

Dear family and friends,

December 2024

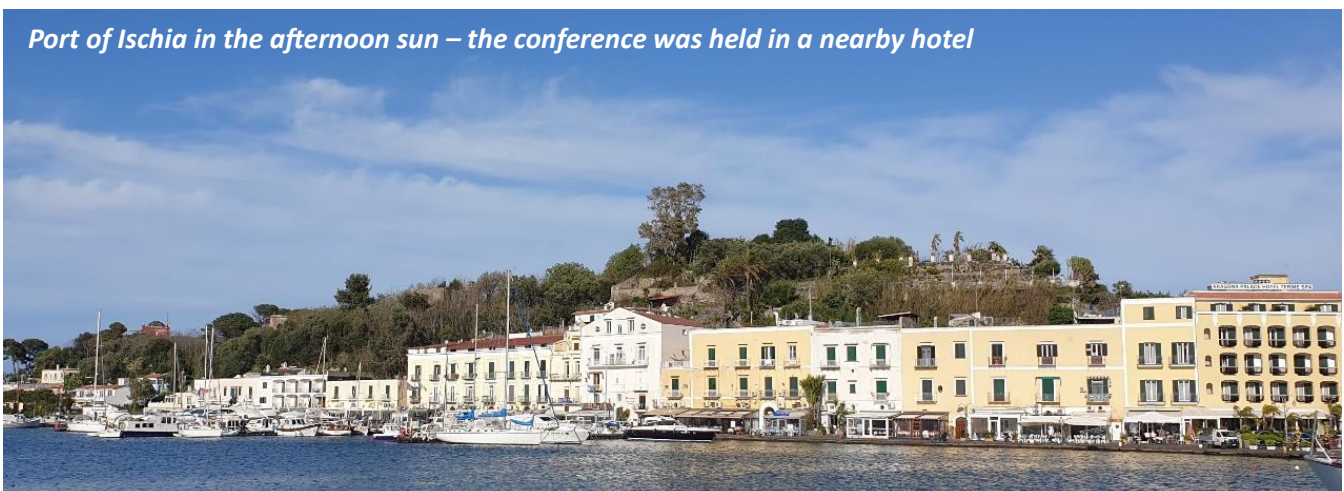
We hope this finds you safe and well, and that 2024 was a rewarding and enjoyable year for you. While it was a wonderful year for advances in medicine, renewable energy, and science, we are concerned by the rise of political intolerance, the ever-increasing global emissions and temperatures, and the horrific wars in the middle-East, Ukraine and elsewhere. We hope that next year brings some resolution.



This was our first full year in our house in Newcastle. It began with a visit from Perth friends Irene, Robin, Martin and Sabina – it was great fun to show them around while we also learned more about the region. Then, we worked hard to get rid of the many weed species in our yard (including big shrubs and trees!) so that we could begin planting native shrubs to attract more birds and insects. In places, we were successful, while in other spots we have more work to do! In the middle of the year (our winter), we tackled a major drainage project to dry out the somewhat “boggy” back yard and reduce moisture in the garage (downhill, under the front of the house). We (mostly Stephen) dug a long (35m/100 ft) trench by hand and laid a perforated pipe to collect water and a PVC pipe to drain it to the street, then we filled the trench with gravel. So far, it has worked very well in heavy rain. We built a raised bed for veggies and filled it with some of the soil we dug out of the trench, and have had a great “volunteer” tomato crop that grew out of the compost we buried in the bed. We plan to plant more veggies soon. *(photo: La Mortella Gardens, Ischia, Italy in May)*

