

# On A Jolly

James and Olly's around the world trip!

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## Our Route

August 17, 2022

Categories: UK

You can see our high-level plan for the year below. Do you have a recommendation? Fill out the form on the contact us page!



# T-30 days till lift off!

August 21, 2022

Categories: UK

Over the last 3 months there has been a hive of activity preparing us for our departure – handing in our notices, finding tenants to rent our flat, trying to get the right visas (several visits to the Indian consulate, £300 and many hours of our lives we won't get back), getting a whole range of travel vaccines, buying lots of random travel crap we probably don't have space for and just generally preparing to put life as we know it on hold!

I can't believe it's now only 30 days till we fly to India. I am both nervous and excited about our adventure for the next 12 months! But very ready to get on that plane.

I'm really looking forward to keeping you all updated on our travels. I am going to aim for a weekly blog post to give you a flavour of what we have been up to each week and you'll get the odd guest edit from James and friends we are visiting along the way! I'll do my best to keep it interesting and excuse my grammar in advance 😊

You can find our route and a live updating map of where in the world we are on the [our route](#) page. We'd love to hear recommendations as we are travelling and also feel free to comment on any posts.

For any super fans you can subscribe to get weekly email notifications when we post right at the bottom of this page.

Now to finish my last week of work and then head to Rhodes, Greece for a pre-travel family holiday (yes... a pre-travel holiday to ease us in 😅).

Next update to come when we reach destination one – India! Our route through India is as follows  
Delhi -> Shimla -> Jaipur -> Jodhpur -> Mumbai -> Goa!





# A Delhi-ghtful first 4 days!

September 25, 2022

Categories: India

Tags: Agra, Delhi, Food, Old Delhi, Taj



Namaste!

Despite the unprecedented rain in Delhi for this time of year we have had an incredible first 4 days of our trip – we haven't let the rain stop us seeing the major sites in Delhi & Agra (Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Qutub Minar, India Gate, Delhi Old Town, and more).

## Agra for the day:

An early start on our first full day in India to take the train to Agra. The trains in India are very efficient, comfy and extremely cheap (at least that's our experience so far). Once you've managed to navigate the station to find the platform its by far the smoothest way to travel in India.

The rain was pouring as we arrived at the Taj Mahal but that only added to the grandeur (and we had our coats and umbrellas after all). You can see why Taj Mahal is one of the 7 wonders of the world as soon as you arrive and see the towering marble mausoleum. Taj Mahal took 7 years to build and was a gift for Emperor Shah Jahan's wife. And not many people know that it is built on top of wooden foundations that leverage the moisture from the river to ensure they don't expand or contract.

Following a quick lunch at a rooftop cafe overlooking the Taj (with some monkey friends) we headed across to the Agra fort where the rain let up allowing us to stroll around the incredible fort before heading back to Delhi.

so he could take over rule.







## Old Delhi – Food Walking Tour

On Friday night we took a private walking tour so we could experience Old Delhi. Raghu our guide had planned an exciting route weaving through the busy lanes and wholesale markets streets (there was a whole street just for wedding invites – yes just the invites). The whole tour was a complete overload to the senses and the photos just don't do justice too the level of organised chaos in Old Delhi.

We tried a whole range of different street food dishes over the course of 5 hours interspersed with walking, rickshaws (including getting entangled with an armoured truck) and incredible stories from Raghu, finishing with a full meal – needless to say we were quite full after!

One of the highlights for me was when we spiralled up some very dark stairs to emerge on a balcony overlooking the spice market, we had Chai tea delivered and Raghu told us the story of how food in Delhi came to be.

The whole thing was an incredible experience and if you are ever in Delhi and are looking for a tour make sure you give Raghu a message – [link here](#).





Spices in old Delhi





## The food...

I know many of you have been asking ‘how is the food there’ so let me tell you...

The food has been incredible – we haven’t had a single bad dish! And more importantly we haven’t (yet) had Delhi Belly! We have been careful but did break the three golden rules on day one:

- Avoid Ice – I had an iced coffee
- Try to eat veggie – We had fish and Pork on day one as it sounded too good to miss
- Don’t over eat – how can you not clear a plate of delicious food!

I have been surprised the variation of food. Whilst I didn’t expect we would just be eating curry I wasn’t quite expecting such a wide variety. The area where we were staying (just north of the deer park) is known for its Northeastern Indian food which is mixture of Indian and Chinese – and quite frankly delicious. On our final night in Delhi we went to a Nepalese restaurant and ate Thali and Momo.

... and I couldn’t not mention the delicious Chai Tea we have been drinking every day – absolutely delicious. If you haven’t tried it you definitely should!

I hope that gives a flavour of our trip so far. We are currently on a train to Kalka where we will change onto the UNESCO World Heritage Toy Train which weaves its way into the mountain town of Shimla! Then later in the week we will make our way back down to Jaipur. Any recommendations please don’t hesitate to let us know.

## Epilogue from James:

Once you’re through the first 12 hours or so of complete intensity, India (and more specifically Delhi) is awesome. But it is a complete assault on the senses – car honking, street vendors shouting, the

smell of spices and street food, the narrow streets, the many entangled cables above your head at all times. It feels a long way from home and I've loved it. That said, it's nice to sit on the train out into the mountains to escape the craziness for a few days.

Our dish of the week was a butter chicken we had on our tour of Old Delhi, at a restaurant called Shahi Mehfil just down from the Jama Masjid mosque (which looks great at night lit up). We saw them BBQ the chicken on the street before frying it off in the sauce they had simmering away, and according to our guide Raghul its the best butter chicken in Delhi. I believe him.



## Trains, Tigers and Tummy Troubles – Shimla, Jaipur &

# Ranthambore

September 29, 2022

Categories: India



## Toy train into the mountains:

On Sunday we set off from Delhi to Kalka where we changed for the UNESCO world heritage toy train.

For our journey it rained for 95% of the time up into the mountains but it was still stunning being in the clouds. You'll see from the pictures we also experienced some rain inside the carriage through a leaky roof so had our coats on – didn't bother us though!

One photo just couldn't capture the beauty of the journey so I've put together a little video to give you a flavour of the journey. Street food vendors hopped on and off the train as we want along the 5 hour journey service all wonder of treats – we avoided these as it was one of our rules and stuck to packet food (little did we know it was already too late.... More on that in a moment). It was a long day of train travel but an absolutely incredible experience! The mountain air after Delhi was so refreshing. The walk up the mountain with our bag to the hostel was less fun though (we accidentally went the long way).



<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/videoleap-5c8ae80f-6d01-4f27-b565-06ca5c0b63b0.mp4>

A few photos of the journey and Shimla itself.





## We got sick...

It was always inevitable that we would get sick along the way in India we just didn't know when and perhaps we tempted fate with the last blog post. But boy did we get sick, James was struck down first and me 12 hours later I'll save you the details but the next two days were spent in our hostel (thank

god for Netflix). We managed to grab some antibiotics from the pharmacy (to all our doctor friends don't worry we did our research on Google 😊) and they helped ease things enough for a quick trip up to the amazing Jaku temple (where a LOT of big monkeys live), which is over 2,400m elevation.

We then caught our 2 hour delayed 5 hour toy train back down the mountain feeling pretty worse for wear (me especially) – it was a struggle but we made it to Chandigarh for our flight to Jaipur the next morning.

## Jaipur

We were picked up from Jaipur in an awesome antique car by a driver called Shahid, who also happens to be a textile designer / tailor. We stayed at a hostel called The Hosteller which was laid back and had a great rooftop cafe. Our first full day in Jaipur I was still feeling pretty terrible so it was a chilled one, but James ventured out for a couple of hours to see the city palace. But the following day, feeling better, we went on a tuktuk tour with our driver Moa to see the amber fort and some of the other sights. Our final stop was Shahid's family shop where we caved in and ordered some tailored shirts and trousers from him. The people in Jaipur (and we think Rajasthan in general) seem to be a lot more friendly and relaxed than what we experienced in Delhi. Lots of people in the street who are generally curious where we're from and just want a chat and aren't selling anything. It took a couple of days to let our guard down as there are still lots of people (mostly tuktuk drivers) out there who would scam you but once we started stopping and humouring people we had some great conversations.







## Tiger Tiger – where are you?

Those who have known me a long time will know that tigers are one of my all time favourite animals so I couldn't miss the opportunity to take a safari and potentially see one. This required a quick train 2 hours south of Jaipur and an early start at Ranthambore National Park.

We set off at 6am (loaded with Imodium) with everything crossed but also the expectation not to see any tigers as it is notoriously rare. We boarded our jeep with a lovely family from Bangalore and our guide and driver and accelerated off into the sunrise and the forest in search of wildlife.

Unfortunately we didn't see any tigers this time – there's a 50/50 chance and it's just been monsoon season so the jungle is dense, green and luscious so can be harder to spot them.

That said, we had a great day and saw a lot of wildlife – from deer to monkeys, birds, bugs and lizards. Some tourists stay for a week and do multiple safaris a day (dawn and dusk) and still aren't lucky enough to spot tigers, so we weren't too disheartened.





Evidently I didn't take this one but I couldn't not include one photo of the Ranthambore locals. [Photo source here.](#)



## Closing

Onwards to Jodhpur today by train excited to see another city in Rajasthan. We've booked into an heritage hotel which looks super cool. Then on to Bombay on Wednesday. Look forward to updating you next week.

Please keep the comments and suggestions coming we love them and read every one!

My dish of the week – a simple one this week – coconut cookies from Shimla which got me through Delhi Belly.

## James Epilogue

Jaipur has been my favourite place in India so far and I've had some great conversations with the locals. Particularly when I was out by myself, people wanted to stop and chat, invite me back to their home for Chai or food, and give me their number. Shahid even invited us to his brother's wedding. Whilst I was pretty sick in Shimla I was mostly recovered by the time we got to Jaipur so I'm feeling lucky I got to make the most of it. My dish(es) of the week were at a really cool cocktail bar/restaurant near our hostel in Jaipur called Native, where we shared butter chicken tacos and a

Hyderabadi chicken naan. I was also feeling well enough to accompany it with a mango gin based cocktail which was out of this world (Olly had a non-alcoholic mojito). Now that Olly is also feeling better again I'm looking forward to a few more rooftop beers in Jodhpur (where the view of the fort at night from the city is awesome).



## High wires and heavy downpours – Jodhpur & Mumbai

October 9, 2022

Categories: India

Tags: India, Jodhpur, mumbai, zipline



## Jodhpur – The blue city!

I mentioned last week that we were staying in a heritage hotel in Jodhpur – well it was a hidden gem ([Baijoo Niwas](#)) it was 10 minutes walk or 2 mins auto-rickshaw from all the main bars and restaurants and the hotel itself was just beautifully restored – they took two residential properties and converted into one beautiful hotel.

We managed to do some exploring by auto-rickshaw on our first day in Jodhpur. First we headed to nearby Mandore Gardens, then the Jaswant Thada which was beautiful and the sun was beaming through the marble creating beautiful colours inside. We then headed to the old step well (Toorji Ka Jhalra Bavdi) where we watched the daring local kids throwing themselves 4 stories into the water – whilst I sipped on a lassi (I'm addicted to a mango lassi!) and James a coffee.

We've noticed as we've come further south there is more consumption of coffee which is good

because we are both big coffee fans – after a quick bit of research I found that nearly all the coffee plantations are in south India so makes sense they would drink more coffee than tea!

Again like Jaipur the people in Jodhpur have been so hospitable, helpful and friendly.

Some snaps of Jodhpur:



On our second day we decided to do something a bit more adventurous given we were both feeling a lot better so we signed up to the Flying fox zip line course, high above the Mehrangarh fort and surrounding lake.

We were joined by Indian couple who now build hotels in Tanzania (Shirley and her husband) for the morning of zip lining – it was a fantastic way to see the fort and I put together a short video below as the one last week went down well. We also now have an invite to visit Tanzania – can we squeeze it in at the end 😊 !



<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/videoleap-0e162ec6-3251-492c-b1ef-4d49107f2bc6.mp4>

## Mumbai

Firstly, for those wondering, the correct name for Mumbai is Mumbai (as of 1995). These days only the affluent still call the city by its previous name – Bombay. ‘Bombay’ is an anglicised version of the Portuguese name used by the British when they took control of the city in the 17th century (in Portuguese it was Bom Bahia, which means “good bay” – thus becoming Bombay).

We immediately found Mumbai to be more built up and western with much more reliable roads with actual lanes and some driving etiquette. And most surprising to us there were pavements so you could actually walk between places not in the road – albeit most of the locals still like to walk in the road. We settled into a heritage style hotel called ‘Abode’ – a lovely place with a chilled authentic vibe.

First thing we did was book massages (of course we did – it's tough all this travelling 😊). The interesting thing about these massages is our masseuse was blind as the hotel supports a blind agency. Neither of us quite knew what to expect but we had great Swedish Massages from highly skilled masseuses! All round great experience and nice to give something back to the local community.

Early the next morning (6am early!) we had a dawn tour booked to see 'off beat Mumbai' with Pranav from Grand Mumbai Tours (would highly recommend).

We started our tour with the newspaper sorting which takes place every morning, evidently there are far less papers than there used to be with the use of the internet/smart phones but many thousands of papers get sorted on the side of the road and cycled to offices and hotels around the city every day.

Next we hit the wholesale Vegetable and Flower markets. Both were bustling for 6:30am a flurry of people, colours and wonderful fragrances. These two markets supply most shops, hotels and restaurants in southern Mumbai. Was fantastic to walk around and feel part of the buzz.

We then were lucky enough to be flies on the wall in the morning Hare Krishna ceremony at one of the major temples in Mumbai. What a way to start your day – there was worship and prayer first then it erupted into singing, dancing and chanting. Ending finally in a teaching. We took blessings from some flames and gave our own blessing to Krishna with a small flower which we waved at the idols.

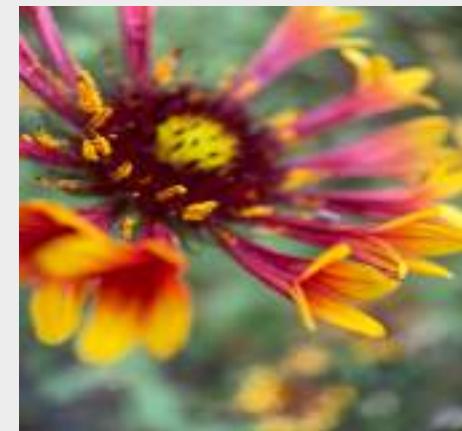
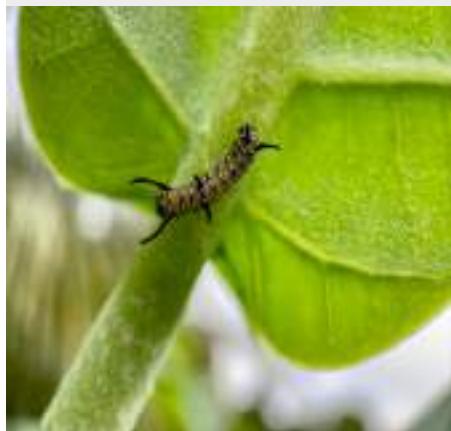
It was a very inclusive and positive atmosphere and people weren't staring at us like "why are these foreigners here" – we felt very welcomed.

We then saw the outdoor laundry which is surrounded by slums and is where most of the working classes laundry is done (including nurses and junior police). And immediately from there juxtaposing we went to the most wealthy street to see the richest man in India's house – he has 600 of his own staff!

We closed out the trip with a lovely wander around the hanging gardens (where I had a play with my Macro lens – see below) and ending with a delicious Masala Dosa for breakfast!



Plants ants and other flora:



## Elephanta Caves

A must do in Mumbai is to take the 45 (ish) minute ferry from the Gateway to India across to a nearby Island to see the 2000 year old cave temples which are mostly filled with carvings of Shiva the Hindu god – this was once a place of worship till the Portuguese and then British arrived. They were restored in the 70s and now are a big tourist attraction although we did see a few worshipers there too.

The areas surrounding the caves are home to a lot of fearless monkeys – so we weaved our way

around avoiding the monkeys, but still witnessing a few attacks (usually when someone has biscuits in their bag).

We then set off on the ferry back to Mumbai (I say ferry loosely this was a tired boat which had some plastic seats on it). And despite the forecast the heavens opened – this was not just rain it was biblical down pouring for about 45 minutes of the hour long choppy ferry journey. I don't think we've ever been so soaked. As we got off the boat all the streets were flooded up to ankle height. The locals not phased taking photos in their flip flops.

We made our way back to the hotel and began the drying process – the only real casualty being part of our crossword book. Thanks to coats and a waterproof rucksack.



## Closing

So another action packed week. As I'm writing this we are about 10 hours into our overnight train from Mumbai to Goa – we were very lucky to get the only 2 person cabin on the train so it's been relatively comfortable and we both managed to sleep.

We should reach Goa in a few hours. The sun is shining and we are both ready for some beach days and to read some books (recommendations welcome). I have to make a little shout out to Dianne from work who has hand picked book recommendations for different countries on our journey – the first one for India was a great read ‘The White Tiger – Aravind Adiga’ – we’ve both finished it!

For those wondering how we are feeling in relation to Delhi Belly we are doing much better, I’m still not quite right but will get there no doubt!



## Good boys of India

October 12, 2022

Categories: India

James – 12/10/22

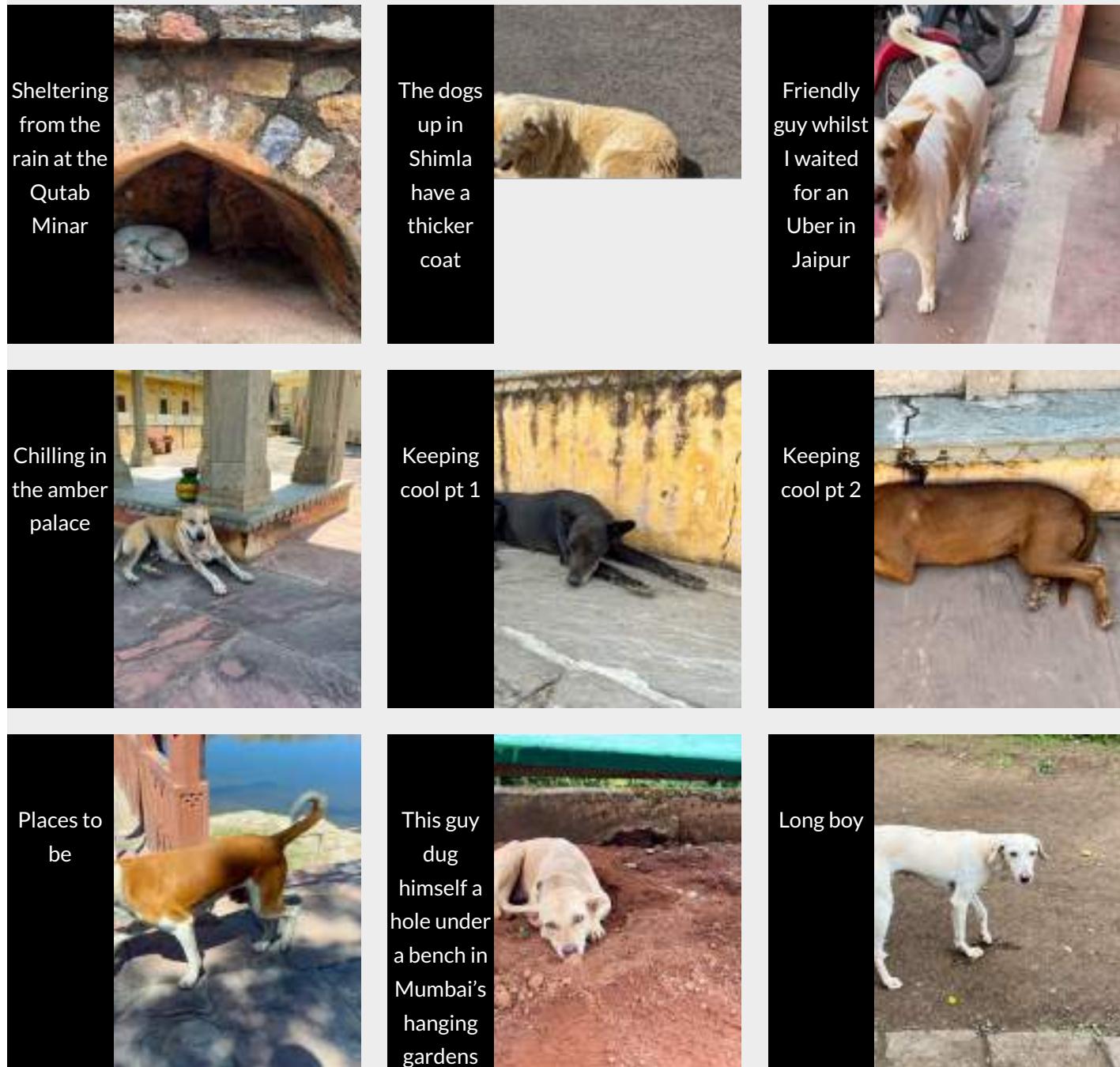
## Strays

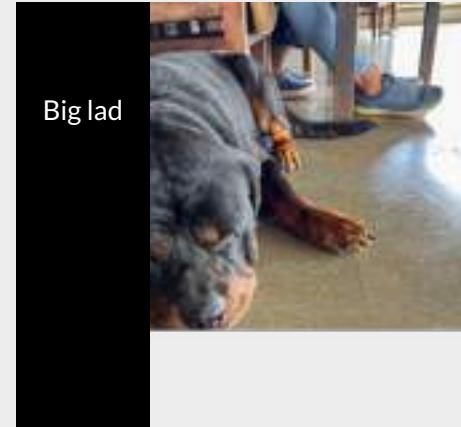
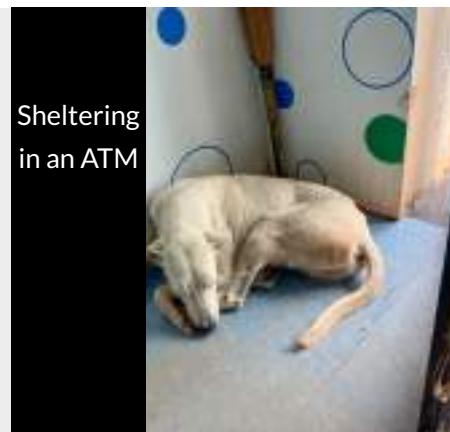
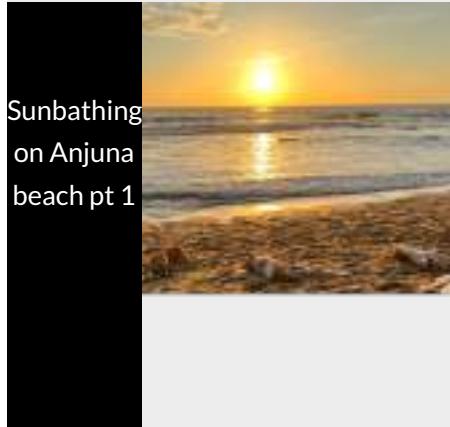
We've seen lots of stray dogs everywhere we've been in India. Some look in a pretty healthy state, others have open wounds or obvious skin problems. The attitude towards dogs in India is mixed. Some obviously love them and care for them and we've seen people pop into a pet shop to buy some treats and start feeding the local dogs – we even saw someone feeding them out of the boot of their car. It is illegal to abuse or kill stray dogs outside of a government run sterilisation or culling programme. Some states do nothing and the population runs wild, whilst other states vaccinate and sterilise to keep things under control. Some states just cull. India has a high rate of rabies and dogs are responsible for 97% of human cases, so it's understandable there is wariness, however I think its the state governments that need to manage the stray populations in a humane way, without dogs starving to death or getting violent towards people because of their hunger.

