inept distribution of land by the great powers, demonstrate this principle all too well. The self-identifiers are clear, Jewish vs Muslim, Israeli vs Palestinians. An

Israeli sees their country under attack by suicide bombers who are Muslims and Palestinian. Their anger is directed at all who they perceive as being part of these in-groups, and injustices are done, people are deprived of land and water, missiles kill innocents. One of those who identify themselves as Muslims and Palestinians blame all those who are Jewish or Israeli, and a rocket or suicide attack can be non-specifically aimed into Israel. The cycle of conflict gets deeper. The conflict also gets wider, non-Palestinians Muslims pick up the anti-Israeli hatred, Israel-aligned Westerners blame all Muslims. The conflict causes internal fractures, the Deputy Prime Minister of Israel, Avigdor Lieberman, advocates stripping citizenship from those who are both Israeli and Muslim.

Is this happening in America today? Have religious lines drawn simple “us” and “them” groups, that allow a fear of a few extremists to find vent in hostility towards all those who identify with that religion? There are dangerous signs that this is indeed happening. At the level of the government, Guantanamo Bay is dangerously skirting the edge of the Constitution. One of the great clauses of the US Constitution is that it guarantees that all those within the US jurisdiction are granted all the rights and protections of the US Constitution, with only the right to vote being reserved for citizens. Yet Guantanamo inmates have not been granted access to a fair and speedy trial. This possible Constitutional violation has created barely a murmur, with many citizens willing to assume that the government will act in good faith, and only hold those who deserve it. Of course, the important question, besides the personal rights of those imprisoned, is how can we know the government is holding those who are guilty without judicial oversight to analyse the evidence?



Of 775 detainees who have been brought to Guantanamo, 340 have been released and another 110 have been labelled as ready for release. In the government’s own assessment, half of all the prisoners, some kept in isolation for years, are either innocent or pose no significant threat. In light of this, should we be wonder about the basis on which the government is committing violations of human rights and the US Constitution? Should we consider the case of Khalid El-Masri, a German arrested while on holiday in

Macedonia? El-Masri had the misfortune to have the same name as an al-Qaeda operative, and he spent two months in a CIA prison in Afghanistan, during which time he claims he was tortured. The CIA finally released El-Masri and have admitted wrongful imprisonment, but no apology or compensation has occurred and there have been active efforts to keep the news profile of this case low. Or perhaps we should consider the case of Brandon Mayfield? An American Muslim lawyer who was arrested as a suspect for the Madrid attacks based on a partial fingerprint match. He was held for two weeks before the FBI reanalysed the evidence and found it to be lacking. In this case an apology and compensation ensued, and most tellingly the FBI admitted that Mayfield’s religion contributed to the investigator overriding the poor quality of the fingerprint match. Truly religion has become a factor for discrimination in the current Administration.

Is it only the government at fault? There are symptoms of a growing hostility in the American people, not directed at those who pose a threat to America, but more broadly to all those in the same religious

in-group. Six Imams were removed from a flight after some passengers felt threatened by their prayer. Raed Jarrar was forced to cover up his shirt (with Arabic writing on it) at JFK airport. It is likely in both cases that the people in question deliberately pushed the boundary to draw controversy, but that does not excuse the response in either case. Or take the case of Congressman-elect Keith Ellison. The first Muslim elected to government, like all Representatives he will be formally sworn in under the Constitution. Like many Representatives, he will choose to follow this with a non-formal photo-op where he swears an oath on a book he considers holy. For a number of Americans, the use of the Koran instead of the Bible in a photo-op is creating outrage. The American Family Association is lobbying to ban the use of any book other than the Bible, Dennis Prager led an attack on Keith Ellison, which garnered a surprising level of support, considering even a simple level of understanding of American history demonstrates that the United States was not founded on Christianity, but rather on secular enlightenment. We had the situation where a journalist had the audacity to ask Keith Ellison to prove that he was not an enemy of the United States.



This discrimination against groups based merely on their religion does not only fuel hostility in Muslim countries, it threatens to rip America apart from within. When Jerry Klein suggested on his talkshow that all Muslims in the United States should be identified with a crescent-shape tattoo or a distinctive arm band, his phone-lines jammed with responses. Many were offended at the very suggestion, and a disturbing number were vocally supportive, and went even further "What good is identifying them? You have to set up encampments like during World War Two with the Japanese and Germans." Klein deliberately manipulated his audience to create controversy, and in all likelihood carefully selected respondents which fuelled it further. However these are not isolated views. A Gallup Poll taken soon after found that 40% of Americans admitted to at least some prejudice against Muslims, 40% favoured American Muslims to be forced to carry a special ID, a third believed that American Muslims were sympathetic to al-Qaeda, and 22% said they would not want to live next door to a Muslim.

The subtle threat of religion is clear – America is starting to fracture down religious lines, where people can despise each other to the point of violating their rights, simply due to their religion. On the global scale both religion and nationalism create boundaries, drawing artificial lines allowing extremists on both sides to say “you are either with us or you are against us”. The why is no mystery. Most religions teach that their adherents are superior in the eyes of an absolute power. Nationalism too teaches that members of your own country are worth more than foreigners, how many Rwandans is one American worth? During the 1994 genocide US Lieutenant General Daniel Schroeder, US Commander of the joint task force on Rwanda, said “one American causality is worth about 85,000 Rwandan dead”.

In a world where the richest two percent of adults own half the world’s wealth, and the poorest fifty percent of adults own one percent of the world’s wealth (the latest figures from the World Institute for Development Economics Research), we need to stop evaluating people in terms of whether they share a religion or nationality with us, and start treating each human being as being intrinsically equal. The insidious “us” and “them” mentality propagated by religion and nationalism is a xenophobic remnant which degrades us all.

A weekend in San Francisco

2/12/2007 San Francisco

We flew down to San Francisco on Friday morning for my British citizenship ceremony. The Consulate General got up and said that he'll assume we know all about the United Kingdom, and really the only thing he wanted us to know was the right way to hang up the Union Jack. Really it is such a silly idea for a country to have an almost symmetrical flag where the sign of distress is to hang the flag upside down. We all then had to pledge our allegiance to the Queens and the rights and responsibilities of being a British citizen. Of the twenty or so of us there, one kid swore an oath, while everyone else made an affirmation - a surprisingly ratio in the US, but a very European one. We then had tea and biscuits with the Consulate General.



After the ceremony we walked down to the wharves and up into China town. We saw fortune cookies being made, and bought some adult fortune cookies to the delight of my lab when we got back to Seattle. That evening we had dinner on Nob Hill, and then went on a vampire tour. The tour was performed by a lady dressed up as a vampire, who walked us around Nob Hill pointing at interesting places and describing the local history, all the while pretending that all the significant characters in San Francisco were vampires, and the whole city revolved around Count Dracula. It was entertaining in parts (Lydia was cranky at her dismissal of Buffy), but forced and painful in other parts. My favourite part of the tour was when she was talking about the Pacific-Union Club. It is a very Republican club, and when the Democrats have conventions in San Francisco they have them in the Fairmont Hotel, next to the Pacific-Union club, "because it is the most liberal hotel in the city". During conventions the Pacific-Union Club closes the curtains of all of the windows in the club, so they don't have to see Democrats (presumably they go through San Francisco with blindfolds on). When I asked

how a hotel could be considered liberal, she said "well, they allow pets inside, and also once I was taking a tour and a lady fell down and cut her knee - well the people in the hotel fixed her up with a first aid kit for free!" Yep - free health care, sounds liberal by US standards.

Saturday was shopping and a trip to Alcatraz, and then on Sunday we hired bikes and rode over the Golden Gate bridge. A very enjoyable weekend.



