

OK, so we are back off to the UK for Christmas. It does seem a long time and distance away to think of a European winter as I sit here in streaming sun with all the doors and windows open my injured leg propped up and the cicadas providing a suitably summery audio backdrop.



I was a bit worried; after all we had not had a proper winter since 2011. How would I cope with a winter that was actually cold? Well as it turned out it was a great success. For a start the weather was very mild, often over 10 degrees during the day, we only had it really cold for a couple of days at the end and that convinced us to run away back home. I think it helped to arrive back at Christmas, I've said before that somehow I have never completely got the hang of antipodean Christmases, all that sun and salads



just doesn't seem right. This was reinforced by London having its best Christmas decorations on, the low slanting sunlight and the pooling darkness arriving early allowed the twin-

kling light to shine. The light and cold and darkness combined with the anticipation of Christmas struck such a chord with my memories that it somehow just felt right.



London is an affluent city, there are huge decorated trees everywhere, how do the councils keep track of them all so they can collect them on January 6th? London also has so much to offer, we had decided that we could not face the train back to Manchester on the last Friday before Christmas so instead we had three nights in a very small but really rather nice hotel on Fleet Street. We had been warned that jet lag might be a problem, it gets dark before 4pm so



after three hours of darkness we felt like it must be midnight but it turned out to still be before 7pm. The way to alleviate the problem is to rush around like mad things, which is what we did.

We got to catch up with friends who either worked in London or were visiting. It did make us slightly groggy in the evenings,



sorry if we were not good, or even coherent, company Paul but it was a delight to sit in a little café just off Covent Garden and just witter. We could catch up on books and children and the state of the Brexit nation. Its odd how these trips play out, six weeks, that is a huge amount of time and then snap and its gone and often there are people we haven't even managed to see, and we only make it back every couple of years, so the gaps can get quite big, one of the gaps that was good to bridge was meeting up with Keith and Diane and Elly and as I sit here now I am trying to remember when we saw them last, possibly a decade ago.

We did do proper London things, Steph discovered that the carol service in St Pauls was on – it was just round the corner, in an hour. What a delight, what a privilege to be able to just up and out to the service. We gorged on capitol delights; we went to the Tate Gallery and had a lovely sunlit tea overlooking the Thames with the cheery “everything will be alright in the end” strapline on the

wall. We walked down the south bank to see the shard (build since my last visit) and were eventually driven back by the rain from Tower Bridge. We had booked to go to the Royal Albert Hall to see the Carols Concert, it was a bit of a mixture of things: classical music, singalong, carols sung by the choir and even Tommy Blaze from Strictly, but an enjoyable mixture. It felt like a holiday within a holiday.

Monday morning, we picked up our hire car from Stanstead Airport (because we will be leaving from here to go to France in a months time, planning for this holiday is a little complex) and headed up north. We would be doing a lot of driving in the car, well I say we, Steph actually. She did nearly 5,000 KM on the holiday which is more than she will do in the rest of the year. We went from Perthshire in the north to Cornwall in the south, we listened to podcasts and Scala radio and watched grey rain arrive day after day. Yes part of the worry about the weather was that if we did get snow would we still be able to get around but we were fine, the snow was some way



off in the future, though ever present in the news, I had forgotten how much the weather features in everyday conversation here.

For actual real Christmas we were off to see Mum. Mum is old and getting older, but our gift to her was just to be around and to be with her over Christmas. It meant that the carers could have a proper

break and we could spend time with Mum, its getting more difficult to get her attention via phone so keeping up with her can be a problem. Just being there I started to get a feel for the rhythms of her day. We got to see her on good days and some not so good days as well, to get some light and shade. Christmas day itself was lovely, we turned the TV off and sat in the splendid slanting sunshine and