In Goa we've seen many more dogs with collars on who are owned, but tend to roam around. They seem well looked after and loved by all.

# Anyway, here's some pictures

Here are some of the good boys we've encountered across the country...





# The good, the bad & the ugly – Goodbye India, Hello Vietnam!

October 16, 2022

Categories: India, Vietnam

Tags: Beach, Goa, Hanoi

I wanted to round up our time in Goa with some good and some bad points about our time there. I'll start with the bad news.

## The Ugly

Unfortunately I continued to be ill so we found a private doctor for a consultation – it was only 500rupee (£5) – can you imagine the cost in the UK! The taxi to get there was more expensive.

Dr Ravinder was fantastic and put me on a new treatment course and also lined up a series of lab

tests to get to the bottom of what was wrong as Delhi Belly shouldn't last 2+ weeks.

When the tests came back (saving you the gross details) it turns out I've been unlucky enough to pick up some parasites along the way – so no wonder I've been unwell. But one quick pill and my parasite pals who've been hitching a ride should have been eradicated! Big shout out to my remote GP (Tash) and Pathologist (Helen) in the UK who've been giving remote consultation and second opinion on lab results!

James has also taken the parasite meds as advised just in case he has any unwanted hitchhikers. He had a funny turn Thursday night (could be a dodgy prawn) but otherwise is feeling well.

Anyway I am feeling much much better and actually managed my first coffee and beer in 2 weeks last night in Hanoi – hurrah!

## The bad

Our first hostel in Goa was a bit of a dump, with tonnes of problems and in the middle of a building site – not to mention the weather was a bit naff. We were staying in Anjuna beach which was basically a construction site, quite filthy with rubbish and most things just not open yet – partly as we were very early in the season. We did manage to find a few nice spots to eat and chill but not many. Would love to see the difference in 6 weeks.

There was also an abundance of tarpaulin everywhere, on roofs walls inside outside – which really takes the shabby chic vibe and turns it into building site vibes.

However the first few days we were back and forth from the doctors, labs and chemist so we were quite busy and had a base at least.

## The Good

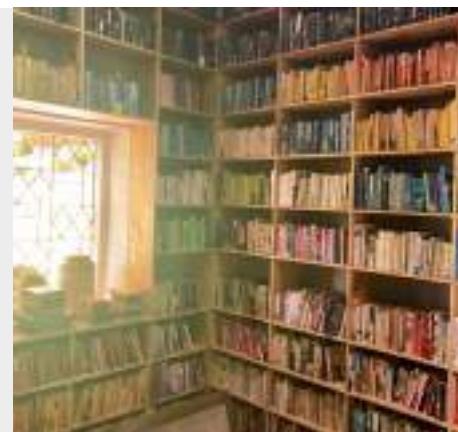
We then moved from Anjuna to Candolim/Calangute beach. We moved to a little resort (for a few nights of luxury). There were open restaurants and beach bars, the beach was clean and the sun came out. \*breaths sigh of relief\*

Everything immediately got better we had a wonderful little hut with all the amenities needed and more. We were 100 steps from a pristine beach and 200 steps from an amazing pool. The staff onsite were absolutely fantastic, including our own care taker for our hut! They delivered breakfast and meals to our terrace and we could hear the sea from our bed as we drifted off. Idillic!

We had 2 days of proper relaxation. I tried a local ayurvedic massage which was very oily but incredibly relaxing- somewhere between Swedish and Thai style. We found an incredible restaurant (A Reverie) where I had a deconstructed Banoffee pie (photo below but it doesn't do it justice).

Final bit of good luck here – on the day we checked out they moved us to a 3 person private villa with pool to relax for 6 hours before our airport transfer!

Aashyana Lakhanpal was our resort – it wasn't cheap but was our little treat for the end of India.



## India to Vietnam

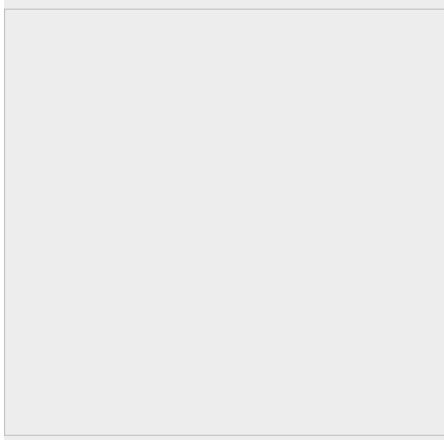
We were both very sad to leave India – we could have spent the whole year exploring India alone and we probably didn't maximise our time given being a bit sick. But we've certainly had a wonderful experience, met some fantastic people and eaten the best Indian food of our lives! But now on to Hanoi, Vietnam for country 2 of ~ 15.

We had a bit of a flight fiasco with parts of our journey being cancelled or hugely delayed so it was a bit of a nail biting morning. But we arrived at the airport and the budget airline (equivalent of

Ryanair) were just brilliant moved us two flights early to ensure we wouldn't miss our connection to Hanoi – with no fees!

We arrived in Hanoi yesterday morning and spent the morning exploring the old town which has an incredible energy, vibrant colours everywhere and a really cool vibe to it.

We then had a Power Nap given our flight was through the night. We then headed out to a water puppet show and for dinner (thanks for the recommendations Roz).



## Water Puppet show

The water puppet show was quite an experience I managed to snap a few quick shots (not my finest photography) to give you a bit of a feel for it – photography was allowed some people filming the whole show.

The show is accompanied by a live band and chorus of singers and voice overs. The show portrays various Vietnamese folk tales. Was a really cool display with fireworks and dry ice included.





[https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/img\\_1121.mp4](https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/img_1121.mp4)

## Closing

Sad to say farewell to India, not so sad to say farewell to our parasite friends. But already loving exploring Vietnam!

Someone has a big birthday tomorrow so we have a lovely meal planned tonight which we are both excited for (at T.U.N.G). Then more exploring in Hanoi tomorrow.

After Hanoi we have an action packed week. We are going on a Halong Bay Cruise for two nights then trekking in the mountains of Sapa! We can't wait to update you next week.

For those in the UK I hope you are enjoying the start of 🍂 – there is always something quite special about getting the coats out.

Ooo also we've made an impulse decision this week to shake up our plans and are heading to Philippines instead of Thailand due to weather this time of year and will go to Thailand in way back to Sri Lanka!

Any Philippines recommendations do send our way!



# Sailing, Eating and Trekking through Ha Long and Sapa

October 20, 2022

Categories: Vietnam

Tags: Ha Long Bay, Hanoi, sapa



## Hanoi Food Walking Tour

On Monday (after digesting our 21 course tasting menu from my birthday meal the night before!), we went on a food walking tour of Hanoi (HA Tours) joined by two Americans and two Aussies. Our guide Chris took us around the old town of Hanoi sampling some amazing dishes from across Vietnam. We ate at restaurants he has been eating at since he was a young boy. I put a list in the appendix of what we ate and where for anyone interested. Below are a few snaps of the dishes we remembered to photo before we ate.

The lovely American couple we met also came for birthday drinks with us after on beer street and we bumped into them again in the mountains of Sa Pa – it's a small world when travelling South East Asia!



## Ha Long Bay Cruise

James had booked a Ha Long Bay cruise for my birthday and it didn't disappoint. We were on the Dragon's Pearl for 3 days and 2 nights. We got to venture further out into Bai Tu Long Bay which has less tourist boats around but is the same iconic landscape as the more well known Ha Long Bay.

There was 19 of us on the boat from various nationalities. It was very social and we got to know each other across the 3 days.

We were blessed with sun on the first day as we set sail into the bay. We then stopped to visit a cave and kayak around several of the islands – it's a really surreal place. Feels like you are at the end of the

world or in an avatar film!

All the food we had onboard was delicious – exceeding our expectations. Fresh seafood was bought to the boat from local fishermen daily – probably the freshest fish we've ever eaten.

However our host Coco did enforce mandatory Karaoke after dinner every evening. The chef was on 'Vietnams got talent' so would kick off with a song and a beautiful piece of music on his bamboo flute – followed by the rest of us butchering songs from across the globe! Luckily the beers didn't stop flowing!

Second day we had quite a bit of rain – seeming to be a bit of a theme perhaps we brought it with us from the UK! James braved some more kayaking (and swimming) whilst I spent some time getting cosy on the boat with a book and pot of tea (Ginger Tea is my new addiction – since being sick it's my favourite thing to drink).

On our final day we visited a floating fishing village and were rowed around to see the floating houses – about 100 people live on this floating village making their livelihood fishing. They even have their own religion and they pray to the sea gods for good fishing.

Also on the final day there were no other boats to be seen – usually there is one or two other tourist boats on the horizon. As we arrived back to the bay and signal returned it became apparent that all boats had been called back the day before due to high winds – but we had no signal so managed to stay out for the night!

All round an amazing experience. A few photos below from the sunnier day.



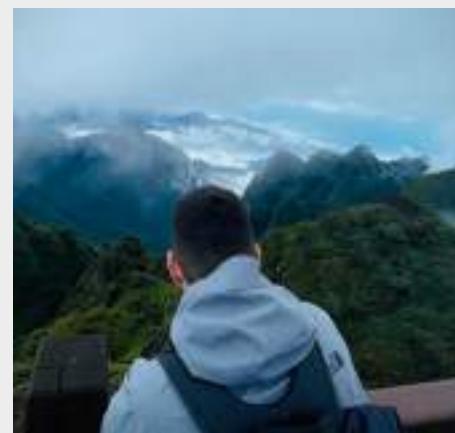


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## Hiking in the mountains – Sa Pa

We booked our two day one night trekking tour with Sapa Sisters – a group of local Hmong women who run their own trekking tour company taking tourist into the valley. To get to Sapa we took the overnight train and spent one day and night in a homestay in Sapa to ensure we were well rested for the trekking.

On the first day in Sapa, prior to the trekking, we took the cable car up to the top of Fansipan – the highest mountain in South East Asia (over 3000m at the summit). The clouds were very low so visibility was a bit poor but there were moments where the sky cleared and you could see the spectacular view.



After a restful sleep we woke early to meet our amazing Hmong guide, Lan. Lan guided us through the valley of rice fields and villages explaining about her life, family, the environment and also the culture of the Hmong people (and other local tribes).

We then spent the night at her aunt's homestay in a village called Ta Van (joined by a lovely French couple who were also trekking). We had a delicious meal with the whole family, meeting at least four generations of their family, their chickens, dogs, water buffalo and squirrel which they had caught (we think probably for dinner tonight 😊).

It was an absolutely incredible experience, our favourite so far on the trip. We learnt so much about

the Hmong people and more specifically the amazing Hmong women. I will do a special separate blog post as there is just too much I want you all to know 😊

Here are a few snaps and a bit of drone shots footage from the trip – photos just don't do the landscape justice!





<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/sapa-720p30h.mp4>

## Closing

An amazing week in Vietnam we've loved Ha Long Bay and Sa Pa! Tonight we will take the over night train back to Hanoi and a quick transit through to head further south to Phong Nha – another spot deep in the Vietnamese countryside.

But for now fingers crossed we sleep well on this overnight train!

## Appendix – Food and Restaurants Hanoi

1. Nem: spring roll – 27 Hang Be street
2. Nom bo kho: green papaya salad – 23 Hoan Kiem street

3. Nem Lui: Lemongrass grilled pork roll – 23 Hoan Kiem street
4. Pho ga: chicken rice noodle without soup – 33 Hang Hom street
5. Bun bo Hue: Hue Fermented beef noodles – 60 Bat Su street
6. Banh mi: Vietnamese sandwich – 14 Hang Buom street
7. Kem xoi: sticky rice with coconut ice-cream – 95 Hàng Bạc street
8. Ca phe trung: egg coffee – 105 Hang Buom street

And in case you fancy trying at home here is the Egg coffee recipe – <https://hafoodtours.com/diy-vietnamese-foods/how-to-make-egg-coffee/>



## Hmong People of Sapa

October 28, 2022

Categories: Vietnam

Tags: hmong, sapa, trekking, Vietnam, women

As I mentioned, during our Sapa trek we spent a lot of time with Hmong people, mainly with the women. Learning about their lives was absolutely fascinating and I wanted to share some of their stories in a bit more detail. So here is a dedicated post. I will generalise and anonymise the stories a little because some are quite harrowing. And just to preface this was our experience from spending 2 days with Hmong people and listening to their stories not all factually validated.

The history of Hmong people is very hard to trace as there is very little written down, all knowledge of this history is passed down orally. But these village communities exist predominantly across Vietnam, Laos and China. Where we were staying in Sa Pa is only 1km from the Chinese border. Hmong people have their own language – a branch of the Chinese Miao language. There are more than 2.7 million people who speak Hmong worldwide. It's believed there are around 5m Hmong world wide with 1.3m in Vietnam.

Hmong people are traditionally animist meaning that they have a deep belief in the spirit world and in the interconnection between all living things. One example being that our guide sacrificed a chicken (which is evidently a substantial and expensive meal to a Hmong family) to pray for her daughters fever/sickness to pass – and whilst I don't share this belief in sacrifice her daughters fever had passed by the morning.

Hmong people live off the land growing rice, corn and many other vegetables, fishing and rearing live stock (chickens mostly). Hmong people have a long history of textile art primarily dying woven hemp cloth in wonderful patterns of indigo with the indigo plants surrounding their homes.



The Hmong women are the life blood of these communities and other than manual labour conducted by men in the fields once or twice per year they really do run the show.

## Marriage

Luckily some things have changed and Hmong women do now have an option to chose who they marry but it is expected that they marry young. One Hmong lady we spoke at length with was pressured into marriage at 17 as it was seen as too late – and unfortunately ended up with a “bad husband” in her words.

Until about 50 years ago marriages were arranged for Hmong women or in some instances the bride was kidnapped and married without her or her parents’ consent. This was often from as early as 7-10 years of age and once married it was expected for the woman to move in with her husband or his family and be put to work in the house cooking, cleaning and starting to have children from the age of 14.

A bad husband is one who is never around to help with the house or children. He sits around drinking happy water (Rice wine approx 40%abv) all day by the litre and gambling. And in some instances find other girlfriends to entertain themselves. Leaving their wives to cook, clean, work, look after the children, maintain the house and perform many other duties expected by the husbands family. It’s extremely hard for the women to get a divorce even if they want to – the decision is with the husband. I naively asked if there was any legal standing or support from the police/government – needless to say, there is not.

We even heard one story of a cousin of one of the women we met who was killed by her husband as he wanted to get divorced/get rid of her. But luckily in this instance the police did get involved and he is currently in prison. However his family is selling all their land so they can bribe the police to release him!

Life isn’t this bad for all women, apparently 20% have bad husbands and then the remaining are on a spectrum towards being good. Our guide’s husband (who she had the liberty to choose herself) looks after the children and maintains the farms whilst she is trekking with tourists and earning for the family – which is apparently quite rare!

## Death

Funerals are a huge part of the culture lasting 3-4 days and can often involve a lot of rice wine. Our French companions who we dined with at the homestay witnessed some knife fights (with machetes) in one village where the funeral drinking had been going on all day. Apparently there was also a lot of people asleep on the road through the village.

The reason for the long funeral is to ensure that people are not lost to wander the afterlife alone which is believed to happen if they do not receive proper funeral rites. Proper funeral rites ensure they find their ancestors in the afterlife. Unlike some other tribes their bodies are then buried alone somewhere remote in the forest.

## Working Women

Whilst men have the privilege and power in the community the Hmong women are absolute powerhouses here in Sapa and no doubt other Hmong communities.

The women are expected to take care of the house so are often up at 4 am to prepare breakfast for the whole family, which is often several generations and any siblings of the husband living under the same roof so can be up to 15+ people. She may then do the rounds on the farm and crops (likely with her smallest child on her back). Our guides then hops on a scooter to Sapa to collect tourists for 10km+ of difficult trekking (again often with her smallest child on her back). Then she arrives home to cook dinner and cleans up after. All with a beaming smile and the most positive attitude. Other hmong women run cafes and stalls selling local produce and textiles to tourists.

## Hmong Men

Other than the heavy labour, the men (from my observations and quizzing the guides) really do have a life of luxury in this culture. Whilst some men do help with the maintaining land and looking after children, grand-children and great-grandchildren, most spend their days getting drunk, smoking and waiting for their wives to arrive home and cook.

What I am pleased to say is this culture is changing slowly and there are some men trying to learn English and do trekking / find better jobs but it is less common currently.

## Closing

What I found quite incredible is that having western tourists at homestays and on these treks is helping to change the culture and educate these village people about how things are in the west, how men treat women in the west and many other things such as recycling rubbish etc. It was quite a realisation that we are giving something back to Hmong people in the way we are taking away this amazing experience.

All in all a real life changing experience and if you ever do have the opportunity to spend some time with the Hmong people in Sapa I can guarantee you'll come away with the experience of a life time!

Not my photos but wanted you to see some photos of the Hmong people. Photos by Quang Nguyen Vinh and others.



## Duck Farms and Dragons – Phong Nha, Hue & Hoi An

October 30, 2022

Categories: Vietnam

Tags: Cooking, dragon, ducks, Hoi An, Hue, phong Nha, scooter, waterpark



Every day we seem to be falling more in love with Vietnam – it's hard not to! Yet again we've had an incredibly action packed week with so much to tell you about so I've picked out a few highlights.

## Phong Nha – Caves, Ducks and Rain

Phong Nha is a bit of a hidden gem about 4 hours north of Hue. Phong Nha is an adventurer's paradise but also great for some relaxing in the surroundings of the National Park.

Luckily for us the area has many other amazing caves which you can visit all year round. James had

planned for us to hire a scooter and work our way around several caves and make a trip to the 'Duck Stop' (I'll elaborate on this shortly).

However we woke to torrential rain – the staff and I thought scooting in the rain was bonkers so we needed a rapid change of plan. After some confusion about if the cave was open or the water levels might be too high 😊 we gatecrashed a group of American's trip to Phong Nha cave in a 4x4 – they were lovely and didn't mind another two in the party!

We took a 20 min boat ride to the cave and then you do the rest by foot. It's hard to describe the scale of the cave and unfortunately the photos below really don't do it justice. We walked deep into the cave and James was even brave enough to swim despite the strong currents.



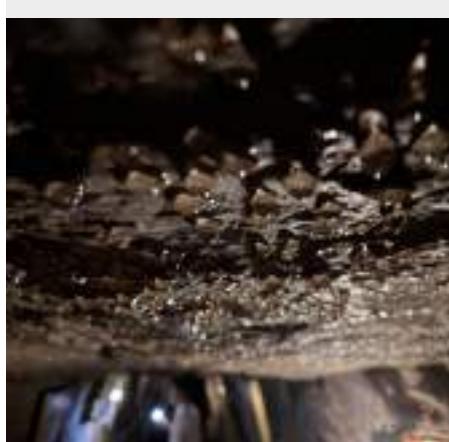
Following the cave visit James did convince me to hire a scooter in the still torrential rain and head to the Duck Stop. The Duck Stop is a duck farm which invites tourists to come in and feed the ducks in rather unusual ways. We asked if the ducks got fat from all the feeding but he said the food goes straight to their eggs and improves the quality of the eggs which they sell. I am sure some ducks do end up on the dinner table – but they've had a great life out in the fields.



<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/videoleap-cc0fac52-83aa-4a46-888a-dd17013a77ae.mp4>

I also wanted to mention our amazing homestay ([Phong Nha Farmstay](#)) which was our base for adventuring in the area. It was a super social spot we met Lisa a solo kiwi/American traveller and we spent hours with the owner learning about the story of the place.

On our transfer to Hue (about 4 hours southeast) we stopped at the Vinh Moc Tunnels. A complex array of tunnels in the DMZ between the border of North and South. Stretching almost 2000m these tunnels were carved and dug by the locals in the area for them to move their lives underground during the war (1965-1966). Whilst an incredible feat, the tunnels were very narrow, cold, dark and damp – pretty horrific living conditions for farmers and their families.



## Hue

We were staying in the imperial citadel area in Hue and it was very peaceful. Lots of locals lived in the area and it only a short scooter to the busy city centre via grab (Uber for scooters in Asia).

The food in Hue is absolutely delicious with various local delicacies including Bánh Lòc (a small clear flat tapioca dumpling) & Bánh Näm (a steamed rice batter muffin filled with pork and shrimp). We headed to one recommended restaurant which to our joy did a platter where you could try one of

each of the key dishes of the region. See the photo below – everything was delicious!



We couldn't not visit the imperial city which was built around 1820 – some snaps of the incredibly preserved city below.

We were then wondering back to collect our scooter to zoom home and I spied two of our companions from the Ha Long Bay cruise (Liz and Stephen from NZ). James wasn't convinced at first but I ran over waving and it was them. Such a small world. We exchanged numbers and met them for a few drinks that evening, exchanging stories of our Vietnamese adventures – and are now planning to meet up in NZ.



Also that evening we were having a beer in a pub and got roped into Halloween festivities with about 30 local kids. We were quickly put in costume and made to speak with the kids and partake in no less than 100 photos... Luckily for us we were paid in free beer! We even made it onto their social media – photo below see if you can spot James and I.



## Hue – Abandoned Water Park

One of the off-the-beaten-track attractions we had on our list was to visit the Thuy Tien old abandoned water park south of Hue – the largest abandoned water park in the world so I am told!

Firstly we needed a mode of transport to get there so following our success with the scooter in Phong Nha we saddled up on a scooter in Hue (for £4 for the day)! And we set off to the waterpark James driving, whilst I back seat drove and provided sat nav. City driving is slightly more perilous but adds to the thrill – confidence and trusting the flow of traffic is the key (sometimes a little hard when there is a man with a washing machine on the scooter in front or a women with 3 kids and a dog on a scooter behind).

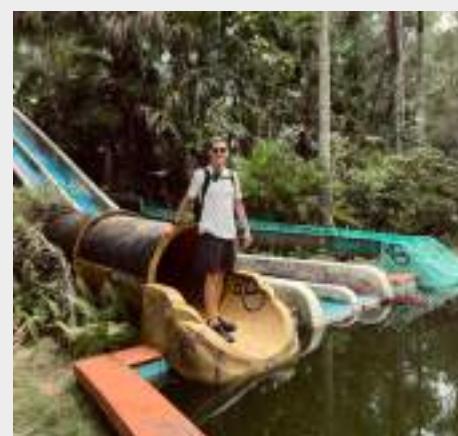
We arrived at the waterpark entrance to find a guard as expected – visitors are not officially allowed. We'd done research in advance and knew bribing the guard was our route in. He asked me to drop 50k (£1.70) on the floor and then we could drive past (whilst he looked the other way). Absolutely hilarious – but I'm now chief briber for the rest of the trip.

Inside the park was really cool. We saw only a couple of other people and a few cows in the totally abandoned park – a photographer's heaven. I had the drone with me so was excited to take some aerial footage... however I had forgotten the battery as it was in hand luggage for the flight \*FACE PALM\*. A mistake I won't make again. Never the less we explored and captured some amazing photos of the park – see below.

Don't worry we did keep an eye out for crocs! A few years following the park closure several of the crocs from the park roamed the area making tourist visits a bit more thrilling – but they were rehomed by PETA several years ago and now live elsewhere in Vietnam.

why.