American innovations

7/12/2007 Seattle

1859 - Nathan Ames from Massachusetts patents the first escalator, now the US has more than 30 000 escalators and 90 billion riders each year.

1983 - Lanny Potts from Oklahoma invents the StairMaster5000, so people can drive to the gym and work off the calories they gained from riding on escalators for the previous 124 years.

1957 - Richard Marshall from Illinois discovers the chemical reaction to produce high fructose corn syrup, the average American now consumed 28.4 kg (63 pounds) of high fructose corn syrup every year.

1997 - Karen Miller-Kovach from New York invents the Weight-Watchers formula to allow Americans to count the extra pounds they have put on from 40 years of eating high fructose corn syrup.

Snow in Seattle

15/1/2008 Seattle

Last night an inch of snow fell lightly onto Seattle. I love the way snow feels when you walk across it, the reassuring crunch under your shoe, the sense of the exotic. I also love the way it quickly leaves the roads and footpaths, but gives a pretty white cover over the rooftops, and decorates the bushes in people's gardens, giving the city such a beautiful veil. I don't love what snow does to Seattle's transport network.



Being from Australia, I don't really know much about snow, so I can't be too quick to judge. Just based on physics though, I would have guessed that snow falling onto roads covered with water from a heavy rain followed by a night of sub-zero temperatures might result in a layer of ice covering the roads. From the frantic noises outside, not everyone came to the same conclusions.

One after another, the cars start driving up 40th Avenue, reach the hill, sit their with the wheels uselessly spinning, then the car starts slowly gliding backwards down the hill, wheels motionless as they serenely wave goodbye to friction. It is not a busy road, so there have been no crashes so far, but I wonder just what makes these people continue trying to drive? Doesn't the fact that they have no control over their car bother them? Or will they honestly be surprised when they have an accident? There have already been a dozen car accidents today. Unlike other northern cities, Seattle only snows once or twice a year. Still, can't everyone remember back to when this happened last year?

I'm waiting at home for a little while this morning. The morning buses also seem to be surprised at the ice, reaching the hill on 40th before turning back to the depot to go and get chains fitted.

The Mile High City

29/1/2008 Denver

I was surprised flying into Denver at how flat the area was, a large plateau rather than mountains. Denver airport was slightly odd, with a lady in a cowboy vest and hat greeting visitors, and bars of country music played in the airport train in lieu of beeping for the opening and closing of doors. For my shuttle to Keystone I sat next to a chatty guy from Georgia who invented a machine to weave coloured Astroturf in logos for the Superbowl, and his friend an alternative medicines salesman who thought that multiple sclerosis was due to bad diet.

We climbed up into the mountains. Oddly the low altitudes look far less lush than the high altitudes, where the dead grass and bushes are covered by snow, leaving only the pines and aspens sticking out.

I settled into the Inn at Keystone, then set out to explore the snow. The staff at the Inn told me that the walking trails were covered waist deep in snow, but I could catch a bus to the adventure centre and hire snowshoes. I did so, but they only hired skates, and directed me to the Nordic Centre. The Nordic Centre was closing for the day, but told me helpfully that the walking trails around the Inn were ploughed so I could do them in my boots.



The trail was beautiful, the lake frozen over and the river reduced to a trickle with snow banks several metres deep. The houses look like they are covered in icing, and there are ice sculptures outside the shops. With the sun setting the snow becomes a deep blue and the sky a faint pink. I am now in a warm bar. If Lydia was here she would approve of the open fire, and would be torn over the drinks menu - should she order the Snuggler (peppermint schnapps and hot chocolate) or Flannel PJs (butterscotch schnapps, chocolate liqueur and coffee)?

Conferencing at Keystone

3/2/2008 *Keystone, Colorado*

I had a really good week at Keystone. I enjoy conferences quite a lot, getting to hear about interesting science and think up new experiments, talking to other scientists over a few beers and catching up with old friends. It was so good to see Sylvie again, it has been almost four years since I last saw her in Montreal. Sylvie brought along her student Veronique (my lab sister) and we all had a lot of fun together. We went ice-skating together, Veronique and I went snow-shoeing, we chatted about their results and Sylvie tried to convince me to move to Montreal. It was also good to see Chris again and to hear Jeff Bluestone give a talk about the same Foxp3Cre x Dicerflx data that I have. We finished up the conference with a really fun night at the bar playing air-hockey, until the belligerent waitress refused to accept Sylvie's Canadian driver's licence as a form of ID.

The snow was beautiful up in the mountains, and I enjoyed the hike a lot. We saw the snow trail of an elk and a ermine, and we saw a squirrel scamper from one tree to another. Still, the altitude was really tough, the cold sucked all the moisture out of the air, so I had mostly sleepless nights. I'm glad I got to see the mountains, but I don't think I'd come back to Keystone, especially if I wasn't going to see Sylvie.

Barack Obama

8/2/2008 *Seattle*

Hillary was in town last night, I tried to go to that but they had it out in the docklands and the outdoors venue was too cold (usually windy weather), so they had to move it indoors and could only let 5000 people in.

Today I went really early to Key Arena with Luke to line up for Obama. The public transport system was chaos with 21 000 people, even hours before and hours after bus after bus was

packed full. I couldn't believe the security around the event - they told people no backpacks, but didn't bother to search anyone (and everyone was wearing heavy coats) or even have a metal detector.

Considering we sat there for hours until he turned up they had plenty of time to do decent security checks on the way in. Fine in Seattle, but I hope he gets better security in other parts of America.



The organisers certainly didn't earn their pay - leaving a bunch of alternative Seattlites for hours with nothing but bad country music playing. The governor came out and endorsed Barack, she made a nauseating speech about Obama remembering Seattle's planes and apples, seemed to just want to have a bit of his popularity rub off onto her.

It is a good crowd for Obama, he has huge support among young professionals who are the most likely to turn out for events (and to caucus for that matter - Hillary's support among the middle and lower class workers does not translate as well at caucuses). From the support for Obama today and the Seattle demographics this state is a sure thing for Obama tomorrow. It is so easy to feel good about Obama's candidacy, he has overcome so many odds to get where he is, but doesn't seem bitter at all about his life experiences.

So Obama was a great speaker. He talked about the excitement of voting without George W. Bush being on the ballot, he talked about how awful it was watching his mother die of cancer while having to struggle through the insurance forms. He said he would fix health care within his first term of office, and end the war in Iraq in 2009. He was happy to directly attack the judgement of John McCain, and said he wanted to work to secure nuclear weapons and start to talk to America's enemies. He noted that despite Bush's policy, millions of children had been left behind, and that was unacceptable in America. He said he would close Gitmo, guaranteeing a fair trial, and he would ban torture. Hardly revolutionary stuff at any other time in American history, but today it was greeted by wild applause.

A girl in the crowd at the front fainted and he threw her his water bottle and sent security down there to help get her out of the crowd. He addressed his weaknesses, said some people are surprised that he is going for the job so young, why doesn't he go and get experience in Washington DC and have the hope baked out of him. His answer was that America needs him now, and not in twenty years time. He said that some people thought hope and inspiration were great, but not enough. He answered that hope was not blind optimism, and he understood how hard it was but the vision was essential if he was to move there. He kept on reiterating that he was against the war from the start, and stated that America needs to regain its moral position in the world.



Overall I was fairly impressed. There were a lot of school students in the crowd, and they didn't really seem to listen to him, just wanting to bask in his fame. His aspirations are great, he gives an inspirational speech, but I think that now a lot of his popularity and fame is based on his popularity and fame, rather than being hard earned with policy detail. But he is an amazing candidate, and to have Paris Hilton-style fame thrown on top of that just adds to his ability. He gave a few bits of policy, \$4000 to children per year for education, and in return they need to give back service to the community, and tax breaks to seniors earning less than \$55 000/year. Mostly though it was feel-good type of stuff, we are bringing change, need to work from the bottom, etc etc. There were a few veiled snipes at Hillary, but he never directly attacked her and essentially gave a positive message.