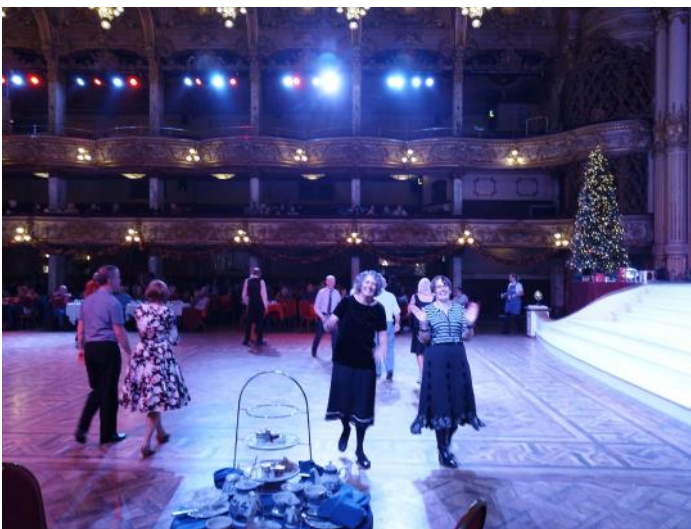


just took our time getting up for the day, we could talk and open gifts slowly, getting the most reaction from home-made Christmas Cake. We cooked lunch using Christmas all wrapped up by Marks and



Spencer's, as well as some splendid salt beef curtesy of Roger. We had to go exploring to find enough plates to eat from. Steph and I got to walk along the beach in the afternoon, beach stomping isn't really for Mum now and then at the end of the day we got to eat cheese and watch Strictly Come Dancing, now that is what I call Christmas.

Our presents to each other, were by necessity, not things that needed to be transported, when we left our bags were stuffed with shopping, we were a couple of kilos over but got away with it. So first up I took Steph to a tea dance at the Tower Ballroom in Blackpool, we were only too happy to have it gate crashed by Caroline, Steph's sister and her hiking buddies who we knew from their NZ trip. It was



great fun, the tea was good and the dancing better, I was knackered by the end of the day. Steph took me to an ice sculpture park and sub zero Tiki Bar in Manchester, it was -10 degrees inside and my ears hurt it was so cold. Tea does seem to play a big part of the trip, we broke up our shopping trip by having afternoon tea, thank you Andrew and Liz. At the time I was a little ungrateful and just wanted to get on with the shopping but it was delightful to collapse and drink rather good tea and watch the sunset gleam over a slightly soggy Manchester. We even got a second wind and did more shopping on the way home.



It does all sound rushed, and lets face it, it was quite rushed at times but we did have some lovely walks and hikes an excellent opportunity to chat. We got together in Alderly Edge for a hike that really didn't go anywhere except into interesting anecdotes and detail from the people



we walk with. Hearing how Jie and Emma have done the opposite trip to us from NZ to London, and Mark's insanely opti-

mistic viewpoint that he had a photo of us all from twenty years ago and nothing has changed, it has, it really has. Walking out with Caroline and Nevis across a bright sunny Scottish morning, and around Ullswater as a form of recovery on New Years day all stick in the mind. Going to the Altrincham market with Roger for some very excellent cheese pie and being convinced by the cheese shop to buy a kilo of tasty Lancashire, rather than 500g, it was a pretty easy sell. We



went to Nick and Elaine's for a sprawling lunch and canasta session, somehow family cards symbolises Christmas for me.

I suppose that is the backbone of the visit was catching up with people rather than visiting places. However there was one place we really wanted to go, Bunny, my sister and Allan have been travelling the planet for far longer than we have and have been

planning to retire for almost as long. Well finally they have returned and settled in Cornwall. Now it is a bit of a trip and they have only been in the country for a week but we managed to get to see where they live. It always seems to help me know where they are when I Skype them. We





even managed to get a sunny walk along the costal path, sunny but very muddy.

As always with this sort of thing we seem to have all the time in the world stretching out in front of us until we do not and the end of our time there is rushing towards us at full speed. Its later than you think. Once we got back from Cornwall everything seem to compress, we were off to

France to see Steph's Dad, back for more dancing, a bizarre barn





dance in Wakefield and Strictly Come Dancing Live! and then all too soon we were off.

In amongst the blur there were some very nice bits. We have been going to France for over twenty years and when we are there we often get to help do things around the place, this time we got stuck in to composting all the cuttings from a long hedge, after all this time of holiday and excess some good manual labour was very therapeutic