Also hot off the press – authorities in Hue have just agreed in September to spend ~£800k renovate the space into a park with walking route around the edge. A much better use of the space but I am very glad we visited in its empty and abandoned state.





<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/videoleap-5a5b9e91-57c5-423a-b4d7-2a04106d00ef.mp4>

## Hoi An

After Hue we made our way to Hoi An, a really quaint town 45 minutes south from Da Nang (if you want to see the map click the [our route](#) page and I've been live updating a map there).

We are in Hoi An for 4 nights so an opportunity to settle in, get unpacked and get all our washing done. The town centre here is UNESCO protected and you can see why. It is absolutely stunning, especially at night when illuminated by incredible lanterns at night – hard to capture on camera but see below a few snaps.



## Hoi An – Cooking Course

We had a birthday cooking course booked in Hoi An (thanks Liv, Darce, Rebs, Soph & Ro). The course was amazing we had a hilarious cooking teacher called Vi. I would highly recommend her cooking school ([link here](#)).

Before we started cooking we went to the food market to collect all our fresh ingredients, then to the kitchen to cook up Spring Rolls, Pho, Fish in Banana leaf & Papaya Salad. All were incredibly delicious – we rolled out of the cooking course after attempting to eat everything we had cooked. If anyone wants the recipes let me know and I'll send you.



## Closing

We are nearing the end of our time in Vietnam which we are both feeling quite sad about as it's been incredible. Tonight we are going to the memory show in Hoi An which was recommended to us – we are intrigued to see what it is!

Then two days in Ho Chi Minh before travelling to Koh Rong a small island off the Cambodian coast (only got wifi and power in the last 10 years). The sun looks like it should make an appearance and we have some diving booked on the island.

## Epilogue from James

For me, the highlights this past week have been the scootering (I'm a master of Vietnamese roads now, but Olly will never feel safe on the back if I'm driving) and the slightly more bizarre experiences we've done – duck feeding, trespassing the water park, chatting with Vietnamese schoolchildren in Halloween costumes, etc. Whilst the weather hasn't been great to us, the delightful Vietnamese people, beautiful countryside and delicious food have more than made up for it. And we did get a beach day in today and, whilst it was cloudy and windy, I still managed a dip in the South China Sea. Hue had some really fun bars and it was great to catch up with our Kiwi friends from Ha Long Bay. Hoi An, whilst a bit quieter, is truly beautiful and still has great food and plenty of spots for a beer overlooking the lantern-lit river.

On the subject of beer, I have a new favourite discovery – Huda, which is brewed in Hue and found throughout central Vietnam. Usually just under £1 a bottle it's fair to say we've been making our way through it.

I've also been making my way through almost every Banh Mi in Vietnam. A delicious breakfast/lunch/dinner/snack that fuses French and Vietnamese, I've always had a soft spot for them, and they're found at many roadside stalls as well as in dedicated restaurants/cafes. I'm rating each one as we go and there'll be a special blog post soon to reveal the winner of... the battle of the banh mi.



## Towns, Cities and Island Hopping – Ho Chi Minh to Koh Rong

November 7, 2022

Categories: Cambodia, Vietnam

This week we finished up our time in Vietnam with a visit to the capital city and then headed to our first stop in Cambodia for some time at the beach.

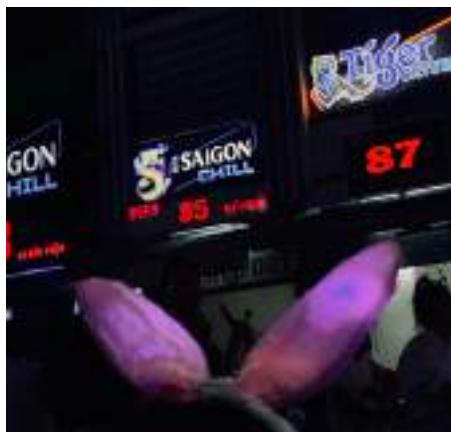
## Hoi An Memory Show

Before we left Hoi An we headed to the memory show as recommended. The show takes place on one of the islands near Hoi An town and before the show you walk around a custom built theme park. The show and theme park are quite a spectacle and a huge juxtaposition to the old town in Hoi An as everything on the island is very grand and modern. The show takes place in a 3300 seats auditorium with no less than 500 professional actors. There was only about 10% of the seats filled when we were there – there were more performers than audience!

The show enacts the last 400 years of Hoi An's history across a humongous stage with a whole raft of lighting and sound effects. It was quite incredible but also lacked an authenticity as it was at such a scale and everything felt so modern and new. But if you have an evening free in Hoi An it's well worth a visit.



## Ho Chi Minh



After Hoi An we headed to our final big city and final stop in Vietnam. Immediately upon arriving you get big city vibes, busy roads, bustling streets and high rise hotels and office blocks – our hostel even had a slide! We were really just passing through Ho Chi Minh for a few nights en route to Cambodia our main objective was to check out the night life and food scene. The only attraction we wanted to visit was the War Remnants museum as we had read that it was a very interesting and insightful museum – we weren't disappointed!

## War Remnants Museum

The museum was set over three floors and really brought to life the impacts of the Vietnamese war on the country and its people. It was really harrowing especially the exhibition in photo journalism from the war.

I have to admit I didn't know too much about the Vietnam war prior to visiting which I feel guilty about as it was really so recent in history (1955-1975). So I wanted to share some facts about the war.

Some facts about the "Vietnam war":

- 3 million Vietnamese were killed (among them 2 million civilians)
- 2 million Vietnamese people injured
- 300,000 Vietnamese people missing
- 300,000 US and allied military killed
- Nearly double the amount of bombs were dropped on Vietnam during the war vs those dropped by all warring nations in WW2 (estimated 10% unexploded)
- Since the war there have been over 40k casualties from unexploded bombs and 60k injured.

Why did the Vietnam war start – good infographic [here](#) which explains.

If you are in Ho Chi Minh this museum is a must visit.

## Koh Rong, Cambodia

Waving a fond fair well to Vietnam we headed to our next country and destination, a small island off Cambodia. We had quite a journey ahead, taxis, flights and boats all to a tight schedule. But lucky for us nothing went Rong (pun intended).

Koh Rong is a bit of a hidden gem of an island off the coast of Cambodia reached by speed boat you arrive to the white sand beaches and clear blue ocean – a little slice of Paradise.

We started with two days of diving to complete our PADI open water certification which sets us up for recreational diving in the Philippines and Thailand.

And after that I don't have too much to report as we've been soaking in the sun with our books. It's been a little overcast at times and even the odd bit of rain but still been wonderful to just chill out and we've made some new furry friends here including 3 legged Petatina (her name translates to potato chip) and our guard dog 'Sam wise' who sleeps outside our room (see snaps below).

We've been staying at Beach Walk resort [here](#) – it's brand new and absolutely stunning. I can also confirm that it has brilliant WiFi as we managed to get Glastonbury tickets from Cambodia from the side of the pool. A bit of Cambodian luck I think!



## Closing

Lapping up the last of the beach today before heading back to the mainland. Next up to visit two key cities in Cambodia – Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. We have a busy week planned across both cities – I will look forward to updating you next week.

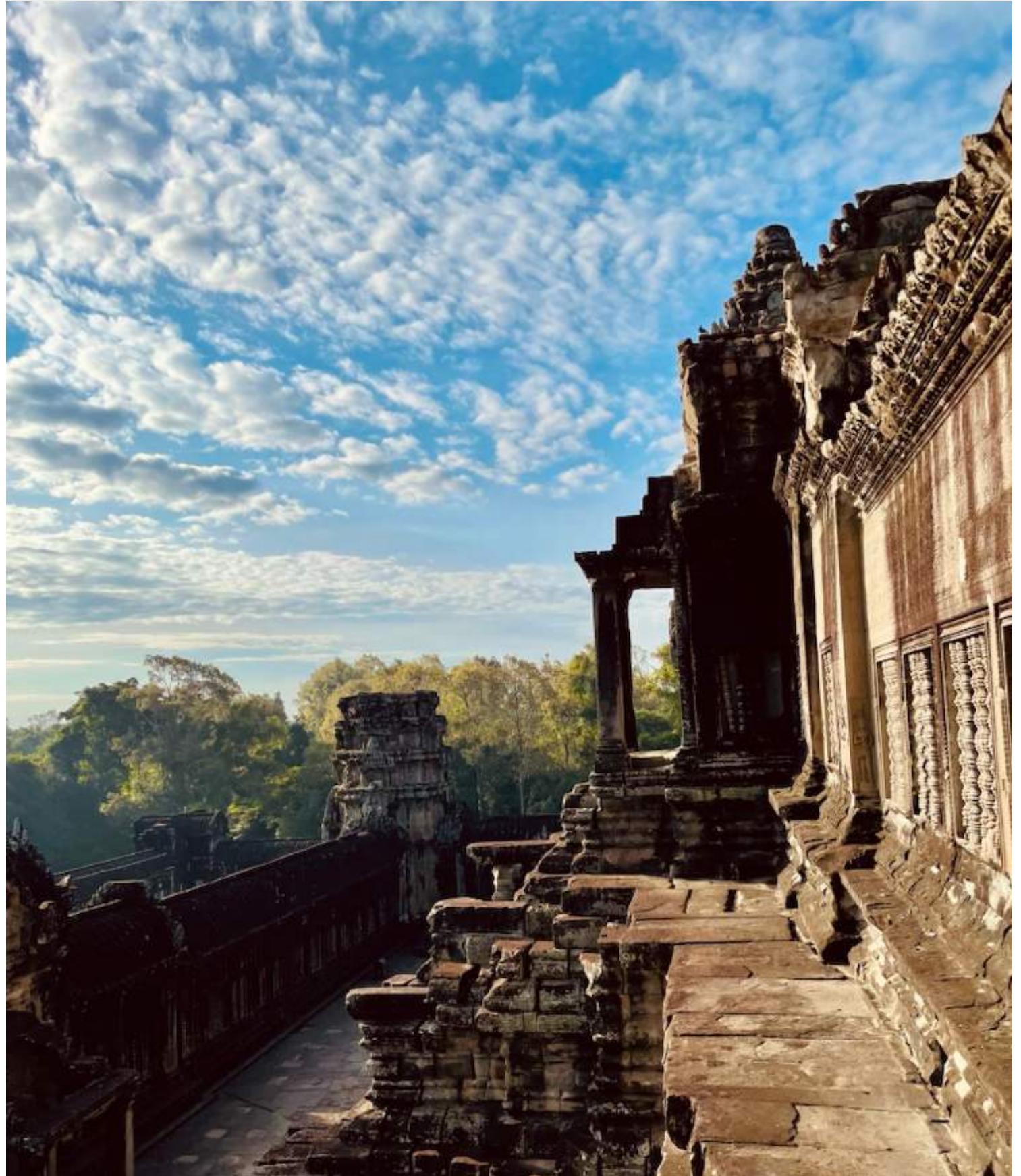


## A week in Cambodia

November 13, 2022

Categories: Cambodia

Tags: Cambodia, elephants, Phnom Penh, Siam Reap, temple





Another incredible week! Learning about the atrocities of the Cambodian Genocide, visiting some of the worlds most incredible temples from the 11th and 12th century and meeting with some of the worlds largest and most compassionate mammals.

## The Capital – Phnom Penh

We arrived by bus from the coast which was pleasantly smooth once we were used to the what seemed like risky overtaking on the single lane road we took for the first half. Second half we joined the swanky new Express Highway (built mostly with Chinese money). The highway cuts the 5 hour journey down to 2.5 – and is due to open fully early next year.

We've loved exploring the capital it's got a great buzz to it. Just by chance we were staying there during the Water Festival (Bon Om Touk). The festival marks the end of the rainy season and this happens when the river here changes direction of flow – this is caused by the increased swell from the monsoon.

So far the food here has been delicious! I had a fantastic pomelo and seafood salad with squid deep fried in courgette flowers.

Pomelo, for those intrigued, is the largest of all citrus fruit tasting a bit like a grapefruit but not as sour. We ate them fresh from a tree in Vietnam with the owner of the duck farm.



## Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum

We knew we had a lot to learn about the atrocities that took place in the Cambodian Genocide and we started with the Tuol Sleng Museum. This museum was once the site of S-12, one of many detention centres where the Khmer Rouge regime tortured and imprisoned “traitors”.

If you don't know much about the Genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge I suggest you watch this short video [here](#) to learn more.

This place was previously a high school and was converted to house prisoners who didn't conform with the new rule. Classrooms became cells and climbing frames became apparatus for hangings.

I won't overload you with facts but feel free to read more [here](#).

What stood out most to me – 18,000 Cambodians were estimated to be tortured and killed here. Loud music was played promoting the Khmer Rouge whilst executions took place. And what's more this was Cambodian people killing Cambodian people (mostly – other ethnicities were targeted too), and if the guards and executioners didn't obey, they themselves were killed under the perilous rule of

Pol Pot (General Secretary of Khmer Rouge).



## Choeung Ek Genocidal Center – The Killing Fields

Following the visit to the S12 site we then took a tuk tuk out of town to the killing fields. Previously farm land this area was taken over, cordoned off and used for mass executions – the approximate number of executions across all killing fields in Cambodia is estimated at 1.3 million. It's also estimated that the Khmer Rouge policies caused a total number of deaths of somewhere between 1.7 and 2.5 million, almost 1 third of the population of Cambodia at the time.

We visited many mass graves across the site which still have large craters where they have been excavated. Fragments of bone and clothes come to the surface during high rains and are collected.

We visited the harrowing killing tree where the grave beside it was filled with mothers and their babies. Through analysis of the tree bark and skeletons it's understood that babies were smashed against the tree before being tossed into the grave. You couldn't help but stop and stare at the tree which is covered in offerings from people.

The whole place is a total shock to the system. However despite all these atrocities nature is wrapping the whole place in green. Plants, trees and birds cover the site making it in a strange way very peaceful. Which is a strange sensation I compared it to visiting several of the German camps from WW2 which are desolate eerie places with a distinct lack of nature. I couldn't help but capture a few photos of the peace that surrounds the site despite the atrocities which went before.

In 1975 the Vietnamese army from the north liberated Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge's regime. And it was only then that the true nature of the regime was gradually uncovered.

In 2006 the 4 most senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge were sentenced by the UN to life imprisonment. Many believe justice is served as those beneath this rule had no choice but to obey or be killed. Others believe that just 4 people behind bars is not justice.

The Cambodian genocide was only 50 years ago and yet this country is full of life and the most amazing people. What a comeback of a nation and true strength in the people.

Closing point on this – many western nations including the UK turned a blind eye to the Kremer Rouge's atrocities during their reign. The full extent may not have been known but more could have been done – I hope Cambodia and the world can continue learn from this horrific tragedy.



## Siam Reap

We took a 6 hour bus drive from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap – it was relatively painless and very cheap (\$11 each). We reached our next accommodation which would be our home for 4 nights – a really spacious room at Bayon Modern Residence.

On our first night we ventured out for local cuisine and cheap beer for me (James had a had a horrible cold). We found a highly recommended restaurant and we both ordered Amok – a local curry dish with lots of lemon grass. I had pork James had fish – both were delicious.

## Sunrise Angkor Wat Tour

3:30am and the alarm went off – EARLY! We headed out with a breakfast pack up to meet our tour group – who later became named ‘Sticky Rice’ by our guide (Sen) as we all wanted to stick together throughout the temple visits.

We had 4 temples to visit over the course of 9 hours. Angkor Wat, the jungle temple Ta Prohm, the

Terrace of the Elephants Angkor Thom, and Banteay Kdei temple.

First stop Angkor Wat for the spectacular sunrise. Angkor means Kings City and Wat means Pagoda/Temple. We found a good spot to watch the sky display a wonderful array of colours as the sun rose from 5:30-6:30 am. People were out in force with tripods and fancy cameras trying to capture the best shot/timelapse of the sun rise – the selfie game is strong in south east Asia. We mostly just watched but did capture a few snaps below.

We then ventured into the building where Sen our local guide shared the known history of the temple which was built in the early 12th century as a place of worship for Hindus by the king at the time (Khmer King Suryavarman II). It took 37 years to build. In the early 13th Century King Jayavarman VII decided that the Hindu gods had failed him, so he converted Angkor Wat into a Buddhist shrine they changed heads of statues and painted over Hindu wall carvings – a rough job I would say. A lot of this cover up can still be seen today.

Later in its history Angkor Wat was left to be encompassed by the surrounding jungle not once but twice (due to the capital city moving to Phenom Penh) and it wasn't till the French re-discovered it in the 70s that the magnificent temple was cleared of jungle and opened to the public for tourism.

We wondered around the ancient temple exploring its 6 libraries (3 for men and 3 for women across the 3 classes – but all with exactly the same teachings). There were segregated pools for washing before worship and different entrances for king, people and the elephants.

We then visited the further 3 temples. The most notable was Ta Prohm which has become entwined with the surrounding jungle over the last thousand years with incredible trees and roots supporting the now crumbling temple. It also features in one of my favourite films – a classic – Lara Croft Tomb Raider! Some of you may recognise it from the photos below.

A great amount of conservation goes into all these temples with funds donated from across the globe to maintain and rebuild these ancient temples – retaining vital parts of history. It was truly an incredible experience to wonder around these temples – all built and carved by hand thousands of years ago. I'm not sure the photos do the temples scale and grandeur justice but here are a few below.





## Meeting Elephants

Meeting elephants was high on both of our bucket lists but we were very apprehensive on where to meet them. As many 'sanctuaries' are not actual sanctuaries and work the elephants in the morning. We read stories of elephants being ridden in the morning and then receiving tourist visits in the so called sanctuary in the evening (this is particularly common in India).

We did a lot of research into the [Kulen](#) Elephant Forest and Sanctuary before we booked our visit to ensure it was an actual Sanctuary.

We then took a very bumpy drive into the forest (a jungle massage as our guide called it). When we arrived we made elephant cakes with Tamarind, Banana, Sticky Rice and rice flour.

We then headed for a meet and greet with three lovely ladies (elephants) from the reserve. They are such majestic and intelligent animals. What a privilege to meet them.

Kulen has 11 asian elephants currently all over 35 years old (past breeding age). They were all previously working elephants giving rides at the Angkor Wat Temple. When the son of the owner of

the elephants moved back from France and couldn't stand to see the elephants working. He sourced land and persuaded his father to retire the elephants and this is how Kulen was created.

Each elephant has a mahout (local Khmer) who takes care of it and spends 12 hours a day with the elephant. There is an extremely strong bond between elephant and its mahout – which we witnessed on the day. They had a way of communicating and you could see from the way they interacted that there was true care between the pairing. Apparently the elephant chooses the mahout when it is younger. Most of these mahout have been with the elephants for 20+ years and will stay supporting it till he or the elephant dies.

Evidently these people wouldn't be needed if there weren't captive elephants and they were in the wild but that's not the reality. It was clear to see the love these mahout have for the elephants on our visit.

An unforgettable experience feeding and walking these elephants – something I will never forget.



## Closing

Sorry that ended up being longer than intended but there was so much to tell – and I could go on!

Tomorrow we fly to Manila for our first stop in the Philippines before heading to several of the islands for their beaches and some SCUBA diving. As we tour the islands over the next week the chance of signal and WiFi is slim so next blog may come when we reach El Nido next Monday/Tuesday.



## The battle of the Bánh Mì

November 18, 2022

Categories: Vietnam



James here. I've always been a big fan of the banh mi, Vietnam's famed sandwich snack. For those not familiar with banh mi, they're basically a French style mini-baguette typically filled with pork or pate (or other meats), pickled vegetables, herbs, and often chilli sauce. The bread is often made with both wheat flour and rice flour which helps to give it a crispy outside and not-too-dense inside.

Throughout our 3 weeks in Vietnam I took virtually every opportunity to sample them in their home nation and I've recorded the results. I've had at least 11 and I can now reveal to you the battle of the battle of the banh mi. Here they are in order of consumption...

## Hanoi

### Bánh mi long Hôi

Here Olly and I both ordered Banh mi Tinh yêu (translates to Banh mi of love). We'd literally just got to the city and dropped our bags and this spot was buzzing with locals which was a good sign. It had 3 different formats of pork in and a good amount of pickled vegetables.

Bread: 4/5

Primary filling: 4/5

Secondary filling: 3/5

Value: 3.5/5 (38.000VND=£1.40)

Total: 14.5/20



### Mama Bread

I'd read this place was really good, it's a humble little street stall near the Nhà Thờ Lớn church. I was not disappointed. We had banh mi thap cam, which means "mixed". What I really loved was how they cut open the bread and put it in a sort of panini press style thing first, so it was squashed and warmed, then loaded up with delicious pork and pickled veg. At 30K it's also on the cheaper side of what you'll find in Hanoi.

Bread: 5/5 (panini style)

Primary filling: 4.5/5 (soft pork)

Secondary filling: 5/5 (lots going on, good sauce, fresh herbs)

Value: 4/5 (30.000VND=£1.11)

Total: 18.5/20



### Bánh mì phố

This was the closest banh mi to our Airbnb (about 10 metres) and we grabbed one for breakfast. The pork filling was the star of the show here. We shared a large which was pretty huge (and justifies the higher price point).

Bread: 4/5 (good, traditional)

Primary filling: 5/5 (great pork)

Secondary filling: 3/5 (delicious sweet sauce but could've been more going on)

Value: 4/5 (45.000VND=£1.65, but for large which we shared)

Total: 16/20



## Bubbles

We came here on our Hanoi food walking tour. Apparently it's a famous place and locals like it just as much as tourists. We both had a roast duck banh mi, which isn't quite as traditional. The highlight was for sure the bread, which they bake fresh in house every day. The secondary fillings let it down a bit, they were fine, but lacked zing – something more tangy or spicy would've been welcome.

Bread: 5/5 (they make their own here)

Primary feeling: 4.5/5 – good quality duck

Secondary fillings: 2.5/5, mostly lettuce and cabbage, room for more

Value: 3.5/5 (35.000K=£1.29) it is a famous place

Total: 15.5/20





### Bánh mì Vui

I got the sense this place is bigger with locals than with tourists. It's cheaper, and rather than roast pork chunks it was more of a salami / processed pork situation. Still tasty, but also a little let down on the veg and herbs. But at that price, I'd probably still happily eat here breakfast lunch and dinner. We

also got our shoes cleaned whilst we sat and ate these on the curb (we'd just got back from trekking in Sapa so our shoes needed it), you can see that happening in the background of the photo.