I'm not really convinced that Obama is a better candidate than Hillary. Hillary has far more policy detail, while Obama is better at conveying inspiration over his goals, but essentially on policy points they are identical. In terms of symbolism, both Obama and Hillary are ground breaking, Obama being the first to have a chance to break through institutional racism in this country, Hillary succeeding against the less vicious but more persuasive sexism that is alive and well in the form of promoting "traditional families". At the moment they are neck and neck in the primaries, I think Hillary has the advantage of greater name recognition, but Obama has the advantage that his core demographic are far more likely to be politically active enough to vote in the primaries than Hillary's core demographic is.

In a general election they match up pretty much equally against McCain, and so far twice the number of Democrats have voted in the primaries than Republicans have. Obama has the advantage that he will bring out the youth vote, and in numbers that have never voted before, and will be competitive with the independents. Hillary has the advantage that she will bring over the Latino vote, a growing voting block and one that McCain has good relations with, and can pinch some older women from the Republicans. Really the candidates are identical, and Obama's gift with PR negates out Hillary's knack with politics, putting them dead even. Both Hillary and Obama would be amazing Presidents, and now more than ever America needs an amazing President. I still hope for a joint ticket with Hillary/Obama, because uniting America will have to start with uniting the Democratic party, and the combination of Hillary's political prowess and Obama's oratory would smash the Republicans and give America a chance at regaining its position in the world.

Snow-shoeing in the Cascades

10/2/2008 Cascade Mountains, Washington

We spent today up in the Cascades snow-shoeing. We really should have done this long before now, but we hadn't got around to it before. So when we saw that the Sierra Club had a snow shoe outing Lydia borrowed some equipment and we tagged along. It took a little getting use to, but it was lots of fun and the mountains are so beautiful when they are covered in snow. The passes were all snowed in, so we just drove up to the snow line and walked along a fire assess road, buried metres beneath us. There were lots of people out enjoying the mountains, some with Huskies or children being pulled along in sleds. We hiked for a couple of hours, then went to an inn where Lydia ate her first American Apple Pie. The other really nice thing about snow-shoeing is that we got to meet a really nice couple, Alex and Sarah, who have just moved to Seattle. They are both lawyers, him for the Environmental



Protection Agency and her with the Humane Society, so they are doing really wonderful work for society, and they were really fun to chat with.

The Grand Canyon and Showgirls

16/2/2008 Nevada and Arizona

We were a little bit grumpy with Las Vegas after flying in the night before. We landed at 11 o'clock, but after an hour wait for the shuttle bus to come and an hour wait in line at the Imperial Palace just to pick up our room key and find out our trip to Zion National Park had been cancelled, we finally trudged through the banks of blank faces inhabiting the casino floor at 3am for a quick nap before our 5am wake-up for the Grand Canyon tour.

We perked up on the road, as we drove from Las Vegas, over the Hoover Dam and into Arizona. The Hoover Dam is meant to be one of the 100 Great Wonders of the World (according to the book by that name that has usually come up trumps) and I'm sure it was really difficult to build, but it wasn't really that amazing to see. The desert here is the Mojave desert, which is the desert region of southern Nevada, south-east California and western Arizona between 3000 and 6000 feet. The reason why this elevation is called the Mojave desert (as opposed to the Great Basin at lower elevations and the Colorado Plateau at higher elevations) is the presence of the Joshua tree, which is restricted to 3000-6000 feet. The Joshua tree was certainly the most distinctive feature of the desert, a member of the Lily family that can grow up to 40 feet tall and live for a thousand years, with peculiar arms that spread out. Then we drove across Arizona (stopping at a few weird truck stops/gift shops) up to the Colorado Plateau and to the Grand Canyon.

The Grand Canyon definitely deserves its position in the top 100. The canyon is 446km long, 6.4-29km wide and 1.6km deep. Until research released yesterday came out it was thought that it formed



by the Colorado River gradually cutting out the river gorge over 6 million years as the Colorado Plateau was uplifted. The Science paper released yesterday, however, proposes that the canyon has actually been forming for 17 million years, but for the first 11 million years it was a series of caverns linking up an underground river until finally the river undermined the structure enough that the roof caved in, forming the canyon.



We saw the West Rim of the Grand Canyon, starting at Eagle's Point. The Hualapai Tribe own this region and have a Skywalk set up. This is a horseshoe-shaped loop made of glass, so you can walk out and look down 1.2km to the canyon floor below. Some of the people on the loop were absolutely



petrified to be walking on glass that high up, and clung with terror to the railing, refusing to look down. The Hualapai also had a dance demonstrating which was really interesting, especially the hoop dance and the fancy dance. After Eagle's Point we caught a bus further down the West Rim where we had lunch and walked around the edge of the Canyon. We watched prairie dogs keep lookout for danger in the rocks and ravens glide out over the canyon. There was some old mining equipment still in place and the canyon itself was just glorious, a staggering cut through the earth with a slow muddy river inching its way along far down below.

On our drive back to Las Vegas they played Pirates of the Caribbean on the bus. We had a busy night planned, so once back in the Imperial Palace we caught the monorail to Mandalay Bay (the hotel's theme is aquariums). We had dinner at a burger place there recommended by Lonely Planet. It was easily the best burger I have had since leaving Australia, with fried egg, pineapple and beetroot, served with a really refreshing Belgian apple ale. After dinner we went across the sky-bridge to the Luxor hotel (confusingly built like the pyramids of Giza rather than the temples of Luxor, with black glass coating the pyramid and a beam of light projected from the zenith into the sky). Lydia had a chat with a few bored girls selling glass pyramids etched with your photo, they were excited to hear that she was Australian because they thought very highly of "Thunder from Downunder" the male strip show showing nightly across the road at Excalibur (they approvingly noted that if one Australian was ill they would cancel the show rather than let a non-Australian go up). They said that being under-21 Vegas was extremely boring, since there was almost nothing there they could do without drinking or gambling. At Luxor we saw a showgirls show called "Fantasy" which was quite well done except for the painful comedy interludes, especially the horrific comedian who struggled to make the show dirty and puerile rather than artistic and elegant. It is an unfortunate aspect of popular American culture that is puritanical and prudish, giving any appreciation for sexuality an adolescent dirtiness.

Overall an excellent day, but an exhausting one, finally getting into bed at 2am.

Valley of Fire and Cirque du Soleil

17/2/2008 Nevada

Our trip to Zion National Park had been cancelled, but we managed to get onto a trip to the Valley of Fire, a state park just outside Vegas. Our guide "Chance" picked us up at 6am outside the hotel, and drove us out to the park. Chance had been a professional card counter at hotels on the strip until they