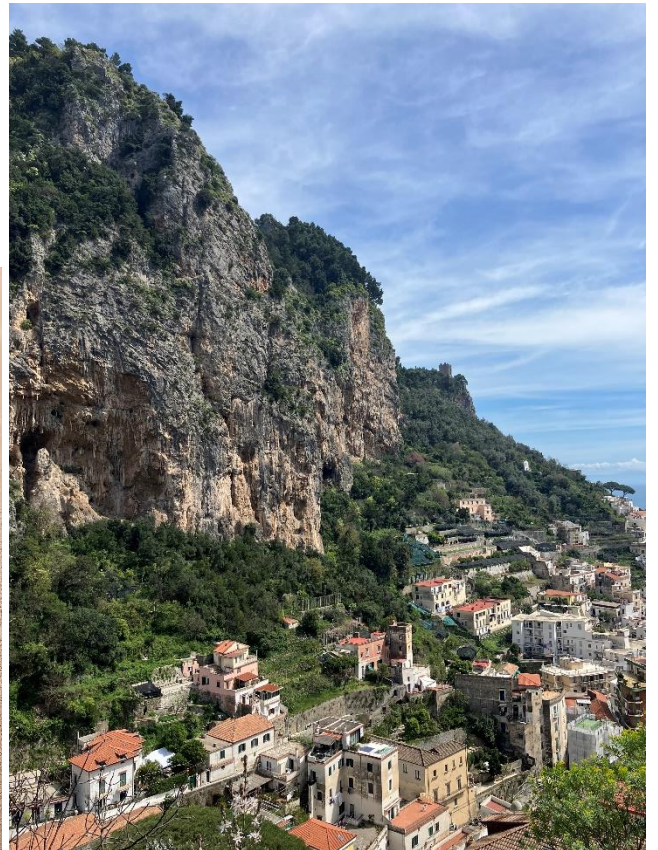
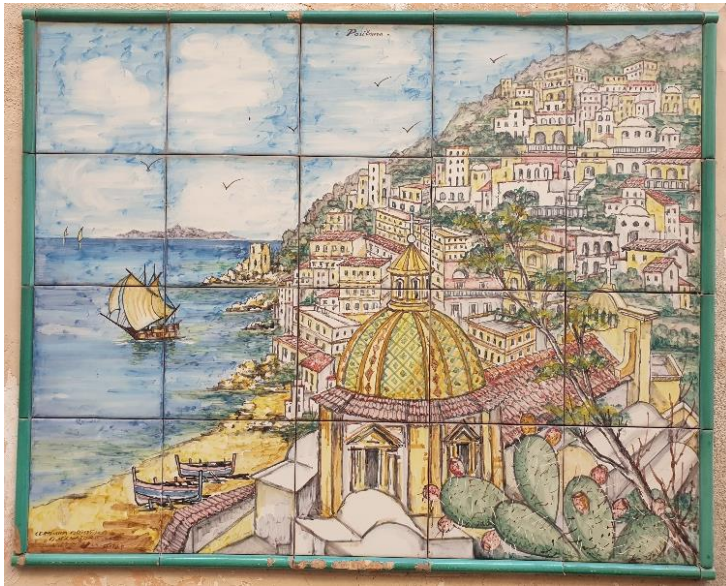
In April we travelled to Italy, partly for a holiday on the Amalfi coast with M's sister Theresa, and partly for a mathematics conference on the island of Ischia, off Naples. At both locations we had a wonderful apartment at the coast with great views. It was great fun to explore small coastal villages by ferry, bus and on foot, and to have delicious dinners made from fresh local vegetables and seafood. The Amalfi coast is spectacular and fairly close to the archeological site of Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius (sadly, we didn't get to climb it). The huge eruption that buried Pompeii occurred in 79 AD, preserved many aspects of life at that time. There were small shops selling ‘street’ food, wonderful bakeries (flat bread, a pizza precursor), and clever design features and construction methods. There were some well-preserved streets paved with stone that were permanently closed to chariots, elevated walk ways to keep pedestrians’ feet dry in heavy rain/flooding and a massive stadium located just out of town to avoid congestion during events (it seated 20,000!).

Port of Ischia in the afternoon sun – the conference was held in a nearby hotel





(left) View from our apartment at Vietri sul Mare, a small village known for its ceramics, beautiful tiles and many tile murals (below), including this one of the old village. (right) View from a walk through the hills, vineyards and small villages behind Amalfi town.



(left) Pompeii with Mount Vesuvius in background.

(below) Castello Aragonese on a very small island connected to Ischia by a stone causeway -- parts of the castle are >1200 years old.



Island of Ischia: 17th Century Pilastrì Aqueduct and beautiful buildings along pedestrian street in the village of Forio

Marie and Theresa explored the beautiful and interesting island of Ischia, consisting of many separate small villages set amongst the hills, while Stephen attended the conference. We all went to two musical concerts, a “field trip” to the amazing La Mortella Gardens, and a multi-course conference banquet that ended with 4 consecutive dessert courses and Italian liqueurs!

Before flying to the US, we visited friends Tom and Judi in Rome (we originally met them in Fiji) and Tom gave us personal walking tour of the ancient city. We saw the impressive Roman Forum, the Colosseum, a 6-story market building, a giant rebuilt Colossus statue, and much more. We greatly enjoyed Italian hospitality, history and food.

(left): The Forum, the central district of ancient Rome; (right) The Colossus of Constantine (11 m/35 ft reconstruction from 9 parts of the original sculpture)



After 2 weeks in Italy, we went to the US for 3 weeks where a highlight was a large gathering of M's brothers and sisters (and partners) in brother Michael's house in Maine. Of course there was lots of catching up, walking, talking, cooking, and eating as there always is. We had a fun excursion to the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Boothbay. Part of the fun was finding the five hidden sculptures in the woods. These were [giant Trolls created by a Danish artist](#) (Thomas Dambo) from recycled wood (click on link to see more). Amazingly, we saw a similar installation in Perth by the same artist a year earlier (called Giants). Marie organized a reunion of some of her cousins from Massachusetts and Connecticut (mother's family). We told lots of old stories, laughed, ate and some played a very competitive game of horseshoes. On another day, we saw M's last surviving Aunt Annette, aged 92, and more cousins on the Ferland side. We also visited M's nieces and nephews, and managed to see some old friends too. As usual, it was a jam-packed visit that was over before we knew it.