Bread: 4/5 – soft and fresh

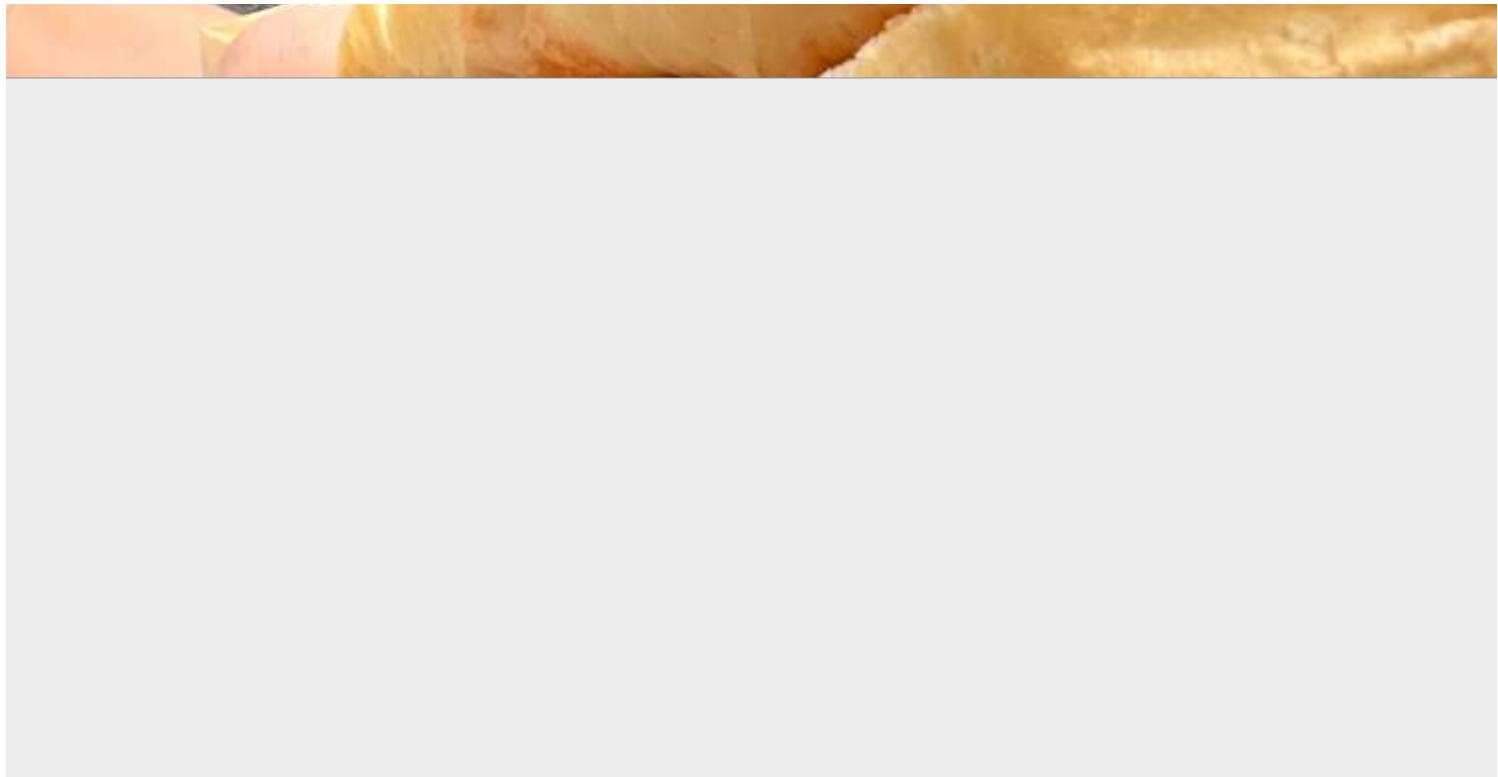
Primary: 3/5 – more like pate and salami style meat

Secondary: 2.5/5 – tasty but fairly basic, could've done with some freshness and zing.

Value: 5/5 (25.000VND=£0.88) bloody cheap

Total: 14.5/20





## Hanoi Airport

Probably the biggest let down but it's airport food so that's to be expected. It was tiny, double the price of a banh mi in the city old quarter, and the fillings were uninspiring. At least we weren't hungry on our flight to Dong Hoi.

Bread: 3.5/5 good, nothing special

Primary filling: 2/5 didn't find the pate great consistency

Secondary filling: 4/5, good sauce, coriander, carrot, cabbage and cucumber.

Value: 1.5/5 (50.000VND=£1.77) it is an airport after all. But it was small.

Total: 11/20

## Sa Pa

### Little Sapa restaurant

This was in a restaurant rather than from a hole-in-the-wall or street cart style vendor, and to be honest it was more of just a pork sandwich with lettuce and tomato. It was fine, but it did not scratch

the banh mi itch, though it did fill a hole after all the climbing stairs at the top of Fansipan mountain. The restaurant was very cute and family run, so no qualms with them, just not great for traditional banh mi.

Bread: 4/5 – no complaints

Primary filling: 4/5 tasty grilled pork

Secondary fillings: 2.5/5 just lettuce tomato and cucumber, nothing interesting or pickled. Needed the hot sauce that was on the table.

Value: 1.5/5 (70.000VND=£2.50) – in a restaurant, and up in the mountains.

Total: 12/20



# Huế

## Sa Su

Our first banh mi in Hue was from just a random cart we walked past. I couldn't really tell you what was in it, a sort of meatball situation but with some pate as well and some other mystery meat. It was small but potent. All in all a great snack, just a little let down by lack of secondary fillings – and there was a real chilli kick. Oh, and it was the cheapest yet!

Bread: 4/5

Primary filling: 3/5 (not really sure what it was, kinda like pulled pork but pretty spicy)

Secondary filling: 2.5/5

Value: 5/5 (10.000VND=£0.35) it was small, but still damn cheap

Total: 14.5/5



## Banh Mi Phung

This was a great contender. Another street cart – strong on all fronts. The meat was more of a processed pate slice rather than real roast pork chunks which I prefer, so that was the only thing I

had a slight gripe with. Again it was cheap and baby sized, great for a snack.

Bread: 4.5/5 – fresh and delicious

Primary filling: 3.5/5 – good pork pate, but as you know I like real pork chunks too.

Secondary filling: 4/5 – cucumber, coriander, good sauces.

Value: 4.5/5 (15.000VND=£0.52) baby sized! A good snack.

Total: 16.5/20



## Hoi An

### Banh Mi Chay

This was one of the closest street carts to our Airbnb so we had it for breakfast on our first morning in Hoi An. I didn't tell Olly until after he'd devoured his that it was a vegan banh mi. He hadn't realised and thoroughly enjoyed it, as did I. I think Hoi An is quite big on banh mi chay (vegetarian/vegan banh mi) as we saw a lot of carts doing them. It's good to know that my favourite snack translates to vegan too and whilst I have to admit I'd mostly choose the meat if available, this definitely did not disappoint.

Bread: 3.5/5 (a little hard on the outside, strange since this was breakfast and you'd think it would be fresh this morning. Maybe yesterday's?)

Primary filling: 3.5/5 – not sure what it was, I think tofu or mushroom mix but really flavourful and good texture

Secondary filling: 4/5 – good chilli sauce, vegan mayo, herbs. Not dry.

Value: 4.5/5 (15.000VND = £0.52)

Total: 15.5/20



### Bánh Mì Phương

This place is famous for being Anthony Bourdain's favourite Banh Mi in all of Vietnam. I can see why, it was really good. It's popular with tourists so often there's a queue, but we were lucky and also sat in to munch ours down. We went for that cam (mixed) and it was generous on all fronts. No real complaints other than the price point is a little on the high side but given its famous endorsement its fair enough.

Bread: 4.5/5. Fresh and warm

Primary filling: 5/5 great mix of thick ham and pork pate

Secondary filling: 4.5/5 perfect amount of chilli sauce, cucumber, lettuce and herbs

Value: 4/5 (30.000VND=£1.04)

Total: 18/20



### Madam Khanh

Another place well known to tourists, once again we sat in and chatted to one of the staff whilst we ate – he helped us add just the right amount of chilli sauce. I'd say this was on par with Anthony Bourdain's favourite. We again ordered that cam (mixed), so had pork, chicken, and who even knows what else. I particularly enjoyed the addition of an omelette/egg thing. The secondary fillings in general I'd say they nailed.

Bread: 4/5. All good, no complaints

Primary filling: 5/5. Pork, pate, chicken, generous with fillings.

Secondary filling: 5/5 cucumber, papaya, and a deliciously sweet chilli sauce. Again, generous.

Value: 4/5 (30.000VND=£1.04) again on the pricier side because it's well known but it was a hugely generous portion so worth it.

Total: 18/20



## Ho Chi Minh City

### Bánh Mì Huynh Hoa

There's only one option on the menu here – their banh mi "special", and it has absolutely everything in it. I lost count of how many different meats. They also give you your pickled veg and herbs in a bag on the side so you can put in the amount you want, a bit strange but I appreciate the ability to customise. This was easily the biggest banh mi I've ever seen and we foolishly ordered one each. We didn't finish them but I'm impressed how much we watched managed. Delicious, but the sheer size I think adds some novelty factor. But I do think you could feed a family of four with just one of these, so overall it's not bad value at all.

Bread: 5/5 – big, warm, soft inside crunchy outside.

Primary filling: 4.5/5 – loads of it, so many types of meat. But some of them a bit processed. Pate great.

Secondary filling: 4.5/5 – all great, served in bag on side to add your own. Missing chilli sauce.

Value: 3.5/5 (62.000VND=£2.16) absolutely huge no denying it, but comes with a price tag. It's a famous and popular place. Still reasonable!

Total: 17.5/20



## And the winner is...

I can reveal that my favourite banh mi was Mama Bread, in Hanoi. Delicious on all fronts, I particularly enjoyed the squashed panini style bread. It was a street cart that you can tell the locals frequent and there were even two school children queuing behind me. I like the idea that Mama serves locals and tourists alike, united in their appreciation for her delicious sandwiches. An honourable mention goes out to the close second places of the two great banh mi's in Hoi An, but for me the humble street cart clinched the victory. If you're ever in Hanoi, make sure you swing by Mama Bread: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/BVsDhWycMzMkQ72K9>.



# A week on the water in the Philippines

November 22, 2022

Categories: Philippines



Our first week in the Philippines is over and we've had an amazing time. The sea and islands here are filled with delights and the Filipino people are so friendly and hospitable.

## Manila

We landed in Manila on Monday and were pleasantly surprised to find the airport and much of the rest of the city decorated for Christmas. A huge proportion of Filipinos are Christian and they LOVE Christmas. Nice to feel a bit Christmassy but also quite strange when it's 30 degrees and lots of the decorations have fake snow on.

We only really had a day in Manila which was spent wandering the district we were staying in and doing some life admin, shopping and haircuts before we headed to visit Palawan and some of the surrounding islands.

## Coron

Our first island stop was Coron in the Palawan area. Coron town proper where we stayed was very chilled and had lots of cool bars and restaurants. You could wander around everywhere on foot from our hotel. We had three nights here so really managed to get a feel for the place and neither of us were sick for once so we managed a few nights on the beers with live music by the locals.

## Coron Wreck Diving

We had pre-booked to go diving around a couple of the WW2 wrecks on our first day in Coron. These were our first recreational dives (where you aren't learning and practicing skills). We were also lucky that no one else had booked on our group tour so we had a private boat, crew and dive master for the day!

The wrecks were just extraordinary.

We saw a Japanese gun ship that was sat upright between 18 and 3 meters underwater and a Japanese supply vessel which was on its side between 15 and 35 meters underwater.

Both had incredible corals growing across all the surfaces and a wide range of marine life swimming around – hard to believe they had only been there for 70 years.

Here are some photos and a short video however the visibility wasn't great so the colours aren't quite as vibrant as they were when we were down there.





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## Climbing Mt Tapyas and Soaking in salty hot springs

The second day in Coron we headed off early to climb nearly 800 steps to the top of Mount Tapyas (more of a hill than a mountain really) to see the Hollywood-style Coron sign and admire the views. It was hot work but worth it when we reached the top.

After the climb we decided to get a tricycle (a motorbike with large side and back car attached that you sit in) to the hot springs about 30 minutes away. Another bumpy off road journey but we reached the fully natural salt water thermal baths. I'm told it's one of the only ones in the world. We bathed in the 37-41 degree pools for a good hour (luckily it was a bit cloudy at this point) to ease our muscles from the morning climb.

It was very peaceful till a tour bus arrived and the place was filled with tourists taking photos for

about 30 minutes.



## Tao Expedition

Next on our agenda was a 3 day 2 night boat expedition from Coron Island to El Nido on the Palawan mainland. These get booked up extremely early in advance so we were lucky to have a spot with 20 other passengers.

The expedition takes you island hopping by day visiting more wrecks and coral reefs for snorkelling. Then at night we settled into island camps sleeping in open huts on stilts.

We had an amazing bunch of people on board and the crew were awesome. A great few days of snorkelling, socialising and eating the most incredible food from the onboard chef with the help of some passengers.

James had a go driving the boat. He said it was harder than it looks to compensate for the wind constantly. But he obviously did a good job as the captain asked if he could take a nap whilst James drove for a bit!

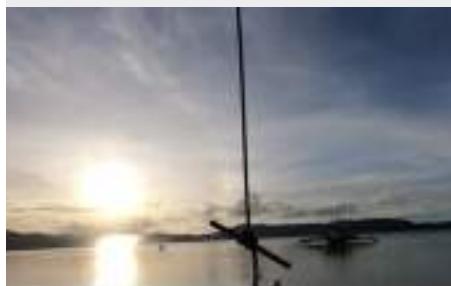
We weren't blessed with continuous sunshine, we actually had every kind of weather over the three days which added to the experience. One day we had biblical rain and large waves which suddenly just blew over and blistering sun and blue skies emerged – very tropical.

On our longest piece of sailing which was for 5 hours across a large open bay the captain spotted a group of whale sharks, he turned the boat and we followed them for about 10 minutes. Our expedition leader said this was extremely rare so we felt very lucky. There were several large and small (perhaps baby) whales – it was just magical. Then not too long after that James spotted a huge pod of dolphins bounding past.

The marine life we saw was very diverse. We saw a huge array of incredible corals – I've never seen such vibrant colours. There were so many different types of fish – all fairly small but again beautiful colours. Someone spotted a small shark (only about a foot long) and a puffer fish. I managed to capture a video of a small sting ray which one of the crew after said was deadly (Yeiks).

Few snaps from the expedition below. We just had the best time and are already planning to meet up with several of the people we met on the trip in El Nido.







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## Closing

Another great week but we are both looking forward to having 5 nights in El Nido (our longest stay anywhere on the trip so far). We need to catch up on sleep and laundry. Our plan here is to hire a scooter and whizz around to all the nearby beaches and soak up the sun with a book. Fingers crossed the rain holds off.



## Filipino Power – Attack!

November 30, 2022

Categories: Philippines

Tags: El Nido, Port Barton, Puerto Princesa



Slightly longer and later blog post this week but thought I would round up the last 10 days in the Phillipines in one post.

Since arriving back from the Tao expedition we've been settling into island life and it's a lifestyle we could get used to. Sun, sea, island hopping, delicious food and too much drinking (you'll detect a theme throughout).

First stop El Nido Town we had booked a slightly nicer apartment near the town so we could really chill out. The little villa is so much nicer than the photos! We had a little kitchen, outdoor seating area and a private plunge pool. Happy days!



Half of the group from our Tao expedition were also staying in El Nido so we've been hanging out with some boat friends most days.

We had a rather rowdy affair for the first England match against Iran. There was a free shot for every goal scored... and the rest of the night is a bit of a blur. I also had a minor collision with a motorbike but came out relatively unscathed.

## El Nido – Island Hopping

We booked onto an El Nido island hopping tour with a lovely group of girls we met on our Tao expedition so we spent another day on the water. Lots of swimming and snorkelling but nothing quite lived up to the amazing marine life and corals we saw on the Tao expedition – it's hard not to compare. But the Bacuit archipelago is incredibly beautiful above the water level. We also kayaked into a really cool lagoon aptly named 'Big Lagoon' – a couple of snaps below.

It was a Hostel tour so again ended with free shots on the Hostel rooftop which then descended into happy hour cocktails and ended in a reggae bar with some very silly dancing – no photo evidence to be shared fortunately! Amidst the drinking we did squeeze in a lovely Italian meal with Fran from the

Tao cruise where we met a lovely couple AJ and Anna.





Our final day in El Nido we headed to Napcan beach which was about 50 minutes on the scooter along some bumpy roads. But was worth it – a lovely quiet beach with lots of space. And we miraculously dodged all the thunderstorms that descended on El Nido town that day.

We met up with 3 separate groups of people accidentally on the beach – El Nido is a small world which was actually really lovely after not seeing friends and family for a few months.

At the beach we did get nibbled to death by sand flies – nasty!

## Port Barton

We then headed to a sleepy beach town a bit further south with two other passengers (Drew and Jess) again from the Tao cruise. We all had sore heads for the early morning transfer due to shots and Long Island ice tea the night before. To make matters worse we were an hour late being picked up as the wrong fuel was put in the first van but luckily a replacement was despatched to retrieve us.

We were so pleasantly surprised when we arrived in Port Barton, it's a lovely town with a few restaurants and bars and a very chilled out vibe... or so we thought. The first night stumbled across a bar which was free drinks from 7-7:30. Another night of dancing on tables and singing to live music ensued. It's been party party for us in Philippines!

The second day we did island hopping around Port Barton it was much quieter on the water with less boats and tourists around so we enjoyed the slower place but still taking in the scenery and marine life. The snorkelling here was arguably better than around El Nido. We were even lucky enough to swim with a couple of turtles for a short while. I only got one awful photo but another magical moment on the trip.



## Underground River

Our last excursion of the Philippines was to head to the Underground River in the Puerto-Princesa Subterranean River National Park. The national park contains a full 'mountain-to-sea' ecosystem and has some of the most important forests in Asia. It was 1 hr 45min from Puerto Princesa (or as we've affectionately nicknamed it: Princess Porchetta) in a very bumpy winding can journey. We were joined by another new friend Carolina from Brazil who we met in Port Barton. We had 3 activities planned for the day.

Firstly we took a boat trip through the mangrove forest with a local guide. He explained to us the importance of mangroves for the whole forest ecosystem in the National park. We spotted a snake sleeping in the tree and a Monitor Lizard swimming through the water.

Second, after a very steep hike up we did an 800m zip line across a beautiful stretch of Sabang beach.

Finally after a spot of Filipino buffet we headed to the Underground River which is a phenomenal feat of nature. It's a UNESCO world heritage site and has even been given the title of one of the seven natural wonders of the world.

To get to the river entrance you take a (very loud) bangka boat around to the river's mouth/cave entrance. Then you enter the incredible limestone cave system in a small row boat with an audio guide to talk you through the geology of the cave and also to point out rock formations which seem to depict a wide range of things (Jesus's face, Virgin Mary, various fruit and also a sexy lady which is said look like Basic Instinct-era Sharon Stone!). Whilst I wasn't convinced by some of the look alike rock formations you couldn't not be in awe of the natural beauty inside the cave.

The cave system is 24km long and we ventured in about 2km. The cave system is home to a whole host of creatures (birds, mammals and reptiles) but it's main resident is bats including some species which are endemic. We had to keep our mouths shut during the tour for two reasons, firstly to avoid disturbing the bats who use sonar to navigate the darkness and secondly to avoid bat poop falling into your mouth! Apparently it's not so tasty. Read more on the underground river on wiki [here](#).

I took a few videos and photos from the day the ones of the cave just don't do it's beauty justice but thought I would share anyway.





<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/videoleap-fced5305-2fee-4a29-92dc-60de0d5a789c.mp4>

After a great but long day we were a little weary but we headed out into Puerto Princesa to meet Jess one final time before we departed. We planned to go and watch Sheena – a musician who we met in Port Barton – playing a gig at a bar there. After her set and a few tequila shots we then ended up heading out to a Tiki club with Sheena and Jess, things escalated once again. A fitting end to our time in the Philippines. Worth the sore heads for our overnight flight to Australia.

You can check out Sheena on Spotify [here](#).

## Closing

Philippines has more than exceeded our expectations – we've loved it here and will definitely be back – there are so many more islands to explore. We counted that we've roughly covered 20 out of 7100 so a few more to explore in the future. We've also been lucky to meet some new friends from across

the globe which added an extra sparkle (and lots of shots) to our time here.

Now onwards to Australia for a few weeks of exploring before spending Christmas with Laura and Rob. Bring on Australia – country number six!



## 10 Days Down Under – Street Art, Sea, Sand and Sunsets

December 11, 2022

Categories: Australia

Tags: Beach, Byron Bay, Diving, Hamilton Island, Melbourne, Sydney, Whitsundays



G'day mate!

We arrived into Sydney last Thursday for a quick overnight turn around leaving our big bags behind for a few weeks of exploring Australia.

It's been nice to be back in a western country I hadn't realised how much I missed brushing my teeth with tap water also the coffee here is delicious .

Our Australia route is jam packed we are hitting Melbourne -> Whitsundays Hamilton Island -> Byron Bay -> Fraser Island then back to Sydney on the 15th for a long stay over Christmas.

## Melbourne

We really loved our stay in Melbourne it's very much a small big city with most things not too far away. We were staying in the CBD (Central Business District) in a very reasonably priced AirBnB with an 80s theme – it even came with pebbledash ceiling. It was a great base and came with access to a hotel's rooftop pool which was brilliant given there was a 2-day 33 degree heatwave whilst we were there.

We spent our first day exploring Fitzroy and Carlton – the trendy area. We felt very at home in this area as it was like east London's Shoreditch and Hackney. Lots of bars, restaurants and cafes. We had an epic sandwich from Nicos sandwich deli and a couple of rooftop drinks at Naked for Satan. It was a Saturday so everywhere was buzzing with people soaking up the sun.

Second day we took the tram out to St Kilda, a lovely seaside spot 30 mins from the centre. We explored the markets and shops in the area before having a dip in the ocean – which was much colder than we were used to in Asia but very refreshing in the 32 degree heat.

Couple of recommendations for restaurants and bars for anyone thinking to visit:

- BKK – Thai food inside HER building – reasonably priced bustling spot
- Bomba – Delicious tapas and great wine options with a cool atmosphere. Also has lovely roof terrace for a drink after
- Naked for Satan – Buzzing rooftop bar if you can get a table with great views and great drink options

- Rooftop bar – Lively bar even on a Sunday. It also has a cinema!

## Melbourne Street Art

You never have to walk more than a street or two to see a piece of street art. Melbourne is world renowned for its street art and we weren't disappointed as we explored. Check out my reel and photos of my favourites below.

We used [this map](#) to do a self guided tour.



<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/videoleap-33010255-9c1e-4595-a4fc-4a4f8af1a464.mp4>



## Whitsundays – Hamilton Island

Next stop was the Whitsundays, a set of 74 islands which lie between northeast coast of Queensland and the Great Barrier Reef. Most of its uninhabited islands are full of dense rainforest, hiking trails and pristine white beaches.

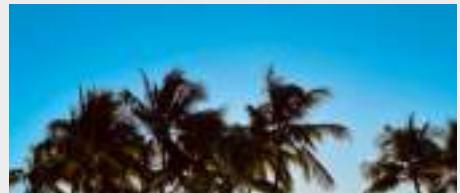
We were staying on one of the more populated islands – Hamilton Island – which we knew was going to be touristy as the whole island is like one big resort. There are hundreds of rented golf buggies whizzing around and a free bus which takes you to the marina, beaches and sunset spots. We were pleasantly surprised to find that whilst touristy it wasn't overly busy and you could find a little slice of peace away from people on the beach if you wanted.

To keep costs down we booked an apartment so we could cook meals at home and bought a freezer bag so we could bring our own bar to the beach. The apartment was amazing and turned out to have an epic view over catseye beach. Although we had to keep the doors shut at all times as the Cockatoos are known to invade apartments if they are left open!

Aside from some time on the beach with our books we had two main trips whilst we were here. One

to Whitehaven Beach and the other was to dive the Great Barrier Reef!

A few snaps from Hamilton Island. The sunsets were just sensational. We did take a time lapse of the sunset with the Go Pro but it got invaded by Korean tourists 😂 – I included a clip in the video below as it's quite amusing.