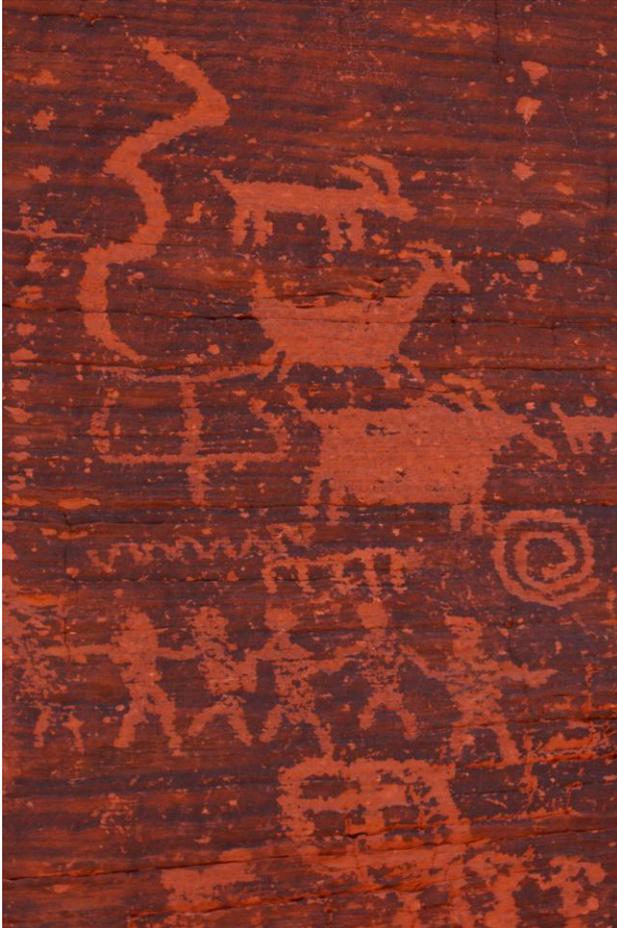
caught him and barred him, now he is a really good guide with excellent knowledge of geography and geology. For the drive out to the Valley of Fire he gave us these "Hints for plains travelers", published by the Omaha Herald in 1877:

- The best seat inside a stagecoach is the one next to the driver... you will get less than half the bumps and jars than on any other seat. When any old "sly Eph," who traveled thousands of miles on coaches, offers through sympathy to exchange his back or middle seat with you, don't do it.
- Never ride in cold weather with tight boots or shoes, nor close-fitting gloves. Bathe your feet before starting in cold water, and wear loose overshoes and gloves two or three sizes too large.
- When the driver asks you to get off and walk, do it without grumbling. He will not request it unless absolutely necessary. If a team runs away, sit still and take your chances; if you jump, nine times out of ten you will be hurt.
- In very cold weather, abstain entirely from liquor while on the road; a man will freeze twice as quick while under its influence.
- Don't growl at food stations; stage companies generally provide the best they can get. Don't keep the stage waiting; many a virtuous man has lost his character by so doing.
- Don't smoke a strong pipe inside especially early in the morning. Spit on the leeward side of the coach. If you have anything to take in a bottle, pass it around; a man who drinks by himself in such a case is lost to all human feeling. Provide stimulants before starting; ranch whisky is not always nectar.
- Don't swear, nor lop over on your neighbor when sleeping. Don't ask how far it is to the next station until you get there.
- Never attempt to fire a gun or pistol while on the road, it may frighten the team; and the careless handling and cocking of the weapon makes nervous people nervous. Don't discuss politics or religion, nor point out places on the road where horrible murders have been committed.
- Don't linger too long at the pewter wash basin at the station. Don't grease you hair before starting or dust will stick there in sufficient quantities to make a respectable 'tater' patch. Tie a silk handkerchief around your neck to keep out dust and prevent sunburns. A little glycerin is good in case of chapped hands.
- Don't imagine for a moment you are going on a picnic; expect annoyance, discomfort and some hardships. If you are disappointed, thank heaven.



The Valley of Fire is the oldest State Park in Nevada. The valley contains a series of sandstone formations formed from ancient solidified sand dunes, 150 million years old. The sand dunes were

overlaid with limestone, which has protected them. In the places where the limestone has eroded the sandstone is exposed and has formed beautiful shapes. The sharp cracks are formed by freeze-thaw of water, the organic holes by sand grains being swirled around by the wind, the horizontal lines were part of the original dune structure. When the light hit the red sandstone just right it glowed with a fire that reminded Lydia and myself of Uluru and Kata Tjuta.



We walked up to Mouse's Tank. This formation is a natural pool, a sealed rock tank in a shadowy cleft feed by tiny trickles of water during the infrequent rains and protected from evaporation by the sun. The tank is named after a Southern Paiute Indian renegade named "Little Mouse", who was accused of killing two prospectors in the 1890s. He ran off and lived in the wild until he was finally cornered at Mouse's Tank and shot. The walk up to Mouse's Tank includes several rock faces covered in old petroglyphs. Unlike rock paintings, these petroglyphs are made by carving out the hard stained surface of the sandstone to reveal the red sandstone beneath. These carvings were from the Anasazi people who lived in the area from 300 BCE to 1150 CE.

After Mouse's Tank we drove to another part of the park where the rock was stained with greens, yellows and blues, rather than red, with eerie ripples in the land. It was a gorgeous place. Then we went off-road four-wheel driving up to a slot canyon just outside the park, and walked through the narrow cleft carved out between the seemingly-impenetrable mountains.

Back in Vegas we had a short nap and then went out for dinner to Battista's, a hole in the wall Italian place just off the strip, for a huge Italian meal with unlimited wine. We then went out to see some of the hotels, starting with the Bellagio. The water fountains in front of the Bellagio are quite unexpected for Vegas – they are tasteful and elegant. The fountains play to different musicals every fifteen minutes in a show well worth watching. The fountains use 1,200 nozzles, 4,500 lights and cost \$50 million to build. We ended up watching three shows, and really enjoyed them. Inside the Bellagio is just as elegant (even the pokies were toned down just a little), with a display for Chinese New Year in the foyer. We had ice-cream at the chocolatier inside, the Jean-Philippe Patisserie, which has the largest chocolate fountain in the world. The fountain was more of a cascading waterfall, with two tons of white, medium and dark chocolate pouring down over 25 glass ponds down 14 feet.



After the Bellagio we went to Treasure Island for a Cirque du Soleil show, Mystere. We had second row tickets right next to the stage, so we had the amazing experience of watching the gymnastics from every direction as they dived down from the sky above us, leapt onto the railing next to us and performed in front of us. The skill and power of the gymnastics is just amazing, the sheer physical strength and acrobatic ability required to perform their feats is just staggering.

Hotels on the strip

18/2/2008 Las Vegas

We didn't have much planned for our last day in Vegas, so we were finally able to sleep in. We had breakfast in the Imperial Palace, which was pretty poor. Actually the Imperial Palace overall must be one of the crummiest hotels on the strip. Their 'feature' is a platform where there are imitation entertainers. It is a shame that in this city where there must be more musicians and singers per capita than any other city they are all forced into imitation, doing the same old routine every night in an atmosphere which must simply crush all innovation and creativity. Excalibur might just pip the Imperial Palace though for the title of "Most Tacky Vegas Hotel".



We caught the monorail over to the Venetian, which has a large indoor mall designed to look like an outdoors twilight walk through Venice, complete with a channel and gondola ride. Then over to New York, New York, which actually looks really cool from the outside with the imitation skyscrapers and the Statue of Liberty. We had lunch at New York, New York and went on the rollercoaster that



wrapped around the outside of the hotel, Lydia screamed her lungs out and couldn't walk afterwards.

After New York, New York we visited Paris, we looks nice from the outside with the Eiffel Tower, but is a trifle sad inside. Then, feeling tired from all the walking and constant bombardment with instant gratification we went and sat in the Flamingo hotel foyer, which is outside, fairly quiet and has an African-crowned crane and a small flock of Chilean flamingos.

American giving

14/3/2008 Seattle

When I look at medical research in Seattle I see the best of America, creativity combined with the raw power of money. Bill Gates is donating (and more than that, managing) billions of dollars of medical research for the most needy, especially in Seattle but around the world. This just doesn't happen in Australia. It might be because the mega-rich in American don't pay any tax, or they want to be

remembered throughout the ages, but for whatever reason the mega-rich here give more than the mega-rich in Australia - those earning over \$30 million in America end up donating 15% of their obscene income while the same obscenely rich in Australia only donate 3%. Of course, the crazy mega-rich in America who donate billions to set up a Creationist Museum aren't exactly helping society like Bill Gates is, but at least they are acknowledging that their success rests on society.