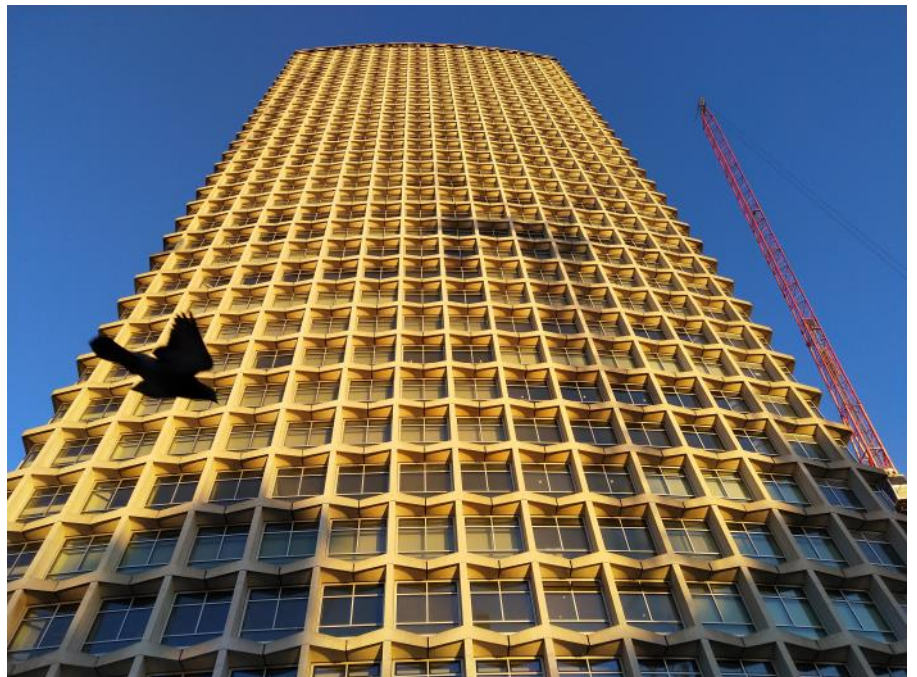




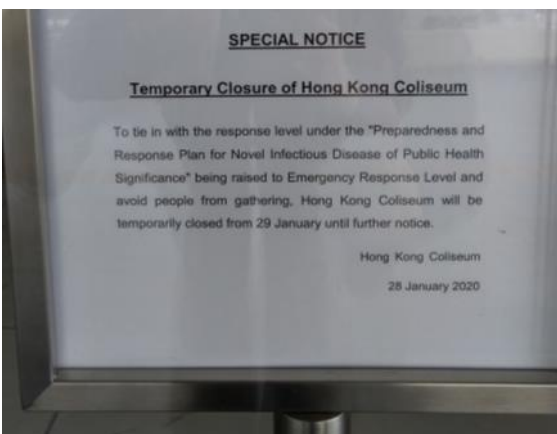
and useful as well. We also got to go to a Burns night supper full of dancing, music and food.

Our hotel in London was upgraded to a little apartment and Caroline, Steph and I got to play late night canasta listening to music and sipping coffee.

Our way home included a stop off for four days in Hong Kong and this seemed like a great idea when we book this lot almost twelve months ago,



now coronavirus and rioting seem to make it less so. Mind you at least the virus has dissuaded the rioters from appearing. In the end it was pretty well timed, Hong Kong was empty, people were all masked up, we were challenged in the street about not wearing a mask and most public spaces, like galleries, museums and sports stadiums were already closed, seemed a bit strong at the time but now a month later and they still only have 100 cases in Hong





Kong is just seems prudent. It was almost a science fiction like visit, the place was so empty and people our hotel huddled in a courtyard discussing where is

the best place to hunker down and wishing each other luck. Almost the last thing we did there was have a coffee in a café overlooking the Star Ferry and at the next table parents and children were eating, the children telling virus jokes, “why will the virus not be around for long? Because it was made in China”. Not entirely sure what the bravado was aimed at but it did make me smile. We went to the IMAX cinema to see 1917, a little worried about the

shared space only to discover that we were sharing it with a grand total of 8 people. We hiked up to the peak through deserted ladders.

Having the city



break at the end of the holiday did have a nice sense of symmetry with the weekend in London at the beginning. The cities were completely different, a grey busy London and a sunny vacant Hong Kong but in each we were able to just spend some time having a holiday in a holiday.

And then we were back home, and back to summer with a bang. I had a lot more trouble adjusting to the change in temperature and season than I did with the jetlag.

I guess with this sort of a trip I expect to catch up with the people who are still in the same place in life that they are in my memory of them and I am always slightly surprised to catch up and discover that the people continue to grow and change. This time I found it very interesting to see people as they transition from employment to retirement. I guess life is always progressing and changing and I will need to think about how my transition will go, after all its later than you think.