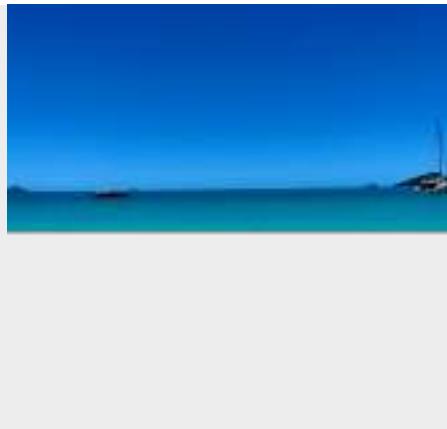




<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/videoleap-9bcc0d2b-0e9d-4be0-a606-6f9c40cd944c.mp4>

## Whitehaven Beach

On our first day we took a boat trip to Whitehaven beach about 45 minutes ride from Hamilton Island to spend a few hours on one of the worlds top 5 beaches. It's 7km long and has the purest white sand in the world which makes the water an incredibly clear blue colour. We simply topped up our tan and floated in the crystal clear water. We had stinger suits on as there are some nasty jellies in the sea at this time of year.



## Great Barrier Reef Diving

On our 3rd day in Hamilton we had decided to splash out and dive on the Great Barrier Reef, one of the seven natural wonders of the world. We are so glad we did! The weather was clear so our boat could sail to a further afield reef called Little Black Reef on the outer Great Barrier Reef.

There we were lucky enough to do two dives both with incredible visibility – by far the best diving we have done yet. You'll have seen in the video above just how alive the reef was – the colours don't do it justice as the fish and corals were luminous in the sun.

There was so much marine life, hundreds of species of fish and coral. I saw a giant sting ray, James saw a giant moray eel and two others in our group spotted turtles but they are very shy so we didn't catch a glimpse this time.

I was hoping to see some reef sharks as they are very common on these reefs but we didn't this time. However snorkelers on our boat saw several sharks near the surface.

An awesome day out on the reef and one of the best experiences on the trip so far.

!

We still haven't quite mastered underwater photography but here are a few snaps from below the surface.



## Byron Bay

We then had a long trip from the Whitsundays to Byron Bay further south on the east coast. It involved boats, buses, planes and a hire car to reach Byron taking us about 12 hours door to door and a one hour time zone change as Byron is in NSW which observes daylight savings and Queensland doesn't.

Byron is a haven for backpackers and surfers, it has a very chilled out vibe. But in recent years more and more tourists have been flocking here causing a gentrification with more modern bars and posh restaurants available. Quite a juxtaposition of wealthy tourists vs backpackers living out of a van. To feel the chilled vibe of Byron just wander down to the beach at sunset and you'll find groups of people gathered around a busker drinking and eating with the waves crashing in the background.

The weather was a bit more changeable in Byron and generally a bit cooler around 23 degrees. Between rain showers the sun popped out enough for us to enjoy the incredible beaches and complete a hike up to the lighthouse and the visit the most easterly point of the Australian mainland.

We were due to go sea kayaking but the weather decided otherwise and it was called off last minute due to strong winds.



## Closing

So far we are loving Australia. The people here are super friendly and the landscapes/nature here is second to none.

We aren't however loving the prices especially compared to Asia. £9 for 2/3 pint of beer is not kind on the wallet. Packed lunches and home cooking is how we are keeping the cost down so far.

Tomorrow we have a 5 hour drive up the coast to Hervey bay via the Gold Coast ready for our Fraser Island 4x4 tour – more on that next week.

I'm sure everyone's starting to feel festive back home/wherever you are reading from. It's strange to think Christmas is round the corner as we haven't yet felt Christmassy I think mostly due to the heat. We have seen some epic Christmas tank tops and swim shorts here – just not quite the same as a woolly jumper. I'm sure we will feel festive when we settle into Sydney for Xmas and New Year!

## James's videos

Howdy! I've finally gotten around to editing some of the footage we've been snapping into short videos for each country we've visited (I'll try to be more punctual with these going forward). Videos for India and Vietnam are up and Cambodia and Philippines will follow soon. [Click here](#) or see the Videos page to check them out.



## Dingo 2 Come In – Fraser Island

December 18, 2022

Categories: Australia



After leaving Byron Bay in our little white MG we made a quick stop at the Gold Coast to see Surfers Paradise and then headed north to Hervey Bay where we would set out on a 2 day 4x4 expedition on Fraser Island. Finally ending the week with a stop at Noosa Heads before flying to Sydney where we are for the festive period.

## Dingo 4x4 Expedition

We were booked onto a two day one night tag along 4x4 driving tour. After a very quick safety briefing and explanation on how to drive giant pink automatic 4x4s on deep sand we set off in our convoy of 4 vehicles.

Led by our lead car 'Dingo 1' which was driven by Arty our guide (who looked a lot like Iggy Pop). We were all kitted with a radio to communicate with Arty - this was operated by the 'Radio Bitch' in the passenger seat.

All 6 of us in our car took it in turns driving and Radio Bitching as we drove around the largest sand island in the world. It was incredible fun and incredibly bumpy at times – but that was all part of the adventure.

On the first day we drove up the '75 Mile Beach' as you can tell by the name it's pretty long. This is where I had my session driving gliding along the solid sand at 80kmph was so smooth with the waves crashing down to my left – a driving experience I'll never forget.

Unfortunately we couldn't swim in the sea as it's very rough with severe rip tides – it's also some of the most shark infested water in the world apparently. So we were happy not to swim.

We did visit and swim in Eli Creek which flows cool fresh water down into the sea. There was a walk way which enabled you to walk up stream and float in a rubber ring down to the water. The swim/float was much needed to cool us down as the 4x4s didn't have the luxury of AirCon.

We also visited a ship wreck (S.S. Maheno) from the 1930s – at the time it was being towed by the Japanese who had bought the ship and were taking it back to Japan. However they got hit by a huge cyclone and the ship was left to the ocean finding forever home embedded deep in the sand on Fraser Island. It's quite a sight as the rust has turned the wreck all wonders of incredible oranges. We sat and watched as the waves lap through the shell of the ship.

We were then hit by tropical storms all night, biblical rain washed through the camp. Our spirits were high as we cooked and drank under the main camp tarpaulin. Which was filling with water at such a pace that people were stood on the tables emptying it every 2 minutes to avoid it collapsing.

We were also visited by all wonder of insects and a few reptiles seeking cover from the rain. Mr Huntsman Spider stayed with us for a good hour keeping us all a little on edge as he hunted the flies which were flocking around the lights above.

Luckily our tent didn't get soaked through and other than soggy feet were managed to get some sleep. Others were not so lucky, their tents were flooded and they had to sleep in the 4x4s.

Second day in the morning when people had dried out a little we visited Lake Wabby which was an incredible deep green colour due to all the run off of minerals from the surrounding dunes. The lake is home to fish, eels and turtles. It was set amidst some incredible sand dunes which we hiked down to

get to the lake.

Finally we visited the number one spot on Fraser Island – Mckenzie Lake. Clear blue waters and white sand made for a picture perfect bathing spot. It had unfortunately started raining when we arrived but we all hopped in the lake anyway and much to our surprise the sun decided to come out. The sun on the water and sand was sensational – you can see why it's the number one lake to visit on the island.

On our last stretch of driving back to the boat the water levels in the road were very high from all the rain. Our poor 4x4 suffered an injury! Her radiator exploded and she leaked green radiator fluid all over the car park at the ferry stop. Crisis in the last leg of the trip. We had 10 minutes till we were boarding. After a lot of cursing our guide Arty managed to patch her up enough to get on the boat and back to the office at the other side. As much as we loved the camping none of us fancied another night in soggy tents and much wanted to get back to the mainland.

Thankfully we made it back. And on the route back we even saw wild Kangaroos bouncing around in the sun which cheered us all up after the car crisis. All in all an incredible 2 day experience on one of the worlds most fascinating islands – no better way to see it than by 4x4 accompanied by an awesome group of people too.





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## Noosa Heads

We then headed south from Fraser Island to Noosa Head. We were joined by one of our new pals from the 4x4 tour who happened to be from York (small world). We took a scenic route through the National park which was filled with scenic forest and rainforest. We were on Koala lookout but no such luck!

Upon reaching Noosa we got our walking shoes on and headed to hike the Noosa Costal walk. An incredibly diverse walk through forest, rainforest, bush, beach and cliffs. At the halfway point we took a chill in the fairy pools which are naturally formed in the rock. Again no koalas unfortunately but we did see some incredible Eagles, Australian Kookaburras, Bush Turkeys and lots of spiders in the trees.

We then headed back to the hostel for free cheese and wine night (yes free)!

In the morning we hit the beach for some sun, sea and body boarding before leaving the east coast.



## Sydney

On Friday we landed in Sydney – for our final stop in Australia. Lots of exploring planned but also some down time for Christmas. Will be nice to be in one place for 2 weeks!



## Exploring Sydney – From the bustling city to the beautiful beaches

December 30, 2022

Categories: Australia

Tags: Beaches, Blue Mountains, Hunter Valley, Sydney



Firstly I hope you've all had a good Christmas and are getting ready for new year celebrations. We have been lucky with sunny weather throughout Christmas and it's looking likely to be a hot New Years Day too!

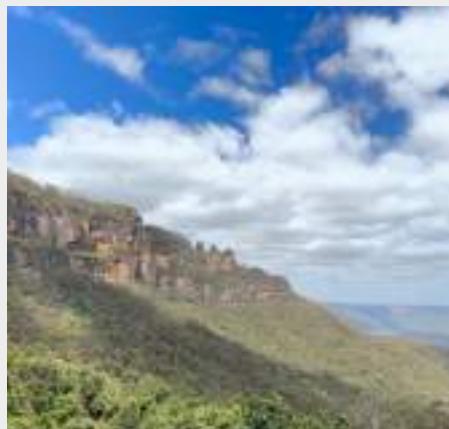
The last two weeks we have been exploring different areas in Sydney to see the nature, wildlife and beaches in and around the city. Whilst also enjoying a hot Christmas Day and spending some time with family in the bush and on the beaches here.

## Blue Mountains

Blue Mountains were top of our agenda on places to explore near Sydney. We took a drive out to the

Blue Mountains with a few friends from home to do a 7km circular hike.

The surroundings here are quite breath taking and only a 90 min drive from Sydney. It was a little overcast for us which isn't so great for photos but was just the right temperature for hiking.



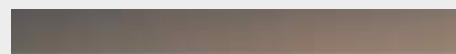
## North Beaches

We are staying in Manly which is a great base to explore all the northern beaches. Over the past two weeks we have visited several of the beaches and completed some great walks.

- Freshwater Beach – Great for swimming
- Curl curl Beach – Great for surfing or jumping around in the waves
- Palm Beach – We did the lighthouse walk here with sensational views
- Manly Beach – Great to wonder along to get to the centre of Manly

- Manly Warf – we did some Stand Up Paddle boarding here
- Shelly Beach – Good for swimming and snorkelling on clear weather days
- North Head – Not a beach but offers great views across the city

It's almost impossible to call out our favourite as they are all brilliant but different beaches. Sydney is so lucky to have all these beaches so easily accessible. We've also been super impressed with the facilities offered near the beaches – changing rooms, restrooms and showers.



Laura keeps a great Instagram account with amazing photos of walks around Manly [here](#).

## Coogee To Bondi Walk

We also wanted to explore the beaches along the eastern part of Sydney – the Coogee to Bondi walk is a great way to see them all.

After getting public transport across to Coogee (which is very efficient in aus) we set off on the 6km walk coastal walk. Unfortunately for us the weather was not on our side and we hadn't packed rain coats or jumpers. It proceeded to spit on us for most of the walk. This didn't stop us from enjoying the spectacular coastline, bays and beaches along the way but did drive us to March the route in under 90 minutes – we both knew there would be a warm and dry pub with cold beer at the end!

It was a great walk I would recommend to anyone in Sydney – just check the weather!

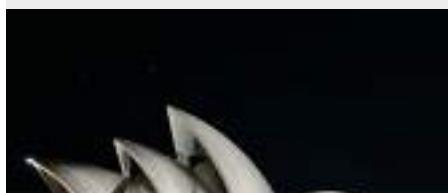


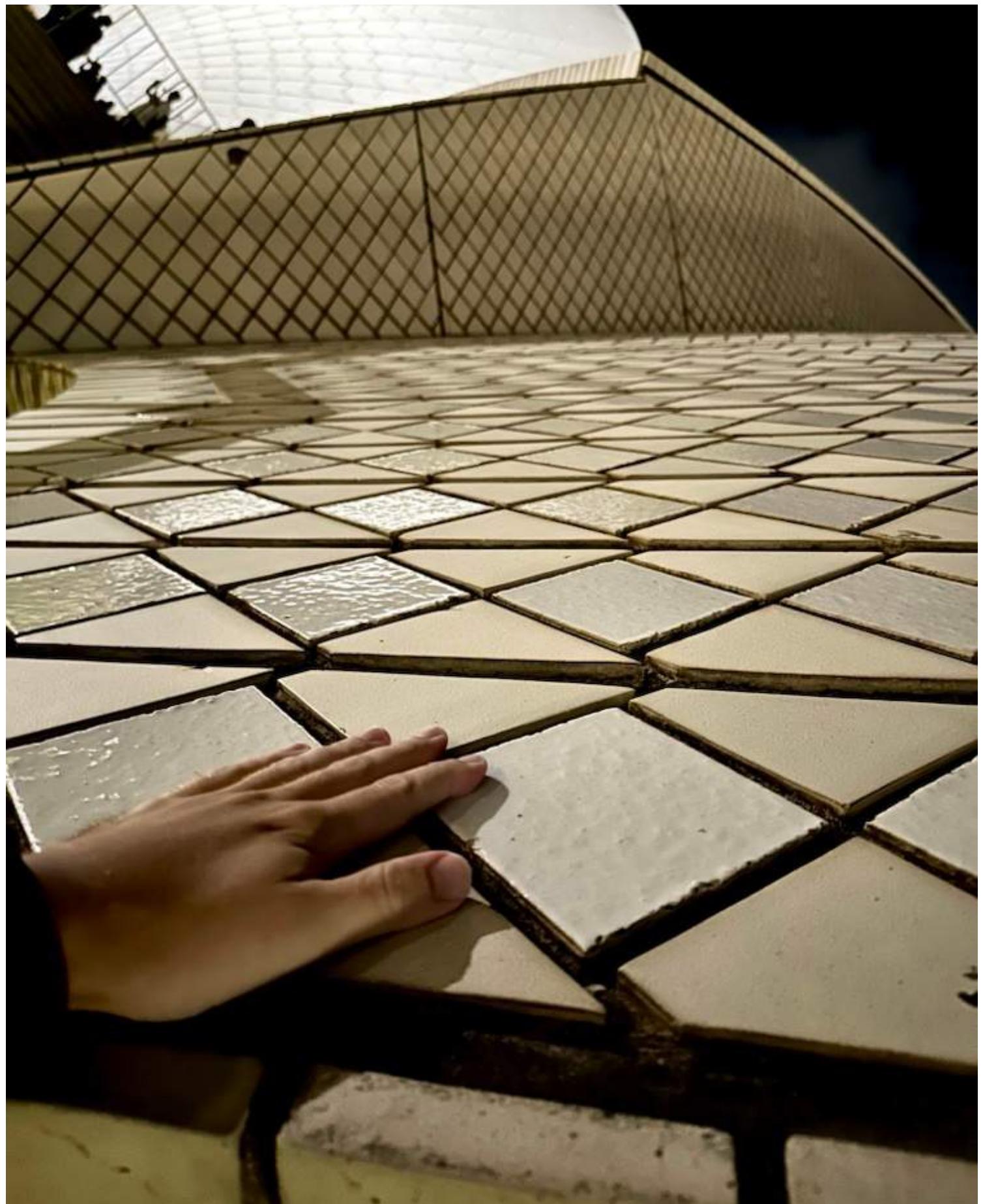
## Dinner in the city

We have been very lucky to spend a few nights in the city for dinner and drinks. We got the Manly ferry across to the CBD which is a fantastic way to arrive and you get prime views of the Opera House and Harbour Bridge.

We highly recommend Sydney Harbour Cafe, Opera Bar and O Bar – all give sensational views of the city. Especially the O Bar which is a rotating bar which over the course of 90 mins rotated 360 degrees ensuring you get to see every part of Sydney from the 47th floor!

In the heart of the city there is so much to explore. The CBD is bustling Monday to Friday, Darling Harbour with its old and new parts sitting side by side and the more historic area 'The Rocks' which consists of lots of laneways and open air markets. It's a great place to get lost wondering around... and also to do some shopping!





## Hunter Valley

We also drove two hours out to Hunter Valley one of Australia's most famous wine regions to test out some of the grape juice here. It's well worth a visit if you are staying in Sydney for any length of time.

We had a wonderful day of tasting and exploring the beauty of Hunter Valley. We used the hop on hop off bus which took us between the vineyards giving us an hour tasting at each.

Vineyards we visited:

- Glandor – Lovely vineyard with 5 resident dogs. Didn't think much of their white wines but the reds they had were delicious
- Piggs Peak – More experimental wines here but all were delicious. This Vinyard causes a bit of a stir in the region with its unconventional wines and techniques.
- Hart and Hunter – Boutique single Vinyard. Set in a beautiful spot with lovely staff. Our favourite wine of the trip came from here – their Reisling.
- Gundog Estate – We weren't a fan of the wines here especially as the whites were served warm.
- Leogate – We stayed on site here in some beautiful cabins they have and did a wine tasting. Delicious range of wines especially the Brokenback Shiraz.



## Closing

Hope you all have a fantastic New Year! We will be celebrating watching the fireworks under the Harbour Bridge at Luna Park – we can't wait! Followed by a festival on New Year's Day which will complete our itinerary for Australia.

Can't believe our time here is coming to a close. We've loved Australia – the people, nature and the weather here have been fantastic. We can absolutely see why so many people move here. We've been lucky to have incredible hosts and spend time with friends and family over the Christmas period.

Next stop New Zealand on Tuesday! We are again very lucky to be staying with a friend from home and her family on Waiheke before picking up our campervan to explore the North and South Islands. New Zealand recommendations welcome 😊



# A wet and windy welcome to New Zealand

January 8, 2023

Categories: New Zealand

Tags: Auckland, Waiheke

We were super excited to arrive in New Zealand and even more excited to be meeting up with another friend (Jazz) to explore Auckland and Waiheke for a week before collecting our camper van to tour the north and South Island.

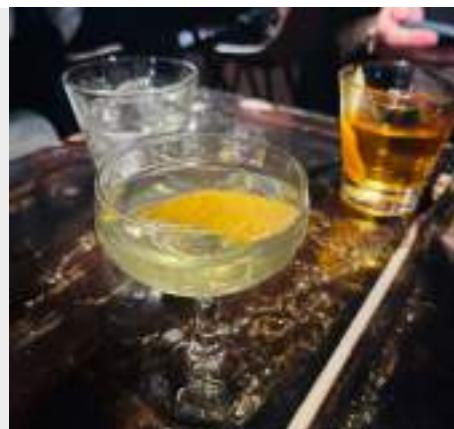
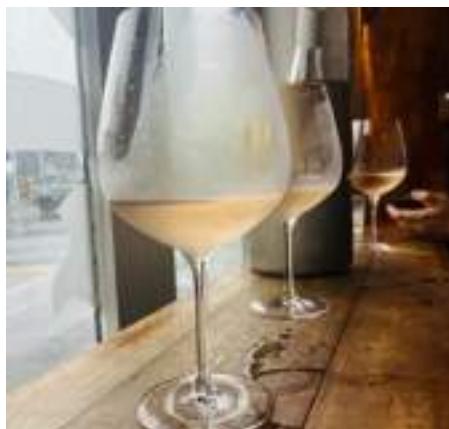
## First stop Auckland

On the first day we met for lunch at the harbour Soul Bar for a big catch up. Before heading back to our AirBnB.

We were staying in a lovely AirBnB in Ponsonby which is a really trendy area with a large stretch of boutique shops, wine bars and restaurants. So our first night we explored several of the bars in Ponsonby and on the second day Jazz did some shopping and we got our hair cut.

We've been a little unlucky with the weather as it's been non-stop rain, grey skies and some bouts of 40mph wind... apparently the wettest January people can remember. But that hasn't stopped us exploring and eating/drinking out as you'll see from the limited number of photos taken in Auckland.

We loved Auckland it's a really bustling city with lots of cool bars and restaurants – our favourite bar being Caretaker. A great first impression of cities in New Zealand.



## Waiheke Wondering

Our next stop was Waiheke Island a 45 minute ferry from Auckland. We were lucky to have been invited to stay with Jazz's family for a week in Waiheke. The weather was still grey and wet and our ferry crossing was rather bumpy. But we were still excited to get out of the city and onto the island.

It's incredibly peaceful here and the nature is just beautiful.

On our first day we visited one of the Vineyards here for a long Italian feast with extended family and friends. The food was delicious and the wine even more so! A little slice of Italy on Waiheke – [Poderi Crisci](#)

Second day we did a lovely walk across the island and went out for a tasty dinner at a local's spot on the island.

Our third day we were blessed with wall to wall sunshine! We really made the most of it – first thing we were on the beach walking and swimming with our morning coffee.

Then we headed out on a speed boat to explore many coves, beaches and surrounding smaller islands in the Waiheke area. With such still conditions it was incredible.

We ended the day with a visit to 'Ron's Town' for pizza and a glorious sunset! Ron is one of Jazz's families close friends who is an architect and has created an incredible space with lots of small buildings spanning across the site with lots of indoor and outdoor spaces for living and sleeping – hence Ron's Town!





<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/videoleap-cf5616fa-f491-4285-95c6-a8fed909e3cf.mp4>

## Closing

A fantastic first week in New Zealand!

Next week with the weather still looking changeable we are going to explore several of the incredible vineyards on the island to celebrate Jazz's birthday- after all a little rain never stopped anyone tasting wine!



## Wonderful Waiheke – Cooking, Vineyards and Birthday Celebrations

January 14, 2023

Categories: New Zealand

Tags: Cooking, Waiheke, wine



## Cooking Vietnamese on Waiheke

Monday was our night to cook for everyone and we decided to recreate some of the dishes we had made in Vietnam on our cooking course. On the menu was spring rolls, papaya salad and fish in banana leaves. We had sourced some unusual ingredients in China town in Auckland ready for the food. The three of us spent the afternoon in the kitchen prepping with a few glasses of vino!

After a few curve balls in the kitchen we pulled off an authentic Vietnamese meal which went down well with everyone. Our main mishap is that we had managed to buy the wrong papaya, we had the sweet ones – this led to Jazz's creation of roasted papaya and chilli oil for desert! And I created a prawn noodle salad instead. Both which turned out delicious!



## In the wet weather we wine – Waiheke Vineyards

With the weather not letting up we planned a few days of wine tasting across the island.

Waiheke island is often referred to as the Island of wine. Home to many award winning winegrowers who over the years have matched the unique climate and soil structures to a selection of classical grape varieties to create a range of incredible wines. Wine growers regularly win world wide wine awards for their Syrah.

We had several to visit over the course of our time here. Here's my 50 cents on each.

- Poderi Crisci – We ate here for Italian so tried several of their wines with food. Their sparkling Zefiro Pinot Gris was a hit for me.
- Stonyridge – Whilst this is one of the top rated vineyards on the island with bottles ranging up to \$400 on the tasting we weren't too impressed by the service or the wine here. Has a lovely view though.
- Postage Stamp Wines – This is a small new vineyard with a laid back vibe. Our favourite was their unlabelled Summer Red which was fruity and delicious.