A hatred for government

20/4/2008 Seattle

I was listening to an interview with a libertarian yesterday which was very revealing to the American psyche. He basically didn't want the government to do anything because he assumed that the private sector or the religious sector would do it better. His example was New Orleans - it took FEMA three days to get there while religious organisations were there within a day (Cuba offered to have trained hurricane-relief doctors there within hours - the US ignored their offer). And once there FEMA was useless. Obviously, he said, the government is inept. Well... the *Bush administration* is inept, FEMA used to be outstanding before the reorganisation into Homeland Security in 2003. 60% of the Netherlands is under sea level, yet the government there has competently protected the entire country with flooding defences able to withstand a once in 4000 year flood (or a once in 10 000 year flood in Zeeland).

Maybe more Americans should consider that while they voted in an inept government, government in general can be extremely capable. Sure, I'd be anti-tax too if I knew that my tax dollars were going to support military spending larger than the rest of the world put together but wouldn't pay for decent education or health care. But where does this blind faith in the private sector come from? The government has failed America (or have Americans have failed America by electing administrations who believe that government shouldn't do anything?), but so too has the private sector. The free market capitalists were dead wrong when they assumed that health care, education and crime would all be sorted out by market forces - although they seem to conveniently ignore America's highest level in the developed world in infant mortality, illiteracy and violent crime.

The link with religion in America appears to be both cause and effect. Religion has aggressively pushed out secular institutes common in other developed countries in order to establish themselves as the sole source of community. Likewise the withdrawal of government from its basic functions has left a hole that draws religion in. If religious groups want to help out in emergencies that is fantastic, the secular organisations of the Red Cross and Medecins Sans Frontieres do so and any help is appreciated. But do we really want religious groups to run emergency relief? I mean Jerry Falwell blamed September the 11th on "the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America" and Pat Robertson blamed it on "no prayer in our schools". Michael Marcavage, the director of Christian group Repent America, said about Hurricane Katrina, "We take no joy in the death of innocent people. But we believe that God is in control of the weather. The day Bourbon Street and the French Quarter was flooded was the day that 125,000 homosexuals were going to be celebrating sin in the streets. We're calling it an act of God."



I think American politics and religion is caught up in a viscous cycle. Government failure leads to the election of administrations that don't believe government has any role in improving America, and they fulfill this prophecy with more government failure. Religion takes on the role of saviour during government failure, and pushes for government to shift even further out so they can expand their influence and total domination over entire communities. It is almost like a regression to the 17th century in Europe, where government existed solely to wage war, and provided no services, while religion had an iron-clad grip over communal life, and could therefore dictate acceptable behaviour with the threat of withdrawing all aspects of social life, education and health. It is sad to see a once great country struggling to undo the Enlightenment, and the powerlessness of educated intelligent Americans to stop these forces.

Distinctly American - fundraising as a commercial activity

24/5/2008 Seattle

Just when you least expect it, you are hit by culture shock.

I was just lazing around at home when two kids knocked on the door. They said they were taking part in this youth group activity to compete to raise funds for their college education (\$40K to \$200K for tuition alone for a basic four year degree, and no interest-free government loans). The competition was to speak to people about their careers and so forth. Not a terrible idea, but it was "sponsored" by a magazine company which gave them points based on their ability to sell magazines to the people they spoke to, basically duping hundreds of kids to run around trying to win a prize by doing their dirty work of selling magazine subscriptions. One of the kids in particular was really American in that "all American farm boy" type of way, from Indiana (it was actually a little hard to understand him, I guess I'm not use to the mid-west accent). We signed up for Smithsonian Magazine to be given to a children's hospital, and he wrote some acronym down and asking us to guess it - it was "thank you and god bless you". I said, "we're atheists, so just your thanks is enough" and he kept on stammering "I'm so sorry". We reassured him that it was okay, we just don't want people to assume that everyone is Christian (the atheists in America often hide from discrimination under this assumption). The other kid was fascinated and actually, honestly, truly said "wow, so like as atheists and stuff do you believe that like humans evolved, you know grew up from, some type of cave man or something that existed in the past?" We had to give them a brief primer on human evolution, he was actually amazed that there was evidence that cave men had really existed and wanted to know what they looked like. The scariest part is that this kid already had a teaching degree from a community college.

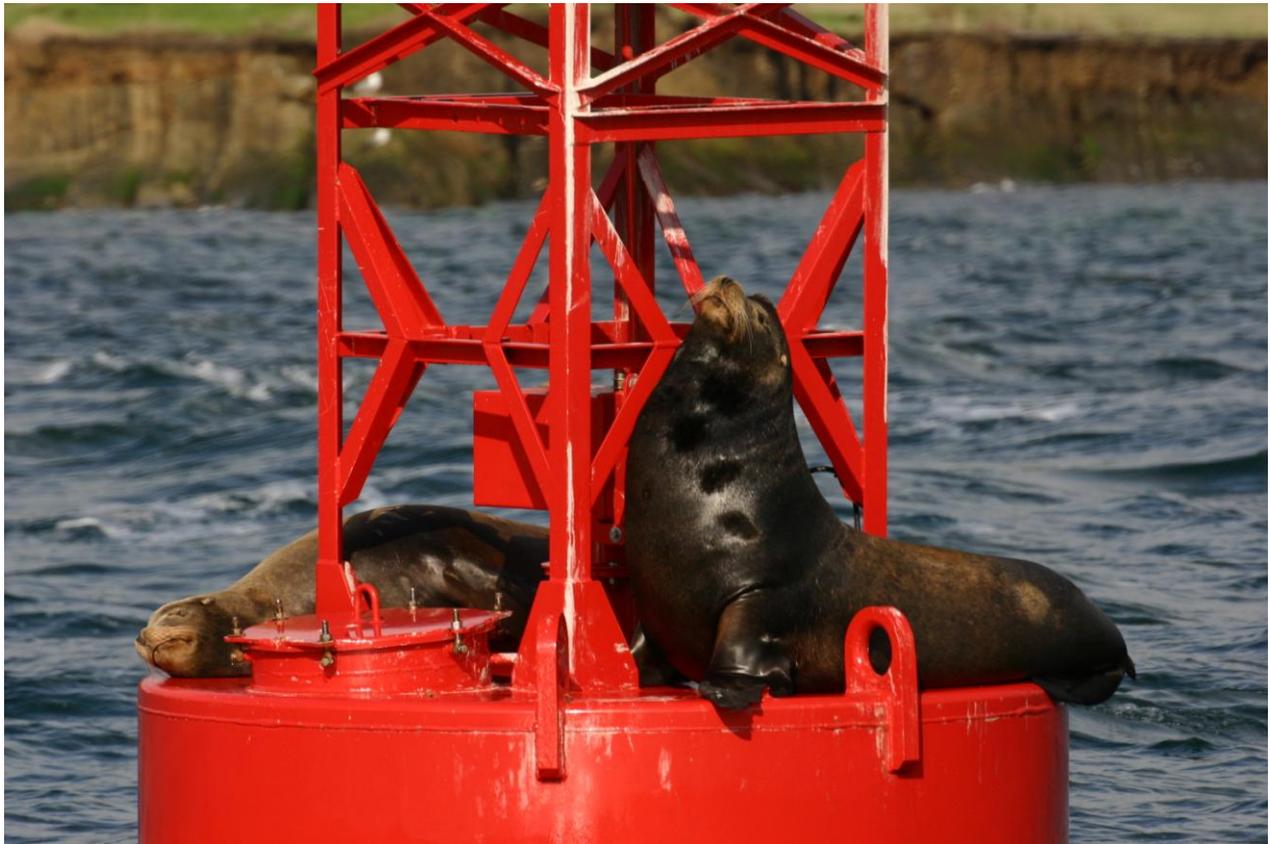


It is really sad and shocking the extent to which religion has subordinated basic schooling here in America. And the extent to which community activities have become advertising ploys and commercially-driven is just plain distasteful. Another example is the Girl Scouts. In Australia, they are just groups of girls that mess around with ropes and stuff to earn badges, and raise money to go on camps by making lamingtons with their parents and selling them to friends and neighbours. In America they have to swear to serve "God and Country" (many groups don't let atheists join) and they have licensed a subsidiary company of Kelloggs (Little Brownie Bakers) to mass-produce 200 million boxes of cookies for them to sell at a commercial level. I'm still surprised at how alien this culture can be.