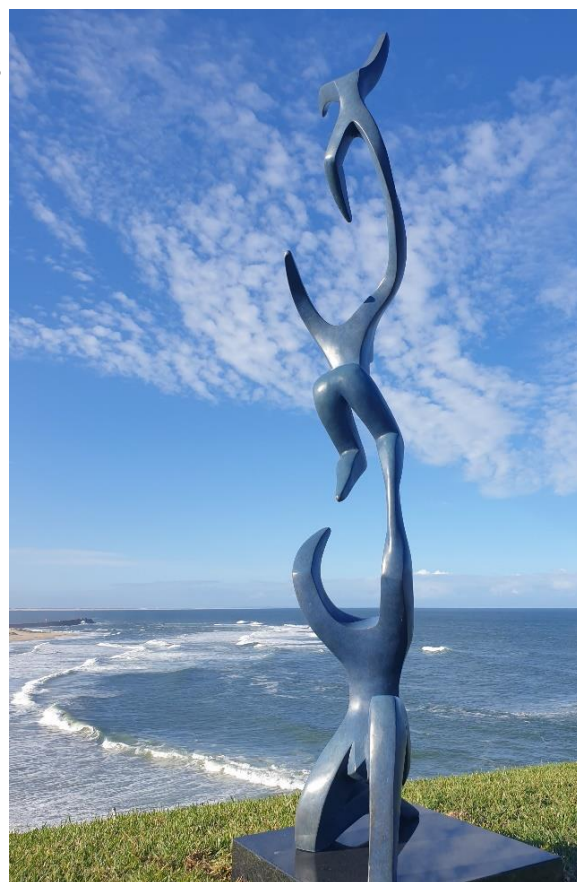
Stephen impersonating one of the Danish trolls in Maine; Sisters in Carver (May): Jeanne, Marie, Theresa & Claire



We had a big shock in June when Marie's sister Theresa had a serious stroke. Since then, she has been working hard with physical, speech and occupational therapists (and family), which has resulted in great

improvements in walking and talking. Fortunately, there are some excellent therapists nearby. Marie travelled to the US for September to help out, and we're grateful for frequent phone calls with family.

Throughout the year, we enjoyed some lovely walks in a local nature reserve with Stephen's brother Tim and wife Anna. It's wonderful to live so close so we can catch up with them, Jackson and Sasha (their kids) more often. In May we went with them to visit *Sculptures by the Sea* (similar to the exhibitions in Perth and Sydney), and saw some really interesting sculptures on a beautiful sunny day. It's a relatively new annual event in Newcastle that we look forward to seeing next year. (below): Octopus made out of scrap metal; (right) "Up, Up and Away" a bronze sculpture about family connections.



Stephen was in a bit of a slump for a chunk of the year, partly related to some health problems (now resolved). Now he is back to doing mathematics as well as garden jobs and helping his mother who turned 89 this month. We had a big family gathering to celebrate Mum's birthday in early December. A few months ago, S's oldest niece announced she is pregnant (due in February) – it's very exciting news as this will be Mary's first great grandchild!

October and November were busy, starting with a trip to Perth (by plane!). Apart from being a research visit for Stephen, we saw a lot of our good friends (although sadly not all). Western Australia has a very special place in our hearts – a combination of dear friends, the beautiful and unique wildflowers, the outstanding King's Park and many galleries/museums. We are grateful to Ursula and Chris for inviting us to stay at the beginning of our trip and for cooking us such exquisite meals. Then we moved to Jane and David's place in Inglewood around the corner from where we used to live. We house-sat while they were cycling around Europe, and then we caught up with them for a few days when they returned. Walking down familiar streets and catching the #950 bus from our old bus stop seemed quite surreal!



Chris, Ursula and Betty, picnic by the Swan River



David and Coral installing the 'shed' window

After Perth, the conference season started. First a Coastal Geology conference for Marie in Bateman's Bay on the NSW south coast (Stephen did mathematics and walked on the beach), then one for Stephen in Newcastle, and most recently the Australian Algebra Conference in Canberra. While Stephen attended this conference, Marie visited an old friend Kath, various art galleries including the National Sculpture gallery, and spent time with friends Neil and Grazyna who were also in town. We stayed with our dear friends Peter, Nicki and their son Reuben, and caught up on life while sharing meals. We always enjoy our visits to Canberra.

Besides the trips, and lots of time visiting or speaking with family and friends, we have also joined the Hunter Bird Observers Club (which is abbreviated as HBOC). They are a very professional and knowledgeable bunch of locals, as well as being friendly. Stephen doubts we will ever rival the experts (Marie is sure she won't!), but we enjoy the monthly meetings with guest speakers and hope to go on some trips to learn more about the local area, including the birds. We've also occasionally helped our friends Coral and David through the year in building a "shed" on their forested property about 2 hours from Newcastle (*photo on previous page*). It will be a very comfortable base when they visit, especially when it's wet or cold, and will sometimes be used by researchers who go to study animals (some endangered) and plants that live there. Eventually the property will be added to the adjacent national park.

We will begin the year with hope, buoyed by the fact that we are (finally) having solar panels installed. We enjoy having visitors, so if you are planning to be in the Newcastle area, please let us know (we promise not to put you to work on one of the many projects on our to-do list!) We look forward to hearing from you.

We wish you good health, and send our love and hopes for a peaceful 2025, both for you and the wider world.

Marie and Stephen

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