- Batch – An incredible Vinyard and cellar door set up high on a hill with fantastic views. Their rose was a hit for all of us.
- Wild on Waiheke – This place has a really cool cellar door space and they also do beer tastings. We didn't think much of the beer but the wines here were tasty especially their signature 'The W' which was a big bold red.
- Tantalus – This was one of our favourites the vineyard and cellar door was incredible. We witnessed people arriving my helicopter for a tasting! We loved all the wines we tried here especially the Epoque which is a prodominently Merlot red.



## Birthday Celebrations Island Style

We also had an incredible day of celebrations for Jazz's 30th birthday visiting some of the vineyards above, dinner at the incredible Ki Maha (where we had the most divine octopus) and finished off with some dancing back at the house. A birthday done well!



## Farewell to Waiheke

That's a wrap on Waiheke – an absolutely brilliant week with lots of wine, celebrations and cracking company. Big shout out to the Ward and Kendrick families who've hosted us over the last week we couldn't have felt more welcome and part of the gang!

Now to the next phase of our New Zealand adventure – Van Life! Bring on 3 weeks touring the north and South Island in our converted sprinter van! We are super excited and very much open to any New Zealand recommendations.



## Van Life: Week 1

January 22, 2023

Categories: New Zealand

Tags: able Tasman, Cooking, hiking, hobbiton, New Zealand, van, wellington

Last week we picked up our home for the next 3 weeks. A 6 month old converted sprinter camper van which we have affectionally nicknamed Pamela Vanderson.

Pam is fantastic; lots of storage, a kitchenette, toilet, shower and outdoor BBQ to top it off. It's quite a beast to drive at 7m long but you get used to it quite quickly and the roads and car parks here are well set up for campers.

It's been a jam packed first 10 days in the van!

## Waitomo Glow Worm Caves

Our first stop was the Waitomo glow worm caves. We descended down into the caves before taking a short boat ride into the deepest and darkest part of the cave where the glow worms like to live.

It's here that we stopped beneath a sky of bright green lights illuminating the cave – magical!

The guide let us take a few photos, I got one but it's terrible – I shared it below anyway. We also got papped on a green screen on our way in and have been super imposed into various scenes in and out of the caves – quite hilarious but not worth \$16 hence the water mark.



## Hobbiton

For anyone who knows the Pirozek Family we are all big Lord of the Rings fans. Luckily James is too! So the opportunity to visit the set of Hobbiton was high on the list whilst in New Zealand. I am also working my way through the books whilst we are here. Currently about 20% into the first one –

unlikely I will finish them whilst we are here!

We arrived for the early tour at 8:40. Whilst Hobbiton has a bit of a theme park feel to it, the tour was really well done. We wound our way around Hobbiton seeing all the hobbit holes (including Sams house and Bag End) with lots of interesting info from our guide before ending up at the Green Dragon for a beer (yes we had a beer before 10am – we figured it's 9pm in the UK so all good). A really awesome experience for any Lord of the Rings fan!



## Te Puia – Thermal Geysers

Next we visited the Te Puia park in Rotorua which is home to several Mauri schools which teach key cultural skills such as weaving, carving and stone work. It is also home to a Kiwi conservation centre which is trying to couple and breed then release Kiwis back into the wild.

It's main attraction is several Geysers including Pohutu geyser which is the biggest geyser in the

southern hemisphere.

After our guided tour we waited at Pohutu for about 40 minutes which was well worth the wait as we witnessed a pretty epic eruption. Perhaps not 40m but was still very high!



## Wai-o-Tapu – Thermal Wonderland

We also visited Wai-o-Tapu which like Te Puia also sits in the Taupo volcanic zone. Waiotapu is an active geothermal area and New Zealand most colourful geothermal attraction.

One of the main attractions here is the Champagne Pool which is a 700-year-old crater that was formed by a hydrothermal (hot water) eruption. It's a giant pool which is steaming hot at 74 degrees and bubbling away with Carbon Dioxide. It's also surrounded by an orange rim caused by the minerals arsenic and antimony sulphur. Overall giving it a slightly Champagne look about it – although I wouldn't recommend drinking it.

We also visited the pool 'Roto Kärikitea' which contains the run off from the Champagne Pool. It was completely neon green. The amazing colour is the result from a deposit of minerals being suspended

in the water and refracting the sunlight. A pretty cool natural spectacle.



## Tongariro Crossing

We awoke at 5:30 in preparation for the Tongariro Alpine Crossing. A 19km hike in the centre of the North Island of New Zealand. It was a chilly morning but the sun was shining.

The walk took us up winding between a couple of mountains. One being 'Mount Doom' from Lord of the Rings. We climbed quite steeply to 1886m passing through what felt like several seasons with cold, hot, wind, sun and clouds (luckily for us no rain) to reach the summit.

The decent, which was also very steep at times (a few slips and falls happened) took us past the incredible red crater and several large crystal blue pools filled with rain water. We then passed through daisy filled hill sides before descending into a dense bush with a fast flowing stream.

This trek really does take you through so many seasons and landscapes. Hopefully the photos below capture some of the beauty. It's well worth a visit but you need to be prepared for a challenging hike.

We were absolutely pooped by the end headed back to our campsite for a beer and an early night!



## Wellington to Picton

We made a quick overnight pit stop in Wellington to explore the city and meet some friends for dinner before our planned ferry to the South Island. James managed a spot of shopping too.

Next morning we were up at 5am to head to get our ferry to the South Island. We had planned an afternoon of wine tasting in Marlborough after the ferry crossing. However... our ferry was delayed by 4 hours. So not only had we gotten up incredibly early we realised we would miss all our cellar door bookings which we had hired a tandem bike to cycle between them. Shit happens! We did see

dolphins on the crossing which was pretty special.

We quickly formed a new plan for our first night on the South Island. We decided to buy our own selection of wines for tasting and we found a remote campsite at cable bay a few hours towards our next destination.

We lucked out and ended up in our favourite camp site so far right by the cable bay. Which is aptly named due to it being the landing point for the first telecommunications point between New Zealand and Australia. We had a wonderful BBQ with wine and watched the stars come out. Then in the morning did a hike and swam in the sea! Idyllic!



## Abel Tasman

Next stop was Abel Tasman. On the way we decided to stop in a few Nelson Vinyards to taste some wine and buy a few bottles for the road. I was driving so only tastes for me! We got a good haul then headed to Abel Tasman National Park.

Abel Tasman National Park is a wilderness reserve at the north end of New Zealand's South Island. It's named after Abel because he is officially recognised as the first European to 'discover' New Zealand in 1642. His men were the first Europeans to have a confirmed encounter with Māori. Although it is widely foretold that he never actually set foot on the area where the nature reserve is now named after him.

Our main activity in the park was a walk and kayak trip. We hiked 3 hours along the coastline of the park (with epic views of the clear blue sea) to reach Observation Beach. Here we stopped for a swim and lunch before hopping into the sea kayaks.

Sea kayaks have a rudder to help steer in the waves which is operated by some peddles inside the kayak. After quickly getting used to them we headed off with our guide to explore several coves and islands nearby.

On one island we saw several seals and their pups – you could hear them crying before you could see them. We also had a close encounter on one stop where our group was examining a jelly fish not realising that one of the rocks very nearby was actually a large seal! The guide had us running back to our boats as they can be quite aggressive.

We saw a lot of great birds including two types of shag and the majestic New Zealand Falcon. We were also lucky enough to spot a large sting ray beneath us through the clear sea water.

On the return journey there was also a strong wind which meant we could raft together 5 kayaks and put up a sail on two paddles and sail back – much easier than paddling.

To round off a great day we met up with Holly who we travelled with in Aus for a BBQ. We were joined by several others from the campsite and enjoyed sharing stories with beer and wine till the stars came out.

Almost forgot to mention there was one minor hitch to the day. I got stung by a wasp 5 minutes into the hike. James got the stinger out quickly and I got some ice on it so didn't hurt for too long. But it for sure reminded my how painful wasp stings are!



## Closing

Such an amazing first 10 days filled with adventure, nature, epic scenic drives and some wonderful people.

Next up we are heading down the west coast with several stops along the way for more hiking, swimming and sights to see. We also have a Glacier Heli Hike booked which we are super excited about – although 50% of these get cancelled due to bad weather so keep everything crossed for us.

## Cooking in the Van

We were both quite excited to cook in the van and see what culinary creations we could create on the road with limited space so thought I would share some of the dishes we've cooked!

Inside the van we have 2 hobs and outside we have a BBQ to cook on. We are also leveraging campsite facilities as most have a basic kitchen you can use which helps us to save on gas.

- Salmon and Pea Risotto – this was our first cooking in the van and it was delicious.
- Grilled Chicken and Mejadra (Ottolenghi lentil and rice dish) – took a little while to fry up all the onions but came out delicious.
- Smash burgers on the BBQ- James ‘smashed’ it with these quick and easy burgers. Served with Mac and Cheese!

No doubt more amazing culinary van cuisine to come. But also wanted to call out two other dishes we've eaten out in the last week:

- Green Muscles – In Able Tasman we had delicious green muscles in a white wine chilli broth with ciabatta and chunky chips. They were Devine and you only find them in Nelson New Zealand
- Whitebait Patty – In our campsite on the south coast Pete's Patty shack was delicious. We ate it before we could photo it but it was delicious



## Van Life: Week 2

January 29, 2023

Categories: New Zealand

Tags: Bungy, Cooking, Glacier, Helicopter, Queens Town, South Island, White Water Rafting



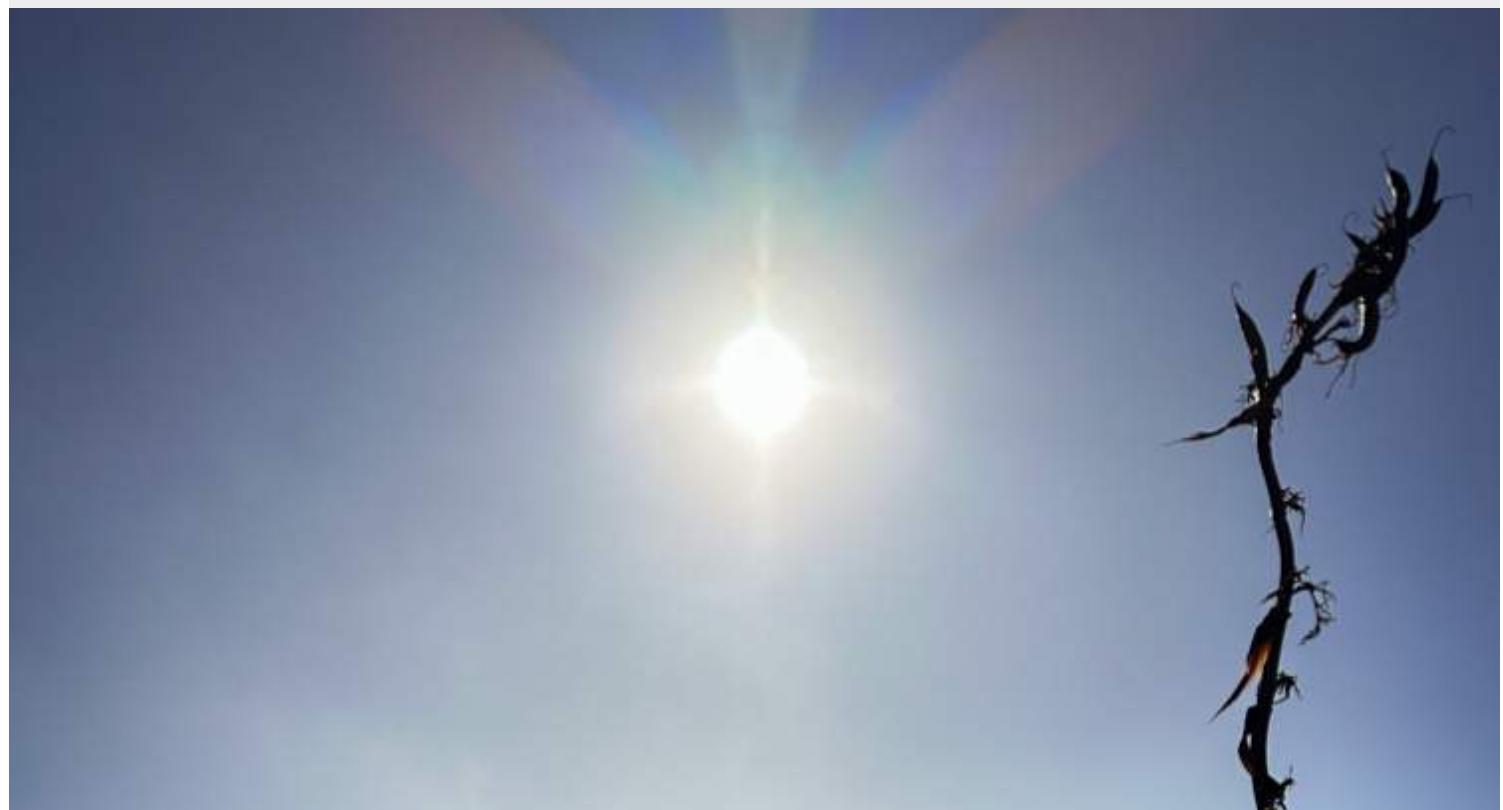
This week we've been winding our way down the incredible west coast of the South Island. The whole drive has been stunning with vast landscapes every second of the way.

Our stops this week have oriented around adventure activities!

## Driving the West Coast and Queenstown

I mentioned before about the stunning driving but I wanted to share just a few snaps from the drive between Nelson and Queenstown. I am also compiling a driving video with clips from all the driving which should come next week.















## Franz Josef Heli Hike

We arrived for our Heli hike very apprehensive as we were convinced the looming cloud might mean it would be cancelled – only 50% of the trips usually run. But our luck was in! We got geared up and had our safety briefings. Before we knew it we were being loaded into the helicopter and on our way to the Glacier.

The helicopter ride was thrilling flying us between the two valleys where the Glacier resides. We hopped off and strapped on our crampons (spikes over boots to aid walking on the ice). We hiked for 2 hours up and down the glacier exploring caves and crevasses with our guided group.

We witnessed one lady being emergency evacuated from the mountain as she twisted her knee. For anyone concerned for her health we saw her on crutches at the bottom and she seemed in good spirits. What this did mean for us was extra time on the glacier whilst they re-shuffled the helicopter

schedule.

We had the most amazing time on the ice and felt very lucky we got the chance to set foot on it. I compiled a short video from the trip below.





<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/videoleap-f7afa8f8-0ced-463d-aa35-91206647f306.mp4>

## Crafting our own Pounamu

Pounamu is a precious and powerful stone to the Māori people. There are a selection of different stones (usually green in colour) which can be carved into various symbols and often worn as pendants. Each symbol and stone has different meanings and powers to the Māori people.

Whilst being sacred to the Māori, Pounamu stones are also quite beautiful. Having seen many people wearing the pendants I was keen to have one of my own. But they are generally quite expensive – always over \$100 (£50). So instead we found a workshop where we could craft our own for less.

We met Jan who runs the workshop and she talked to us about the stones and the importance of them. She said that one stone from her huge tray of stones would call to us to be created into our

own Pounamu and would hold a little piece of our souls.

We each found our stone and set out on the diamond sanding wheel crafting it into our perfect pendant. Jan said the stones would find their way into a shape which they did as we worked them on the wheel.

This was then followed by 30 minutes of polishing, and our pendants were complete.

Stone jewellery carving was not something I expected we would be doing on our trip but it was a really amazing experience and we both ended up with wonderful pendants.



## Roy's Peak

Roy's Peak was our next big hike! Roy's Peak is a mountain in New Zealand, standing between Wanaka and Glendhu Bay. It offers a gruelling uphill walk with incredible views across Lake Wanaka and up to the peak of Mount Aspiring / Tititea. The track zigzags steeply up the side of Mount Roy through thick grass until the ridge to the summit.

Despite the slog uphill it was a great walk and well worth it for the epic views at the top. Our calves certainly felt the burn.



## The Nevis Bungy Jump and Swing

Our quench for adrenaline was not completely fulfilled by the Franz Josef Heli Hike. Next up we wanted to take on the largest bungy jump in New Zealand.

8.5 second free-fall of 134 meters! Some might think we are mad but it was absolutely amazing. Surprisingly neither of us were particularly nervous and generally more excited.

That does change a little when you're standing on the edge of the drop ready to plunge 134m. You get counted in 3,2,1 and then your legs buckle so the elegant swan dive you imagined doesn't quite take shape.

Then you are falling... first 3 seconds is terrifying then the next 5 seconds you start to enjoy the falling before you suddenly pulled up and the bouncing starts. It wasn't a jolt more of a smooth bounce. Then you can take in the incredible scenery either side before being hoisted back up to meet the eyes of the other terrified jumpers waiting for their plunge.

Following that we headed across the way to take the two person swing which we took together and it drops you backwards 74m before swinging you across the valley.

Both were insane and fulfilled the adrenaline rush we were craving.

We didn't pay for the photos or videos as they were very expensive but here is a little montage from our phones and gopro.



<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/videoleap-5df62646-d8c9-4097-856b-006b46358ac4.mp4>

## Whitewater Rafting

Our final excursion this week again in Queenstown – Whitewater Rafting. Neither of us had done it before so we're very excited. We had booked rafting on the Shotover Rapids however due to low water levels we were moved to another river. We still had a fantastic morning out on the river with some brilliant rapids.

James and I were put in the second boat of a large stag group of hungover Aussie lads. Was hilarious – but because we were with the stag we spent a huge proportion of our time in the water, we were caught up in a rivalry between the two rafts.



## Closing

We've loved driving the west coast of New Zealand as well as the beautiful scenery we've created some pretty epic memories.

We've also loved our couple of days in Queenstown which has a buzzing vibe especially on a night time.

Now for our last week with Pam the van! First we are heading to Milford Sound then winding our way up to Christchurch with a few stops along the way.

We will be flying to Thailand before we know if and currently have no plan – some planning is needed this week for sure.

## Epilogue Cooking in the Van

A few more dishes on the menu this week:

- Home made curry with home made Naan on the BBQ
- Butternut Squash and Chorizo Risotto
- BBQ Vegetable Pasta with BBQ Garlic Bread

All accompanied by a great selection of wines from the Nelson and Otago wine region which we have picked up on our way past the vineyards. We've also had some great local beer along the way too.



One special mention for our only meal out this week:

- FergBurger – in Queenstown this is the place to get a burger. It's about a 30 minute wait for one of their \$15 (£8) burgers. And boy was it worth the wait – absolutely delicious!



## Van Life: Week 3

February 6, 2023

Categories: New Zealand

Tags: Milford Sounds, Mount Cook, New Zealand, South Island



We couldn't believe how quickly our last week with Pamela Vanderson came around! We were both quite sad to hand the keys back. 3500 kilometres covered over 3 weeks – without incident except the parking ticket 30 mins from the drop off point!

We did make good use of our last week covering a lot of miles in the South Island.

## Milford Sounds

Our first stop for the week was Milford Sounds. It's 40km as the crow flies from Queenstown but the drive is slightly longer at 300km and about 4-5 hours driving. It's a <40 min flight in a small aircraft direct.

However the long drive is absolutely magical, weaving through the mountains and through a giant tunnel bored through a mountain. We stayed in the one camp site in Milford Sounds which is set in the rainforest and filled with the noise of Cicada's – honestly they were deafening and our ears were ringing when we left.

Next morning we arrived at the marina for our boat trip where you are greeted by incredible scenery with high mountains on either side and deep blue water out as far as the eye can see.

Milford Sounds is one of the wettest places in New Zealand with nearly 200 days of rain per year. But we were lucky – clear blue skies and calm water greeted us for our 3 hour boat trip.

The blue water however is unusual as usually there is a layer of fresh water which sits on top of the salt water. This water is inky black as the rain water gets dyed by the tannins in the moss as it rolls down the mountains. This dark top layer of water blocks a lot of light from getting into the cool calm waters below. Creating deep water emergence. Which in short creates the conditions you find at 100m underwater much closer to the surface – in this instance at 10m. This means you get to see marine life that usually lives 100m down at 10m. What is also unique at Milford Sounds is they have an underwater observatory at 10m to allow you to easily view this marine life without getting wet.

We were lucky enough to see deep water coral, fish and other marine life including an Eagle Ray on our trip down into the observatory.

I didn't think the photos alone quite did this wonderful place justice so we collated a short video from the visit.



<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/videoleap-4c6a2f29-d841-4dff-b363-9aa84f1ef212.mp4>



## Shotover Jet

On our way back past Queenstown we decided to hit up one more adventure activity. A jet boat trip through Shotover Canyons at 85kmh!

What a scream! Zooming through narrow rock canyons extremely quickly before an out of the blue 360 spin. Certainly got our adrenaline pumping. A great way to see the Shotover river that we didn't get to white water raft on.

The boats are specially made for the journey on the river and can run on just a few inches of water. The river was very low just a few inches in places and we did hear a few bangs and scrapes along the way but were assured it was safe!



## Aoraki aka Mount Cook

Our next stop was Aoraki, the tallest mountain in NZ, sitting in the southern alps which run the whole length of the sound island.

We had two nights of free camping planned (no power or facilities but it's free to camp) both sites promised spectacular views on clear days. Boy did they deliver here is a few snaps from our van from lake Pukaki and Aoraki camp site.

In Pukaki we saw an incredible sunset beaming pink light onto the mountain. And in Aoraki we could see the glacier from our back doors!



Whilst in the alpine national park we had a few hikes planned. The most well known one being the Hooker valley track which winds you through the mountains to a spectacular view of Aoraki across a glacial lake which was 3 degrees warm... a fantastic walk and needless to say we didn't swim but saw a few people trying to. Some photos from the hike below.

Next morning we woke to torrential rains. Given this was the first really bad weather since we collected the van we weren't too miffed. We did decide against the other steeper hike given the conditions and instead did some planning for the next leg of our trip.

All in all an amazing alpine area with stunning views as far as the eye could see. However when the rain did come you couldn't see the glacier or mountains at-all so we were very lucky to have had a clear day.



## 3500 Miles with Pamela Vanderson

I mentioned previously that I had been compiling some driving footage to give a flavour of the epic varying landscapes we've encountered over the last 3 weeks. A video doesn't capture quite how amazing the landscape is in New Zealand you really have to see it to believe it but hopefully this gives you a glimpse into our last 3 weeks of driving.



<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/videoleap-a0075522-71a2-4d32-ad74-2378716b154d.mp4>

## Christchurch

For our final two nights in New Zealand we had booked an Airbnb to explore the city before heading off. And just our luck a 33 degree heatwave in Christchurch for our visit.

Whilst we've loved our time in the van it was nice to have some space to get unpacked, get our washing done and also some decent WiFi!

Christchurch itself is a lovely little city, feels very quiet even on a bank holiday weekend. There are a couple of buzzing spots with bars and restaurants which we wondered through. But overall quite sleepy.

We took a ride on the heritage tram which winds around the city whilst the driver shared a bit of the

history of the city.

One thing that was quite apparent is the lasting damage from the earthquake in 2011. Whilst lots of areas have been rebuilt with shiny new shopping centres and houses, many of the older damaged buildings such as historic churches and civic buildings are still awaiting the funds to be restored and are currently patched up to make them water tight.

There are also lots of gravel car parks all over the city seemingly in random areas which we believe are where damaged buildings have just been floored and the council are waiting for a buyer of the land.

The current estimate is that around \$70 billion (NZ\$) has been pumped into the restoration and rebuild of Christchurch centre!

But the city moves forward with plans to raise more money to restore old buildings and build back the city better. Human resilience at its finest.

All in all a lovely little city to visit.

## Closing

And that rounds up four weeks in New Zealand. Time really is flying for us. An amazing experience, everything we hoped it would be and more. We've seen close friends, made some new ones and met so many lovely people along the way.