Being an atheist in America

27/7/2007 Seattle

Before coming to America I knew that religion was a far more powerful force here than it is in Australia. But what I didn't suspect was that atheism would also be so different between the two cultures. In Australia around 64% of the population, if pushed, would call themselves Christian and 31% would say they are not religious or wouldn't even bother answering. This isn't that different from the US, with 77% Christian and 14% not religious or not answering, especially after you take into account the different urban/rural balance.



The big difference is really in the attitude of the religious. In Australia, even the 64% who are notionally Christian poke gentle fun of the 7.5% of the population that goes to Church weekly, calling them "God Botherers", always pestering with their prayers, and they don't tend to make religion the defining part of their life. Religion doesn't enter politics, with atheist Prime Ministers like Bob Hawke being elected without any fuss, and *of course* women have the right to control their reproductive health, children should be given sex education and drug users should be given access to clean needles.

In America, on the other hand, 26% of the population goes to Church weekly, 41% go regularly and 80% believe in miracles, actually thinking that their god directly intervenes in our life. This population is loud, abusive and has cowed or cajoled the rest of the religious population into providing them support even on extremist issues. Jerry Falwell can safely come out and say that 9/11 was caused by "pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians, the American Civil Liberties Union and the People For the American Way", John Hagee can say after Hurricane Katrina "I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they were recipients of the judgement of God for that", Pat Robertson can accuse left-wing professors of all being "racists, murderers, sexual deviants and supporters of Al-Qaeda" and Fred Phelps can say "God hates fags", yet the only one punished by mainstream American Christians is Phelps, who committed the additional sin of being anti-American. The others, extremists by any consideration, and considered respected spokesmen for the religion.



The religious extremists in America have (successfully) stolen patriotism and tied it to Christianity. They have been rewriting history, claiming that America was founded as a Christian nation, despite many of the key Founders being non-Christian (Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Tomas Paine were explicitly not Christian, George Washington and James Madison were careful to never proclaim a position) and the first government unanimously endorsing the Treat of Tripoli, stating "The United States is not in any sense founded upon the Christian religion". Instead, they cite their own success at rebranding America as the basis for further stealing America for the Christians - the addition of "In God We Trust" on the coins in 1864 and "One Nation Under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954. With the gain of power they are wielding it to cement their position and to crush dissenters. They have made criticism of religion such a crime in the public sphere that even gross abuse is not punished if it has a religious basis. This year we saw an 11 year-old girl slowly die of diabetic ketoacidosis over the span of 30 days, suffering symptoms like nausea, vomiting, excessive thirst, loss of appetite and weakness, because her parents refused to allow her to take simple insulin

injections to save her life and instead relied only on prayer. The police didn't even take the other children away from these criminally negligent parents, simply because their excuse was religion.

Consider the issue of religious terrorism. From the headlines, it would be assumed that most cases of religious terrorism in America are performed by Muslims. Far from it, Christian terrorism is much more common. On the issue of abortion alone, Christian terrorists groups such as the Army of God, Aryan Nations, Christian Patriots, the Ku Klux Klan and the Lambs of Christ perform multiple attacks every year. Only 8 people have been killed by Christian terrorism since 1993, but this is largely due to police intervention, as the number of attacks is astronomical - in the past 30 years there have been 17 attempted murders, 383 death threats, 153 incidents of assault or battery, 3 kidnapping, 655 bioterror threats, 41 bombings, 173 arsons, 91 attempted bombings or arsons, 619 bomb threats, 1630 incidents of trespassing, 1264 incidents of vandalism and 100 attacks with stink bombs. This is nearly one act of Christian terrorism against reproductive clinics or staff every two days for 30 years, and ignoring threats, trespassing or vandalism, it is more than one case of Christian terrorism that could have resulted in death every month for the past 30 years, based on a single issue alone. Yet how often do we hear about Christian terrorism on the news? How often do moderate Christians condemn extremist Christians? The extremist group is so large it has cowed the moderates into keeping silent and wordlessly supporting their coup.



This religious extremism is also directed against atheists. The discrimination is rife. 53% of Americans would refuse to vote for an atheist as President, regardless of party or experience. There are no elected Governors, Federal Senators or Supreme Court Judges who are not religious. Less than 1% of Congress is not religious. No President in living memory has been non-religious. The broad cultural perception of atheists is immorality and criminality, even though (despite judicial bias) atheists are heavily under-represented in

prisons (only 0.2% of inmates). The Boy Scouts' official position is to not allow atheists in as Scouts or Scout Leaders and the American Heritage Girls are the same (Girl Scouts are starting to allow in some non-theists). Discrimination, exclusion and persecution of children is bad enough, but the bigotry extends further, to violence. The University of Florida student who recently abducted a communion wafer has received hundreds of pieces of hate mail and death threats. The student would be wise to take them seriously too. Consider the murder of Larry Hooper in 2005 by his extremist Christian roommate Arthur Shelton, explicitly because Hooper did not believe in God. At the trial his family came to the court room and screamed out against "the people from hell, evil and devils", "the one good thing of all of this is that another atheist is dead and the world is better off for it" and "the only good atheist is a dead atheist".

It is this violent and discriminatory climate that has, in my opinion, altered American atheism. In Australia choosing to be atheist is like choosing boxers over briefs - nobody cares except your partner, and it is your private decision unless you chose to proclaim it to the world. In America, that decision has real consequences and so many are afraid to come out as atheists. In Western Europe 70% of the non-religious use the word atheist, while in America even the non-religious shy away from the label,

with less than 3% using it. In Australia I don't even know if we have atheist groups, it is so completely unnecessary. In America, under barrage from religion constantly, irritated and offended by people saying "God Bless You" every time I do something nice and reacting with shock when I respond that I am an atheist, I sought out the company of atheist groups and was shocked at the wide array available. The first event I went to was with the Seattle Atheists/Agnostics Meetup Group, and the edge of persecution was noticable right from the start - you needed to join before being told the location, and the reservations are all made anonymously with the host institution simply being told "if anybody asks for 'the meetup' send 'em our way". Discussion was not the casual and light chuckling about the odd quirks of the religious the way it is in Australia. Instead you can hear the hurt of people being forced to hide their position on religion at school or at work for fear of being treated differently, people exiled and disinherited from their family, people rejected by their partners, people forced to live a secret life. On the positive side you can also hear the tone of defiance and even challenge in their voices, daring religion to strike them again.



The demographic tide away from religion is turning in America. The proportion of young adults today who are not religious is 25%. As long as Americans can block the religious extremists from legislating religion and stifling education, in twenty years it will be as effortless to be an atheist in America as it is today in Australia. But for the present, I have only the greatest admiration for those Americans who have the courage to withstand the overwhelming pressure and declare themselves atheists.

Things I'll miss about Seattle

15/9/2008 Seattle

Our friends. I was really lucky to move into a lab filled with such genuinely nice people, bound by shared adversity. Luke's dark and intelligent cynicism, Shyla's sunnyness, Jeong's humorous quirks and witty analogies, Jared's willingness to contemplate and debate issues (even if invariably from the

dark side), Jenny's stoic happiness and wry smiles, Lianne's slightly confused goodness, Ye's very confused good nature, Steve and Rachel's energetic beans (and legendary biceps), Yuri both surly and boomerily happy, Katherine both helpful and practical. It would be hard to imagine a group of people more diverse in personality in every way except one - they have made Seattle a pleasure for me.

Our apartment.

Lydia and I have been so lucky to be able to share good times in our apartment. It is tiny and ugly, nothing really works and we never bothered to fill it with stuff, but it has the most amazing view we'll ever share in our lives. To be able to look out each day over Seattle, to see the horizon, watch the sailboat race every Tuesday night on Lake Union, to see the pure white icing covering Seattle on those rare snow days, to see Mt Rainier when she is awake and bathed in pink in the evening, to watch the colours reflected from the downtown skyscrapers change with the light at sunset, to see the very tip of the Space Needle peeking out from behind Queen Anne. We have been between Wallingford with Tutta Bella and all our other favourite restaurants, and Fremont with its quirks and events, and close enough to University to make transit a quick bus trip or a decent walk.



The Burke-Gilman trail. I doubt I'll ever again have such a perfect way to get from home to work. Fifteen minutes on my bike, a level track on the banks of Lake Union. It is so wonderful to be able to turn a chore into a twice-daily pleasure. To be unbound by timetables or parking, to feel the wind in my hair as I fly down Stone Way. Metro or train, our next city will not have a handy dedicated and scenic path running from home to work like Seattle does.

Working across the hallway from Lydia. Being able to be so close to her during the day, able to nip across the hallway every hour or so makes the world of difference to me. I enjoy being able to have lunch with her and going home with her in the evening.

Rain rain go away

18/9/2008 Seattle

Front page of the Seattle PI, 16th of September:

Enjoy This Weather While You Can

Not a drop of rain this month

What has been missing this month in Seattle is indeed rare and wondrous.

No rain.

Not a drop.

The National Weather Service in Seattle has not measured a single bit of precipitation this month, said Danny Mercer, a meteorologist.
So rare is this occurrence for September that Mercer believes it has happened only once before.

Don't get freaked out - the great Seattle Drought of 2008 has finally broken after nearly 20 days with no rain.



Elections, American style

21/9/2008 Seattle

We are witnessing the cultural experience of an American Presidential election. For those fellow travellers used to a functional democracy, I thought I would outline the American way of doing things.

Firstly, it is not actually a single election. On "Election day" (the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November, every four years) there are 51 different contests. Each Presidential candidate has to individually enrol in each of these contests, or at least as many as it is worth doing (Lincoln, for example, didn't bother to enrol in the South). There is a contest in each of the 50 states and one for the territory of Washington DC. The other territories (Guam, US Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Northern Mariana Islands and American Samoa, with about 4.4 million American citizens) don't count.

So, in each of the 51 regions with first class citizens there is an "election". This isn't actually legally binding or required, and in itself doesn't actually mean anything. The actual election happens six weeks later, on the first Monday after the second Tuesday in December. During this actual, legally binding, election, a group of Electors from each state votes on who will be President. Each state gets a number of electors roughly proportion to its population, except there is a minimum of three (and Washington DC must have at least three but cannot have more than the smallest state), so the really small states get proportionally more power. The states get to chose who their electors are in pretty

much whatever way they want. 48 states and Washington DC chose to have a single state-wide election on "Election Day", giving all the Electors in the state to the candidate who got a plurality of the vote (the most votes in total, no preference voting allowed). This means that the 55 Californian Electors go to whoever wins the most votes in California (it will be Obama) and the 34 Texan Electors go to whoever wins the most votes in Texas (it will be McCain), making the vote of a Republican in California or a Democrat in Texas completely worthless. Maine and Nebraska do things in a different



way - they instead divide the state up into three chunks and each chunk has a plurality vote to elect a single Elector, with the final two electors being elected on the basis of the plurality of the whole state. None of these systems are set in stone though and any state can change the rules at any time. The Republicans, for example, want California to be divided up proportionately or regionally, so they can take a few of those 55 electors from the Democrats, but certainly don't want the same system in Texas where it means they'd lose a few electors to the Democratic Party in return.

The important thing to remember is that these Electors are actual people. They are pre-selected by different systems in different states (by primaries, by elections in party conventions, directly by the candidates campaigns, etc) but once the delegation (either Republican or Democratic) is chosen each individual in it acts as a free agent. This means that the actual election, on the first Monday after the second Tuesday in December, is not just for show. In this election each Elector votes for their preferred Presidential candidate. Usually, Electors vote for the candidate who won their region. However, on 158 different occasions "faithless" Electors have voted otherwise. Sometimes it is simple spelling errors (if they spell the candidates name wrong on the ballot their vote isn't counted), other times they just had a personal agenda they hadn't told anyone about beforehand, and chose to vote for the other person. They can even vote for a person who didn't even run for President. In 26 states and Washington DC there is nothing anyone can do about it. In 22 states the "faithless" Elector can be punished afterwards, but their vote counts, and in Michigan and Minnesota they can be punished and their vote is disqualified (but not counted for the correct person either). Another disqualification is for a voter from one state to vote for a President/Vice-President pair if both are from the same state as the Elector (so if President and Vice-President were from California, no Californian Electors would be allowed to vote for them, regardless of who won California - both Bush and Cheney are from Texas, so the Texan electors should have been disbarred from voting for them, but Cheney moved his official residence to Wyoming a few months before so they scrapped through on a technicality).

Unfortunately there are an even number of Electors (538), which means a tie is possible (and even comes up under a few scenarios for the McCain-Obama polling). In the case of a tie, the Electoral College is disbanded and the President and Vice-President are elected by Congress. Even without a tie, it goes to a tie-breaker if no candidate gets a majority (for example in 1824 Jackson got 99 votes, Adams got 84 and the other votes were split between two extra candidates). Under the tie-breaking system, the President is elected by the House of Representatives and the Vice-President is elected by the Senate, making McCain-Biden and Obama-Palin results possible. The Vice-President election is pretty straight forward - each Senator would vote between Biden and Palin, and they would keep on

voting until there was a winner. The Presidential election is more complicated (of course!) - each State Congressional caucus (ie the 53 Californians, the 32 Texans, the single Alaskan, etc) meets separately and votes for a single representative. Those 50 representatives then meet and vote amongst themselves between McCain and Obama, so all of California is equal to the single Alaskan. This result would be hard to predict, as some Democrats like McCain and some Republicans like Obama, and the sole representatives of states like Montana and North Dakota have lots of power. Amusingly, if these 50 people can't chose a President by the 4th of March, the Vice-President chosen by the Senate becomes President (giving President Biden or President Palin). The Vice-President can then nominate anyone they want to be Vice-President, but they must be approved by both houses of Congress.

So now us foreigners can start to understand the arcane tradition that will take place on the 4th of November. Let's just hope they elect Obama and don't screw it up the way they have the last two times.



A Seattle Weekend

28/9/2008 Seattle

We started our Seattle weekend on Friday afternoon at Golden Gardens Park. After a miserable week of weather we expected Lifan's and Jared's farewell BBQ to be washed out, but we really got lucky ("lucked out" in American-talk) with the weather, which was perfect for a BBQ. Golden Gardens is just above Ballard on the edge of the Sound, so we got to sit out on the beach and drink beer in the sun and watch the sun slowly set over the Sound and the Olympics. I guess we are at that age now where people bring either a puppy or a baby to these type of events (except Jared, who showed off by bringing both), and it turns out I really like it. It is nice to be able to muck around and have fun with the dogs, relax with cherished friends, be able to bury a baby in sand (and not be the one to deal with the consequences) and generally have a great evening. One of our best evenings out in years.