We've seen the most impressive landscapes and swam in the bluest lakes and sea. We've completed several diverse hikes and spotted a lot of New Zealand's bird life (45 birds identified according to James's bird tracking app).

We've loved New Zealand and van life. I am confident we will be back one day.

Next up is Thailand! Where our loose route is Bangkok-> Pai -> Chiang Mai -> Koh Samui -> Koh Tao. Any recommendations let us know. But first we have a few days layover in Sydney to see some friends and family.



# Back to the land of cheap beer and delicious foods

February 12, 2023

Categories: Thailand

Tags: Bangkok, Beer, Food





After a quick pit stop in Sydney (via an extremely turbulent flight) to see some family and friends we made our way to Thailand. First stop Bangkok – food capital of south east Asia.

We had a few nights planned in Bangkok before heading to the North of Thailand. James hadn't been to Bangkok before so a good chance for him to explore and for me to revisit my favourite spots.

## Jay Fei

If you don't know who Jay Fei is check out this [Netflix episode](#).

She is the queen of Thai street food and the first street food chef in the world to receive a Michelin Star.

However it's not as simple as getting a reservation at her restaurant as there are only 8 tables and they operate a first come first serve queuing system with huge wait times.

Luckily we were still on Aus time so a 6:30am start felt like more like 10:30am for us. It was quite strange walking through the quieter streets of Bangkok (if you haven't been it's definitely a night city). We arrived around 7am and there was already quite a big queue outside the restaurant.

We got our queue number at 8:30 – lucky number 11. We took our chances and visited a nearby temple Golden Mountain to break up the wait. And just as we arrived back our number was being called – luck or fate who knows!

We had a prime seat watching Jay cook up all the dishes. She cooks every dish herself which is why

the wait times are so long.

We ordered three dishes and all were delicious:

- Crab Omelet – this is one of her must eat dishes and it didn't disappoint. More crab than egg – it was simply delicious
- Tom Yum – She was the first to create dry Tom Yum but we wanted the OG so went for the traditional soup. The broth had an immense depth of flavour and the tiger prawns were giant, succulent and a pleasure to eat. Good level of heat in this one getting us sweating – but that could also have been proximity to the fires and lack of air conditioning.
- Drunken Noodles – finally a noodle dish, this is how Jay started out so we couldn't not. The noodles were tasty but not quite as show stopping as the other two dishes.

Yum yum and yum! You can see why she has a Michelin by the taste of the food. Credit to the 75+ chef who is over the flames in her goggles cooking for 12 hours a day 5 days per week. Absolute power house. I'm so glad we braved the queues and got to experience Jay Fei!





## Koh San Road – beer, bars, beats and backpackers

Over the few nights in Bangkok we couldn't not visit Koh San Road and the surrounding areas.

For anyone who hasn't heard of it this area its backpackers paradise – filled with cheap bars and parties running til the early hours. Over the course of a few nights we tried out several of the more classy establishments and consumed a fair quantity of Chang beer.

I did however manage to pick one bar which had a local Thai band on and we were the only white people in there. We did get some strange looks but stayed to enjoy the live music. One of our guides later in the week was shocked that we had been – she said “that’s a Thai bar for Thai people”! All part of the experience I say.

Not much had changed in Bangkok since I visited 6 years ago, perhaps everything is a little more expensive post covid but you could say the same everywhere. One big change is that cannabis has been legalised in Thailand so there were a lot more weed stores and stoned people. And also my hangovers are significantly worse than they used to be! Still great fun to be back on this bonkers street soaking up the atmosphere.



## Temple Run

In between eating and drinking we did explore a couple of the temples in Bangkok.

All the temples here are extremely ornate covered in gold leaf or other shimmering materials often surrounded by small jingling bells. There are usually fountains there too bringing the sounds of running water. A very peaceful atmosphere – it sure takes the edge off the crowds of tourists all trying to get the best Instagram photo. Most of the temples are Buddhist which is not surprising given <93% of the population practice Buddhism.

We didn't take too many photos but here is a glimpse.

## Chefs Food Tour

What better way to try some new food in Bangkok than on a street food tour. We did our research and picked one of the best tour companies in Bangkok and we are so glad we did.

We tried 20 different things across 4 hours. Our guide Fon showed us around the back streets of Chinatown to some hidden gems before visiting the main strip of street food in Chinatown.

We tried a range of Thai and Chinese dishes – we loved them all. Without boring you with all 20 here are our top 5 (in no particular order as we couldn't quite agree):

- Prawn Dumplings from Jok One Table: I love dumplings and these were up there with the best dumplings I've ever eaten!
- Soy Sauce Ice Cream from Healthy boy: sounds odd but think Salted Caramel vibes. Made a great palate cleanser at dish 15/20.
- Green Curry from Jek Pui: Delicious aromatic curry with not too much chilli. As seen on Netflix documentary on Street Food
- Pork Satay from undisclosed cart in China town: The best Satay ever – full stop.

- Pork Belly Pepper Soup: Very different flavour to other soups so much pepper but with crispy pork belly it was just yum.

By the end of the evening we were very very full but finished the evening with a rooftop beer overlooking Koh San Road people watching.

Unfortunately most of the dishes were eaten before we thought to take any photos. But we did get a few good snaps of China town.



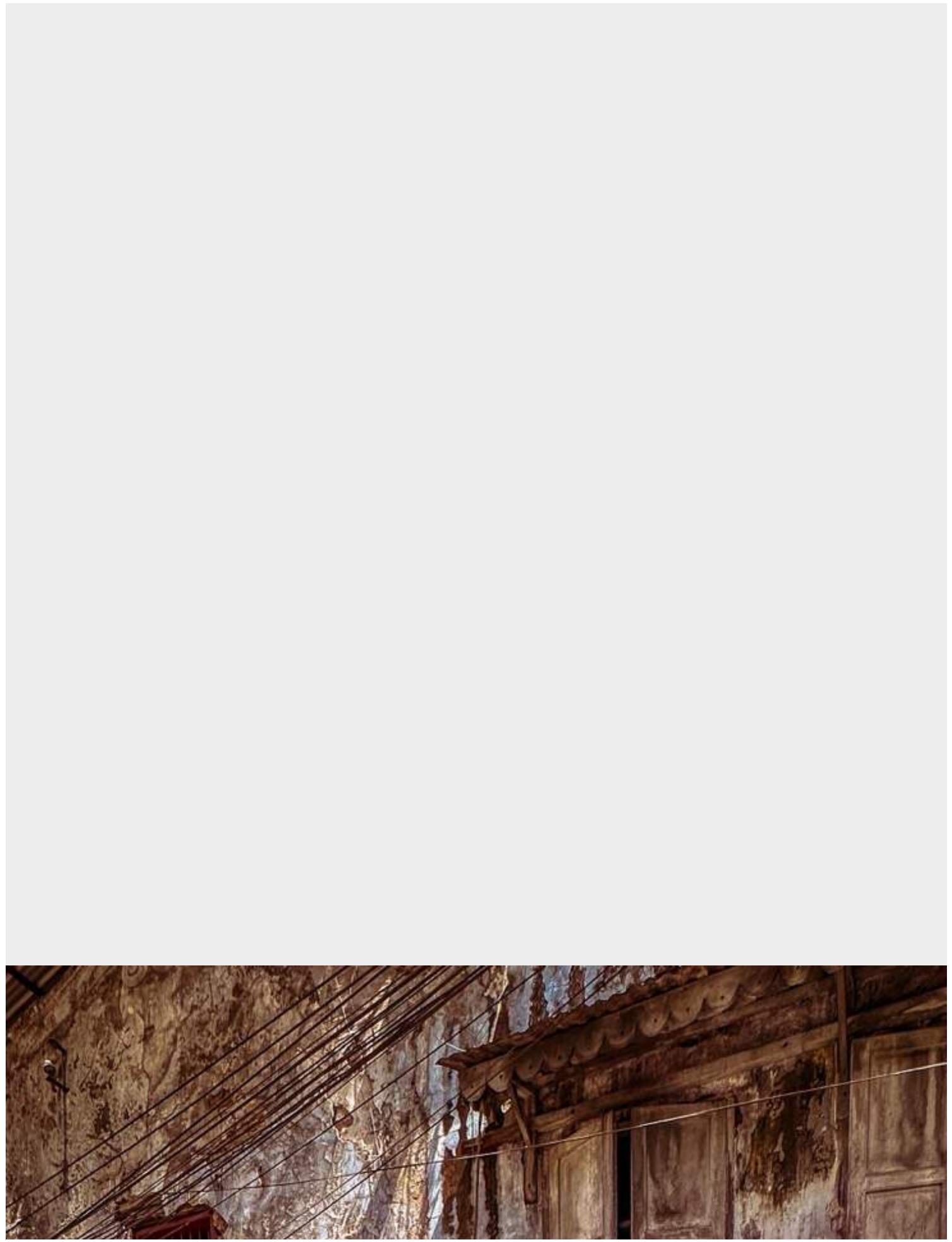
## Exploring Talad Noi

On our final day we wanted to explore one of the more historic areas of Bangkok – Talad Noi. We hopped on the boat down the Chao Phraya river to get there – our ticket was a whopping 39 pence.

Talad Noi has been home to various ethnic Chinese communities since shortly after the foundation of Bangkok (in 1782). It's on the edge of China Town and is home to many old buildings and second hand car parts vendors. It's also bursting with street art and more recently several trendy cafes have opened up drawing in tourists and young people.

We had a wander around the area taking some pictures of the art followed by an iced coffee on the riverside. The fiat 500 depicted below has become a bit of an iconic landmark of the area as it started out just being left there for many years and now it's symbolic of the area and a key Instagram spot.

We also headed to a little street food spot that serves curry pasties. I wasn't sure if it would work but chicken curry in a small pastie as a light morning snack was delicious.







## Closing

That brings Bangkok part one to a wrap. As I'm writing this we are just on the night train to Chiang Mai in the north with the sun setting out of the window (a glimpse below).

We've got 4 days in Pai and 3 in Chiang Mai planned for this week. We've loved Bangkok but nice to get out of the city and what better way to travel than by overnight train – saving a night of accommodation and clocking the miles.



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## Mai oh Mai what a wonderful time in Pai

February 19, 2023

Categories: Thailand

Tags: Beer, Boxing, Chang, Chiang Mai, Cooking, Pai



This week we've been exploring two northern Thailand hotspots, the city of Chiang Mai and mountain town of Pai.

## Exploring Pai

Pai is a small mountain town 91 miles northwest of Chiang Mai. It's a favourite spot for travellers (it was recommended by lots of people along our trip) as it's got a very chilled vibe with a great nightlife and food scene. We took the overnight train to Chiang Mai and hopped straight onto the bus for a 4 hour rollercoaster ride up through the mountains. I was told there are more than 700 tight turns on the journey.

The reviews were correct. The vibe here is really chilled in the day with people taking day trips to nearby waterfalls and landmarks. Come 7pm the walking streets and bars come alive with live music, tasty food and a great bustle of people.

Everything in Pai is in walking distance which means no haggling for TukTuks and you're always only 5 minutes walk from home. We were staying in a little wooden hut over the river which you crossed

by a cute bamboo bridge (which can often get washed away in bad weather).

One of the days we took a scooter out to the white Buddha and a long winding bamboo bridge through paddy fields. It's really luscious and green everywhere as we were whizzing through the quiet mountain roads around Pai.

That evening we headed to the Pai Canyon to watch the sunset – a must do when staying in Pai. It was beautiful but a haze was settling in over Pai already.

Come April the regional 'Burnings' start making it a very unpleasant place to be with a constant smell of burning and a haze that sits across the whole region. We are glad we timed our trip before the smog really sets in.

We loved our stay in Pai!





## Topsy Tubing in Pai

One hot attraction is the twice per week tipsy tubing, which involves floating down the river with some beers to a party spot where there's more beers, a bbq and a DJ.

We made friends immediately and spent the day with a mum, dad & daughter from Essex and a couple who've been travelling for 3 years and are planning to set up a restaurant in Siam Reap.

All 300+ tubers were launched down the river simultaneously. We lost everyone that we met immediately but enjoyed a drunken float for about an hour chatting to random people you bumped into along the way. We regrouped at the party.

A lot of Chang (local beer) was consumed which resulted in a big Changover the next day – luckily Thai food is a good cure!



## Chiang Mai

We arrived back in Chiang Mai via the 3 hour rollercoaster bus this time to spend a few nights and

explore the ‘northern capital’. Chiang Mai meaning “New City” in Thai is the largest city in north. The city is 700 km north of Bangkok, set in a valley on the banks of the Ping River. We had a few nights here to explore the city and we had also booked a cooking class to brush up on our Thai cooking skills.

The city itself is very beautiful, the old town surrounded by a moat and 4 gates north, south, east and west. There are beautiful temples dotted across the city some great areas for shopping and a vivid nightlife scene of bars, street food and shopping markets. Lots to explore but not as spread out or busy as Bangkok.



## Cooking on an organic farm

After our great experience in Vietnam we had booked onto a Thai cooking class. This one was on an organic farm 45 minutes outside of Chiang Mai. We were collected by our wonderful instructor Garnet who took us around a local market before giving us a tour of the farm and guiding us through the cooking of 4 Thai dishes.

We cooked:

- Tom Yum Soup
- Pad Thai
- Koh Soi including making the paste from scratch with a pestle and mortar (Koh soi is a northern Thai Curry – which is currently curry of the year globally)

- Mango Sticky Rice

All were very delicious if I don't say so myself. We were joined by mostly Americans in the class and the instructor loved to attempt to imitate a British accent with all her instruction to us. The experience was great fun and we now have some new recipes for our repertoire. If anyone wants any of the recipes let me know and I'll send across.



## Muay Thai Match

Muay Thai often referred to as Thai boxing, is a combat sport that uses stand-up striking along with various clinching techniques. There are several arenas where you can watch it across the city. We had planned to meet up with our friends from Tipsy Tubing to watch several matches one evening.

Whilst quite brutal fighting there is clear respect between the fighters who bow before starting and help each other up when someone is knocked down. A few fights were very short just a few punches whilst others lasted out the 5 rounds. We made a few bets with a local chap wandering around (my brother will be proud), but this chap knew his stuff and we didn't win once but thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

We had a flow of beers to our table whilst we watched the fight and afterwards visited a beer pong bar and a sketchy club called 'The Spicy' where we danced till the early hours. Sore heads the next day but a great way to experience a Friday night Chiang Mai style!

[Tiger Muay Thai](#)



## Closing

Next we are heading to the eastern Thai Islands for some sea, sun and diving. Although the forecast is currently looking a bit changeable we are hopeful for a lot of sun.



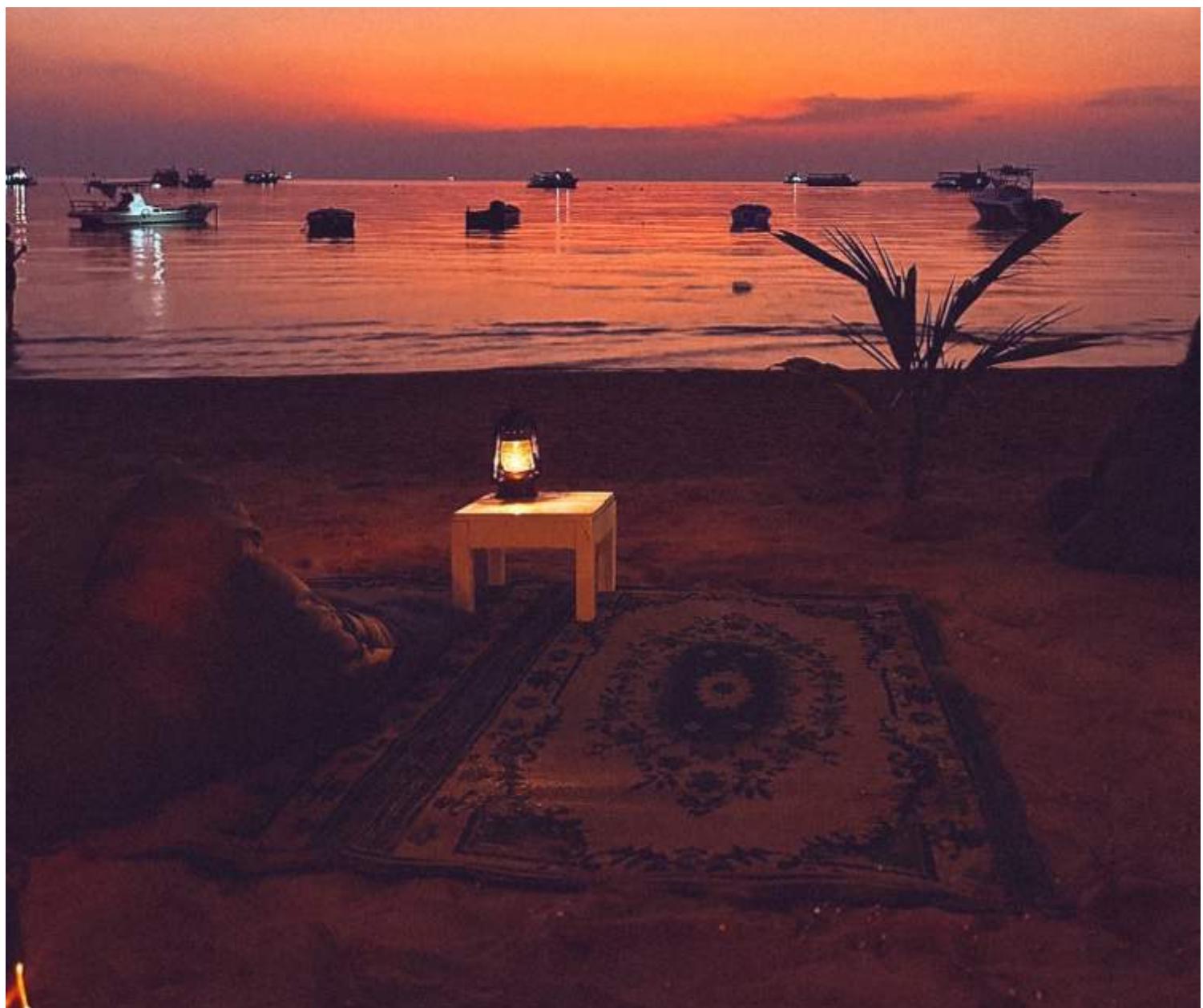
## Thai-Island Life – Samui & Tao

February 26, 2023

Categories: Thailand

Tags: Beach, Diving, Koh, Samui, Tao





This week has been all about living the island life, soaking up the beach and sun across the eastern Thai islands. So not too much to report and not too many photos as we've spent a lot of time reading and swimming.

## Koh Samui

Koh Samui is a more lively island that is very resort-y. Filled with lots of tourists there to lie on the beach for a week.

We had booked into a nice-ish resort for a bit of luxury for two nights before our ferry to Tao.

Beautiful beaches and great weather for our stay.



## Koh Tao

The tiny Island of Koh Tao (“Turtle Island”), 45 km north of Koh Phangan, is one of the top scuba diving destinations in Thailand and is only reachable by a ferry.

As well as being a hot spot for diving it's also a beautiful island with lots of bays and incredible view points.

We had two objectives here! First was to get our PADI Advanced Open Water and second was to soak up the sea, sand and sun for a few days. After a bit of a fiasco getting the ferry across we managed both successfully!

The sunsets on Koh Tao were just beautiful. We found a beach bar ‘Fizz’ which did a great deep house set and a reasonable happy hour which became our regular for sun down. We also loved to watch the various fire shows which started after the sun had set.

We also took a scooter out one day and went exploring the island. We headed to a cute cafe called high the moon which has spectacular views over one of the many bays. Then whiled away several hours in a deck chair on Freedom Beach.

We had some great food recommendations whilst we were here and tried a lot of the local restaurants. One fusion dish worth a shout out is the massaman pizza from Chu Chus which was

surprisingly delicious. Also the curries at Samosa restaurant were top notch – the whole restaurant was run by one woman solo!



## Diving – Advanced Open Water

After getting our open water qualification last year we were keen to improve our skill level. Koh Tao is not only one of the best islands for diving in Thailand but also one of the cheapest in the world. So a good spot to do further qualifications cheaply.

Our advanced course was actually great fun with not too much theory. We had a great instructor (Hannah) to ourself – we were actually her first official students as she was a newly qualified instructor.

We learned and practiced several new skills – deep dives, underwater compass navigation, peak performance buoyancy (floating underwater), fish identification and our personal highlight was night diving.

We were both excited and a little nervous about the night dive but it ended up being our favourite.

We went out to one of the dive sites just before sunset. Got our gear on and our underwater torches (which are incredibly bright). Then plunged into the dark ocean.

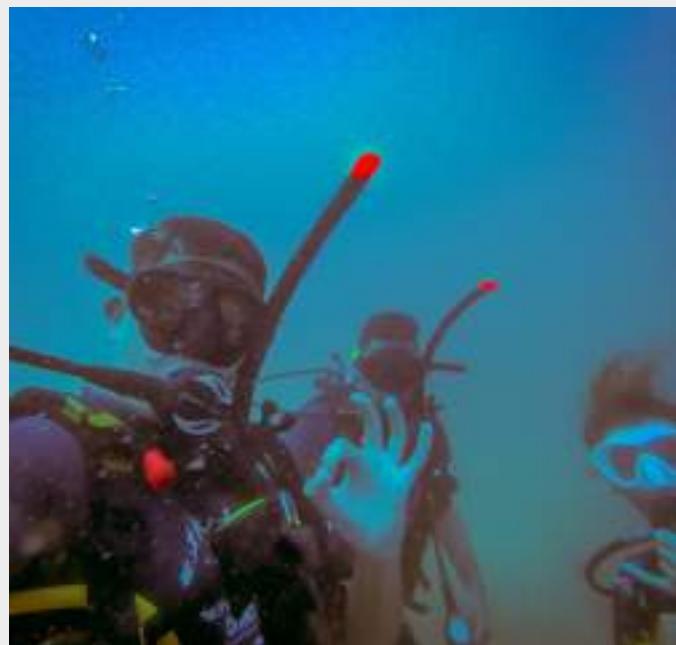
We saw lots of incredible marine life, crabs emerging from their shells and wandering the sea floor, fish sleeping in their corals, small marine life floating through the beam of our torches and humongous Grouper swimming around in the darkness. We even turned the torches out for a while and played with the bio luminescent plankton.

Such a magical experience – heightened by the fact you could only see and focus on what was in the torch beam.

Our second favourite was our deep dive where we cracked an egg under water at 30m. If you want to see what that looks like the video is below.

We passed our qualification with flying colours and also made good friends with our instructor and we celebrated together a few times this week – which included a Joss Shot (Vodka and Oral Rehydration Satchets) 😊.

Also I won't mention that the bumpy boat ride caught up with James's motion sickness on one of the boat journeys 😞





<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/videoleap-b3375a06-c43b-443f-83b1-1d0a187a69e3.mp4>

## Closing

We have a couple more nights on Tao and Samui before heading back to Bangkok. However it has been a bit stormy so hoping our ferry's don't get impacted.

Then we fly to Sri Lanka mid week where we will be meeting 5 friends from home to explore Sri Lanka for a few weeks! We are very excited to see them and they are also couriering some essentials to restock – hair wax, contact lenses and toothbrush heads 😊



## Sri Lanka-shire Hotpot

March 5, 2023

Categories: Sri Lanka

Tags: Beach, bugs, bus, Colombo, Ella, Food, hotel, leeches

We've been in Sri Lanka for three nights now and so far we are loving its charm and the friendly Sri Lankan people.