On Saturday afternoon we walked along 45th in Wallingford, browsing the travel book shop for books about Belgium, getting chocolate cupcakes from Trophy Cupcake and going to see Tropic Thunder at the movies (which was actually excellent, the Panda and Dingo scenes were magnificent, and Downey and Cruise were great actors).



In the evening we went to my first (and, hopefully, last) American football game, between the Huskies (University of Washington) and the Cardinals (Stanford). The Husky stadium is huge, it is just the college football stadium not a professional stadium yet it hold over 70 000 people, not that far off the capacity of the MCG (and since the field is a tiny 100m by 50m everything is up close and personal). It is claimed that the Husky stadium is the location of the first Mexican wave, on the 31st of October 1981, but it is more likely that the Mexican wave was invented in 1980 in Canada and the Husky stadium was merely the first American experience.

The game is weird. It is a bit like Rugby, except the players wear more body armour than the soldiers in Iraq and get to have a break every couple of minutes. Really bored me to tears, but then I'm not a sporting person. I can't understand why someone would teach their child to jump up and down and scream abuse at a bunch of footballers simply because they go to Stanford instead of the University of Washington (especially considering the home-town of the players is often neither Seattle nor San Francisco, and if any succeed in football they will just be sold

off to a random team). How can someone be so upset at the Huskies letting a touch-down go past that they cry with regret that they just signed up to go to college at the University of Washington? The Huskies are one of the worst college football teams in the US, and the UW is one of the best medical research institutes in the US, yet "team spirit" means screaming abuse at a referee for doing their job rather than taking pride in the meaningful achievements of the university. I found the fans to be very ugly and it wasn't an enjoyable experience at all.

Then today we had a morning down at the Pike Place Markets. The Pike Place Markets are one of Seattle's most famous attractions, being built in 1908 to combat market speculation on the price of onions. The markets have a lot of tourist junk but also a lot of really good food. We went on a "Saviour Seattle" tour, which took us to a few different places to try the food - Daily Dozen Doughnuts, MarketSpice, Pike Place Fish (where Lydia got to catch a fish in the famous Pike Place fish toss), Frank's Quality Produce, Pike Place Chowder (which won the Rhode Island "best New

England Clam Chowder" award three years in a row, before becoming inducted into the hall of fall and disqualified from future entries), Chuk'ar Cherries (we bought some dark chocolate carbinet cherries later), Beecher's Handmade Cheeses (their cheddar was magnificent), Piroshky-Piroshky and Etta's Seafood. It was a beautiful day to be outside, the food was excellent and the tour was actually very enjoyable.

A very Seattle weekend indeed.

Election night

4/11/2008 Seattle

Tonight I can only say to America: *You. Did. Good.*

I think I can safely say that 100% of America was behind Obama. Sure, we watched the results in the gayest neighbourhood of the second gayest city in America (you heard me New York, you need to gay it up to overtake us, let alone San Fran), but tonight we experienced democracy finally being heard. We heard the voices ignored for eight years.



Seattle, and progressive America, you did everything you could in 2000 and in 2004. You threw everything you could into it, and when you failed you kept on fighting. Tonight, November the 4th 2008, you finally managed to drag the rest of the country with you. *Tonight you won. Tonight America won. Tonight the world won.*

America, you did good.

A more balanced look at the US election

6/11/2008 Seattle

[Tuesday](#) was amazing. The like of which I have never seen in America before. Everyone was full of nervous energy and perfect strangers were first partners in anticipation and then in celebration. I yelled myself hoarse with joy, and I was not alone.

It was certainly a big day for America. They repudiated the extremist policies of George Bush and John McCain and turned to an outstanding man, [Barack Hussein Obama](#), for leadership. It was America's finest moment in forty years. But let's be completely honest - the bar has dropped pretty low over the last 40 years. America has been behind the rest of the developed world, and in fact has often dragged the rest of us backwards. The election of Barack Obama does not make America a leader again, it simply gives America a chance to catch up. The election of Barack Obama does not cancel out the mistakes made by George Bush, it simply allows America the opportunity to work towards forgiveness.

The result of the 2008 election was a huge win for progressive America. But the campaign showed just how sick America's electoral system is. The actual system itself is [archaic](#), and desperately needs updating. But beyond the electoral oddities, the system is simply undemocratic. In Virginia, [state law](#)

requires one voting machine per 750 people. If each person takes only five minutes to vote, it would take 750 people three days to vote. Of course, Republican districts have far more voting machines than Democratic districts. Then we have dirty campaigning - not just telling lies about opponents, but telling lies about the electoral system, such as Republicans sending out fliers to college campuses telling them that due to the massive turnout expected, voting has been extended to two days, with Republicans voting on the 4th and [Democrats voting on the 5th](#). This type of rubbish is beyond the rough and tumble of politics and reduces America to a pseudo-democracy.



And another thing - for a transformational election, one where America could finally turn out and vote *against* a President who allowed war, rape and torture and *for* a President who represented change, the turn-out was pathetic. There are 218 million eligible voters in America, after you count out the young, foreigners and felons. Yet only 130 million people turned out to vote on Tuesday. Sure, this was the most ever to vote in a American election (in absolute numbers), but still, it was only 59.6% of eligible voters. Among youths the turn-out was even worse, only 57.1%. This marginal increase was enough for America to move up from 35th out of 37 countries in voter turn-out, to 34th. Hardly a stunning increase, and still lower than Russia on a 61% average and well below Venezuela on 85%, let alone Australia, Malta, Austria, Belgium, Italy and Luxembourg at over 90%. Both Obama and McCain called Russia and Venezuela undemocratic. By what standard are they so much less democratic than the US? What more needs to happen for the American turn-out to reach the 85% Venezuela regularly manages? I mean seriously, here there were people offering to pick you up, drive you home and literally give you a free coffee and ice-cream into the bargain. All to do the bare minimum of duty a citizen owes their country.

Barack Obama will be a great leader, but even with an outstanding Democrat and an incumbent Republican who did more to destroy America than any terrorist, the election was only won because of

the changing demographics of America. White America voted against Obama, 55% to 43%. Christian America also voted against Obama, 51% to 48% (and 54% to 45% among Protestants). It was only because of the growing proportion and hard work of Blacks (95%), Hispanics (67%), Asians (62%), Jews (78%), Muslims (73%) and atheists (75%) that Obama won. I hope Obama appreciates that. There were also significant failures on Tuesday. Alaska re-elected a convicted felon for Senator rather than elect a Democrat. Gay marriage was banned in Arizona (56% to 44%), Florida (62% to 38%) and, most distressingly, California (52% to 48%), while Arkansas banned gay or unmarried couples from adopting or fostering kids (57% to 43%). This was an election which took rights away from people based only on their sexuality, a complete disgrace in the 21st century.

Barack Obama is an amazing man. For him to become President with every institutional barrier in his way is astounding. It is progress for race relations in America, but it does not fix them. This does not magically solve the institutional racism in America. One vote will not eradicate the gap in illiteracy and life expectancy. America is going to need to continue to work hard, and Barack Obama will not solve America's problems by himself. Obama also has his flaws. He sees America with the same pair of deluded rose-coloured glasses that every other American President has. No Obama, America is not the only place where your story could take place. In fact, [the chance of poor immigrants working their way up to wealth through hard work is lower in America than in Europe, Australia or New Zealand.](#)



I was ecstatic with Obama's win on Tuesday. It was the most memorable and iconic day of my three years in America. I bought a copy of the Seattle PI on Wednesday and I will frame the front page to always savour that moment. But pure joy and pure celebration is unbalanced in a world where Obama's achievement is so sweet because of just how low America has sunk.