We've been joined by Nick, Jen and Rebs to explore Sri Lanka with us for our first two weeks here.

So we thought it only right to hand over the blog for a guest edit this week from the three of them.

## The Beach

A long compressed city stretched out along a golden beach, Colombo is no oil painting. We flew in and met James and Olly at the airport, and then Jen a day later. Their tan is infuriating. Their holiday sounds incredible. Their tan is still infuriating.

Our villa, a giant yellow shoebox, sat just up from Mount Lavinia beach.

Almost everything revolved around the beach.

Morning swims. Evening dinners on the beach. Drives along the beach road. Beer after beer after beer under the stars on the beach. Waiting for trains in the beach bar. James covered in diesel fumes from sticking his head out of the train door, chugging up the beach front.



## Old Hotels

Bookending Colombo's beach are the Two Towers of Middle Earth – the old colonial hotels of the Galle Face, and the Mount Lavinia.

Like Galdelf pinballing from one to the other in search of Hobbits, rings, and mithril, we barrelled between them for swims and Singapour slings, margaritas, sunsets, grilled fish and wine.

The Galle Face's food and atmosphere was fantastic, and we didn't even make it to the Prince Philip

memorial museum. Go there if you're in town. The Mount Lavinia was the old governor's mansion cum mental asylum cum army base. A great view of the city.

We loved Colombo. It might not be the prettiest city in the world, but well worth a few days to chill, drink, eat and swim.

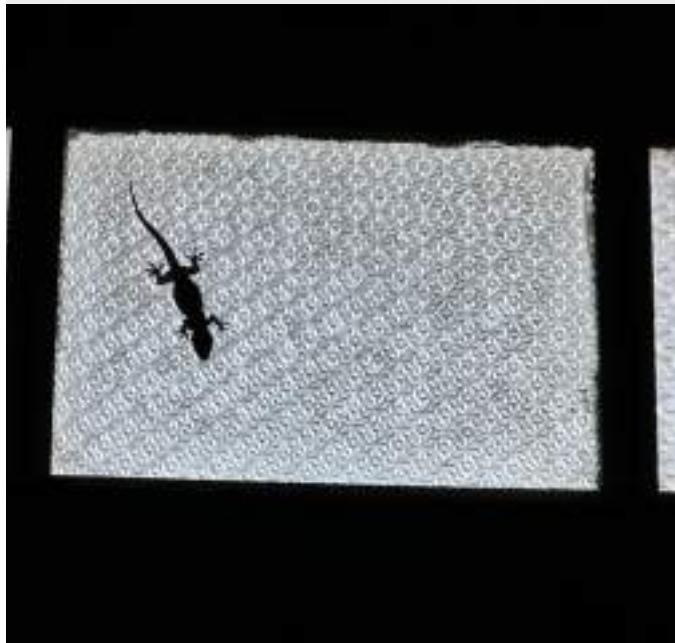


## Sri Lanka flora and fauna (aka Wildlife)

We've been lucky enough to see a variety of animals in our Sri Lankan journey so far! Colombo saw us petting multiple beach dogs (one with three legs 😱) who have all been incredibly friendly. After dark we saw little crabs scurrying out of holes, back into the crashing waves. A lizard had the treat of dropping onto Olly's head at breakfast!

Our car journey from Colombo to Ella was accompanied by sightings of wildlife on every winding bend. Cows, monkeys, goats (a mongoose!) and lots of dogs kept us entertained and puppies providing the cute factor! We have only been in Ella a few hours but have already seen a lot of wildlife, including a frog in the shower!!

We are still yet to see plenty more, top of my list being a leopard and turtles!



## Amba and the Attack of the Leeches

We reached the mountainous region of Ella, but within a few hours we were face-to-face with fearsome, blood-sucking creatures with ten eyes each....the dreaded leech.

Our encounter began once we had checked in to Amba, a luscious organic eco resort and tea farm in Uva province. We quickly settled in to a spacious, bougainvillea-draped farmhouse, and donned our walking gear to set off on a ramble around the extensive Amba grounds (130 acres).

Things began well, as we comfortably traversed tea fields to reach a high, exposed ridge, providing us with an expansive vista across dramatic mountains and valleys. As a few drops of rain began to fall, we decided to continue our ramble down the estate towards the old tea processing plant. Hearing the sounds of rushing water, we briefly stopped to take stock of our position on the map. But we hadn't spotted damp ground beneath our walking shoes. And so it began.

A hoot! A cry! Oliver had spotted a leech willfully attached on to his ankle. Then terror ensued – leeches all over all of us, drinking blood and growing glossy and glutinous.

Remembering the words of the helpful Amba manager, we grabbed deet and waged war on the ambitious worms, peeling them from our legs and running up the steep fields away from the damp

ground. Eventually we were spotted by a helpful farm owner, who guided us back to Amba for a restorative Aperol Spritz. And so calmness resumed in the verdant flora and fauna of the Amba estate.



## Sri Lanka-shire Hotpot (aka the food)

With Colombo and Mount Lavinia being on the coast we've had some great seafood so far. A highlight has been multiple portions of hot buttered cuttlefish, grilled prawns and local oysters. Of course a seafood snack is not compete without a side of holiday chips (holiday chips being a notion coined by the group in north London circa 2019). We had our first lunch in Colombo at Ceylon Curry Club where we enjoyed a traditional Sri Lankan meal including string hoppers, roti, curry and rice.

Today on the drive to Ella we stopped in the hills at a riverside restaurant and devoured a Sri Lankan feast including chicken curry, okra, dhal, salads and a mountain each of rice. Whilst so far our breakfasts have been very much DIY based on what we can get in the supermarket (toast and a delicious exotic fruit jam), we are looking forward to trying out Sri Lankan breakfasts in the coming days. Last but not least, we had some strong desserts at Galle Face Hotel, in particular the creme brûlée and chocolate moose really tickled our collective sweet tooth.



## Closing

What a lovely week catching up with pals and also a weight of my shoulders not having to write the blog!

One story that was missed was when we got 4 of us in a tuk tuk to head to one of the temples which was a squeeze!

We are looking forward to exploring Ella further and also heading to the Yala National Park in a few days.



# Sri Lanka by Chat GPT (Yes I got an AI to write this one)

March 12, 2023

Categories: Sri Lanka

Tags: Cats, chat gpt, Ella, Leopards, Sri Lanka, Tea, Yala

It's been a very busy week with the gang so I decided to get Chat GPT (an AI chat bot) to write the blog this week.

We were all excited to see what awaited us at the top of the mountain. The hike was challenging, but

we managed to reach the top, and the view was worth every effort we put into it. It was a spectacular sight to see the lush green landscape, and we were all in awe.

Let me take you on a virtual journey to our amazing week in Sri Lanka with Rebs, Jen, and Nick. Our adventures this week continued in Amba Tea Estate in Ella, where we indulged in scrumptious food and tasted some of the worlds finest tea. The views of the mountain ranges were breathtaking, and we decided to do a hike to Ella Rock through a dense forest where we were accompanied by Batu the dog. Luckily the sun had come out and the leeches had hidden under ground (yes they do that). We also had leech socks which you'll see Nick modelling below in the photos.



## Safari in Yala National Park

The next stop on our itinerary was Yala, where we went on a thrilling safari adventure. We spotted Lucas, the leopard, which was undoubtedly the highlight of our safari. We also saw elephants, peacocks, mongoose, and crocodiles while cruising around a lake.





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[https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/img\\_3621.mp4](https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/img_3621.mp4)

Lucas the leopard approaching our jeep

## Weligama – August Beach House

We then headed to Welligama, where we stayed in the August Beach House, a stunning villa on the beach. Mike and Carmen flew in from the UK to join us, and the staff, especially Nita, were all very friendly and hospitable.

One of the funniest moments of the trip was when we all went for a night swim in the ocean, and Carmen became our security guard. She was keeping a lookout for any signs of danger, and we all found it amusing.

We also visited Galle, where we explored the fort, lighthouse, and maritime museum. We enjoyed a delicious lunch at Galle Fort Hotel, which was exclusively reserved for our group.

James's 30th birthday was coming up, and we had a unique celebration planned. We went whale watching with Raja, and we were lucky enough to spot a fin whale, a sea turtle, and a pod of 100 dolphins. Will share the professional photos of these next week!

Oh, I almost forgot to mention Puss the Cat, who joined us for most of our journey. We all fell in love with Puss, who was just the cutest little thing. One time, we found Puss sleeping in one of our suitcases, and it was a challenge to wake her up. Puss brought a smile to our faces and made our trip even more memorable. Puss also has four 7 day old kittens which are adorable!



# Closing

After a few more days on the beach here in Weligama we are excited to revisit Yala and Ella next week with Mike and Carmen. We can't wait to see what other exciting experiences await us on this beautiful island.

Overall, our week in Sri Lanka has been yet another adventure of a lifetime, filled with laughter, new experiences, and beautiful memories that we will cherish forever. And we've loved sharing these with some of our nearest and dearest.



## The Return to Yala and Ella: Sri Lanka Week 3

March 19, 2023

Categories: Sri Lanka

Tags: Elephant, Ella, Tea, Train, Yala, zipline



Firstly today marks 6 months since we set off on our travels! Can't believe how quickly it's flown by. We both feel so lucky to have been able to have this adventure and cannot wait to see what the next 6 months hold!

This week we did a reverse of last week. Revisiting Yala for another Safari and then onward to Ella town for some more hiking. And over the course of the week said goodbye to Rebs, Nick, Jen and then finally Mike and Carmen who've all headed back to what I hear is a very chilly UK (not smug at all).

## Whale Watching Photos

I mentioned last week that we would get hold of the professional photos from Whale watching, whilst they aren't the best due to the distance you can see a great one of a dolphin and the fin of the Fin Whale below.



## Yala Safari Round 2 ding ding

After bidding farewell to half of the group. Mike, Carmen, James and I headed onwards to Yala. We arrived into the National Park after dark which made for a very interesting drive to our accommodation as some of the wildlife had started to make its way onto the road – on the way we saw lots of wildlife including a wildcat and an elephant. Our driver had to wait till the elephant moved out of our way. And this was before we'd even started the safari!

Next morning we woke early for our morning of Safari – this time in a Defender which allowed us to go more off the beaten track into the bush.

We didn't manage to see a leopard this time but none of the tours did that morning, we did see quite a few carcasses which suggests that the leopards had a big meal the night before and were sleeping it off. We did however have some fantastic encounters with elephants and eagles!

In the afternoon we chilled by the pool watching the crocodiles in the lake nearby. We befriended one of the staff who did tell us that one time one croc got into the pool and was rather difficult to get out. Needless to say we still swam in the pool to cool off from the evening heat.



## Ella Town Explorations

Final stop with Mike and Carmen was a few nights in Ella. Ella town has a fantastic buzz about it – it's certainly a tourist hotspot filled with lots of westerners but had a lovely vibe. When we arrived into Ella there was a biblical storm with heavy downpours and deafening crashes of thunder – luckily only lasting a few hours but was quite a spectacle to watch.

We were staying in a homestay with the most exceptional view across the valley and Ella rock. It did involve walking up the train tracks to reach it but the trains move so slowly here you do have time to get out of the way when they pass.

We had one full day to explore Ella town and the surrounding sights. We absolutely maximised it.

In the morning we hiked little Adam's Peak to get some exceptional views of Ella Rock and nearby tea

plantations. On the way down James and Mike did the largest fastest zip line in Sri Lanka across tea plantations (video below). After that we hiked to the 9 arch bridge to take some photos and walk along the tracks.

Then following a delicious lunch in town we headed to Halpe Tea Factory where we got a full tour and tasting.

An incredible last day in Ella before Mike and Carmen also departed to head home to the UK.





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## Train from Ella to Kandy

The Ella to Kandy train journey is the scenic train ride in Sri Lanka and said to be one of the most scenic in the world. The journey time should take 7 hour 6 Mins but in reality often runs up to 9 hours. Our ticket for the journey was just a few pounds and despite the train being slow it was very comfortable.

The journey itself lives up to the hype. Shortly after departing Ella you begin to enter tea country where the train winds up incredibly steep hills between tea plantations. Then drops down into incredible palm jungle.

We both managed to spend some time sat in the open train door with your legs dangling as the warm air tickled at our feet. Staring out at what feels like never ending tea plants dotted with pluckers

dressed in white to reflect the sun. Accompanied by the dull rattle of the train it was remarkably peaceful watching the hills of tea roll by and the odd dramatic waterfall emerging from the landscape. A must do journey for anyone visiting Sri Lanka. I captured a few short video clips along the way to give you a flavour of the journey.



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## Closing

We've got a few days in Kandy to see Buddha's (alleged) tooth and then head north to the Cave Temples and Sigriya (Lion Rock), before we head back to the south coast to master our surfing.



# Tasty Temples, tooth's and towering rocks – Sri Lanka Week 4

March 26, 2023

Categories: Sri Lanka

Tags: Beach, Beer, Buddha, Dambulla, Food, hoppers, kandy, lion rock, Sigriya, tooth



This week we had a few key sights to see in central Sri Lanka before heading back down south to the reliable weather and surf.

## Temple of Buddha's tooth aka Sri Dalada Maligawa – Kandy

On our stay in Kandy we visited the temple of the tooth, a UNESCO site. Which allegedly houses the tooth of Buddha himself. Over the years the tooth has been stolen and returned by various nations – Portugal and India included.

The temple was alive with people when we arrived as it was a Sunday and there was also a large festival taking place across the city that weekend. Whilst it was busy the atmosphere was really remarkable. You could feel the energy from all these worshipers looking to give their offering to Buddha via his tooth. All ages dressed from head to toe in white each carrying various flowers in bright colours of purple and orange.

It was lovely to observe but eventually our bare feet were getting a bit burnt on the hot floor (our soles aren't used to the heat like locals) so we headed to retrieve our shoes and grabbed an ice cold juice and some Kottu Roti – I'll talk a little more about Sri Lankan food later in this blog.

Evidently you can't photo inside the temple but I snapped a couple of photos around the temple below.



## Spice Garden

On our drive from Kandy north our driver suggested we stop at one of the many Spice Gardens which thrive in the conditions of central Sri Lanka.

We were pleasantly surprised by the experience as we had a private tour of all the spice plants. Smelling and tasting as we went.

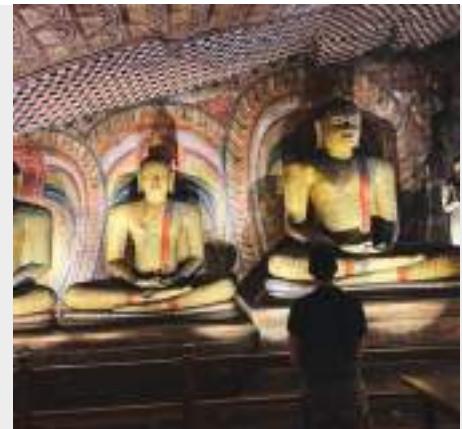
We then got a free massage with some of their herbal oils before continuing our journey north. We both learnt a lot about spice plants!



## Dambulla Golden Cave Temple

Next stop along the way was the Golden Cave Temples in Dambulla yet another UNESCO heritage site. The cave temples have been a sacred pilgrimage site for 22 centuries.

After a steep and hot climb we reached the temple. The temple itself is quite modest but inside the hand carved caves you can see the 157 Buddha statues as well as many intricate wall paintings which have been well preserved. We took some flowers to offer to the giant reclining Buddha.



## Sigiriya

We arrived in Sigiriya with a plan to climb lion rock the following morning. We had booked into a charming budget homestay for a handsome £8 for the night. The hosts were wonderful and we took a special liking to their large Alsatian Leo.

We went for a wonder around the area that evening which is mostly filled with lodges for guests visiting the UNESCO heritage sight to climb the great rock. But we wanted to experience the local life here so we wondered the back streets and found a local lake where locals were fishing and

wondered past many of the local dwellings soaking it in. Then just as the rain was coming we ducked into a reggae bar (called Rasta-rant 😂) for a beer.

On the walk home I was pondering at the incredible stars above when I saw a Sparkle of fireflies (yes a group is called a Sparkle). An absolutely entrancing moment, we stood watching the luminous dots whizz around the sky.

Next morning we were up at the crack of dawn to climb Sigriya (aka Lion Rock) to avoid the 30 degree heat. It was still a challenging and sweaty climb to the top.

Once you reach the top you get breathtaking views of the surrounding area. We reached the summit before 8 am so there was a beautiful morning haze across the landscape.

We then began to explore the ruins of the ancient citadel which sits on top of the rock. The citadel on top of Sigiriya was built by King Kasyapa who ruled from 477 to 495 CE. Its location was chosen as it provided great protection from attack as well as a long range view to see any attackers coming.

Last one I promise –



## Back to the south coast – first stop Dalawella:

Finally ending the week back on the south coast. We wanted to hit two new spots on the south coast and do some exploring of the area as well as some sun bathing and swimming.

First stop was Dalawella famous for its turtle beach. We had four nights here to explore the beaches and areas nearby.

Day one we visited Unawatuna which is a fantastic beach but busy with families. The area around the

beach is filled with nice restaurants and bars. We had a great BBQ fish here.

Next day we went exploring east along the coast. First we visited the turtle hatchery which rescues eggs and injured turtles. We did our research to check this was genuine conservation before paying for the tour. But these guys really do care for the turtles.

There were hundreds of baby turtles due to be released that evening as well as a couple of permanent residents – Olivia the leatherback turtle who's fin was damaged by a boat and can only float now. And an albino turtle born with a spinal defect.

We then went along to the turtle beach and were lucky enough to swim close with turtles in the wild which was amazing. What was less amazing was the other tourists feeding and touching them – they didn't seem to mind but it certainly made me uncomfortable.



Finally we visited the Thalpe beach pools. According to the villagers these rock pools were cut out of the corals around 50 years ago and were used to soak coconut husks in order to separate the coconut coir.

Now they've become a hot spot for locals and tourists to bathe whilst being splashed by the waves.



## Closing:

We have just a few more days on the south coast in Ahangama which is more of a hip surfing spot before heading back to Colombo for our flight to Japan.

## Epilogue: Sri Lankan Food

I realised I hadn't talked much about the food here in Sri Lanka which is an oversight by me as it's exceeded all our expectations and quite frankly been some of the most delicious food we've had on our trip.

On the south coast we've been eating a lot of incredible seafood and fish platters including lots of cuttlefish, prawns, butterfish, red snapper, crab and squid. They occasionally toss the food through a sauce but generally just expertly BBQ it:



Rice and curry is obviously a staple here but they do it really well. When you order curry and rice you get not only the curry you order but a wonderful selection of vegetable curries, vegetables and dhals. The spice levels here are perfect for us never too spicy never too bland (but perhaps they are tailoring for western palate but they do it very well).

What they also do here are string hoppers as an alternative to rice which make for a nice change. They consists of rice flour pressed into noodles with a special tool then laid into a flat disc-like shape and steamed. You put dollops of curry on top and eat with your hands



We also have a new found love of Kottu Roti. which is chopped pieces of Roti fried on a hot plate with veggies, egg, cheese and/or meats. Creating a plate deliciousness!

Sri Lankan Snacks are oh so delicious too. Various curry filled deep fried snacks of roti or crispy casing never fail to quench the snack craving. Even their equivalent of Bombay mix is delicious. We find that every snack counter, train snack seller or pastry delivering tuk tuk we visit has something

new to try and we are yet to be disappointed.



The breakfasts here are to die for! There are so many different elements to each and you normally get several of these leaving you full and set for the day:

- Breakfast always starts with a fresh plate of fruit – papaya, passion fruit, melon, pineapple. And always so fresh and juicy.
- Hoppers (Plain or Egg) – these are rice flour and coconut based which are then fried off (sometimes with an egg in the bottom) in a special rounded pan which creates a sort of bowl shaped pancake. You then add some filling – usually onion sambal. Before devouring the delicious bowl.
- String hoppers and curry I mentioned above can be served at breakfast time too.
- Sri Lanka Omelet – whilst simple is always a crowd pleaser. It's an omelet with some chopped veggies and spicing. We had a particularly good one when on the boat whale watching.
- Coconut pancake – these are a thick doughy pancake filled with fresh grated coconut and honey – yum
- Coffee – as well as the amazing tea here Sri Lanka also grows brilliant arabica coffee which accompanies the delicious breakfast.

Long and short of it – they take breakfast seriously here and I'm all for it!



I couldn't not mention the Lion Beer here! It's the local lager and is around £1-2 a large bottle always served ice cold. We've certainly made our way through a few bottles, cups and beer towers of the elixir here!



Needless to say we've eaten and drank very well here and all at a fraction of a cost. Curry and rice costing ~£3, Kottu Roti costing around £1.80, snacks less than £1 and breakfast around £2.50. I think everyone who's joined us on the trip would agree that we haven't had a bad dish in the whole time we've been here.

I highly recommend you scope out your local Sri Lankan restaurant and give the food a try.



# I wonder if you know how they live in Tokyo (はい)

April 2, 2023

Categories: Japan

Tags: Food, tokyo



Not much to report in our last few days in Sri Lanka, sea, surf, chess (yes you heard me), fantastic fish, some dancing and an amazing dog called Bella.

Then Thursday evening we set off on our rather long journey to Tokyo. We had a beautiful last sunset on our drive to Colombia airport a perfect farewell for now to Sri Lanka.

We had a 20 hour journey via Kuala Lumpur as it was the cheapest option. First leg was only 3 hour

leaving us with a 9 hour lay over airside in KL. We made one of our wisest decisions to date and booked into a capsule hotel – which was a dream. 6 hours sleep and a shower before our longer flight to Tokyo.

What was slightly less pleasant were the queues upon arrival at Haneda Airport Tokyo. 2 hours to get through immigration and customs, then another hour to wait for a taxi to drive us 9 minutes to our hotel. Meaning we arrived to our hotel rather peckish at 2am. We went to find some snacks in the local 24/7 convenience store. These places are a gold mine its not like a corner shop back home. We walked away with hot Yaki Soba and a Bento box – needless to say we went to sleep with full tummies and if the corner shop food is this good the restaurants can only be better!

## Tokyo's Drifting Blossoms

We had purposely timed our trip to Japan around the Cherry Blossoms in Tokyo and given the early bloom this year we were a little worried that we might arrive to find bare branches and floors filled with petals. So our first priority was to visit a couple of the main parks in the Shinjuku area. We were blessed with a glorious day (apparently the last few weeks have been quite wet – so we felt smug).

First stop Shinjuku Gyoen Park only to find it fully booked – this is a sign of things to come if a park is fully booked. Prior to arriving in Japan we did have great trouble finding reasonable accomodation across Japan as this is the busiest time of year and the first year tourism has been allowed post covid. Luckily we managed to source some late afternoon tickets to the park online so we would circle back later.

So we decided to head to Yoyogi park first via the beautiful Meiji Jingu temple. Still not quite sure what to expect would their be blossom left or not. We wondered our way through the park which was very busy and then we caught our first glimpse – ahhh Blossoms!! They were absolutely beautiful 700 trees covered in blossoms in varying stages from full bloom to just starting to turn green.

This park is very popular with locals and nearly every inch of grass had picnic blankets and large sheets laid out covered with people eating and drinking underneath the blossoms. The vibe was fantastic, no phones out except for photos and lots of happy people enjoying the sun and one of natures wonders.

We then stopped at a small sandwich shop for some cute Japanese sandwiches. Salmon and cream cheese for me Duck and Banana for James (yep banana – but it really worked). Before winding our way back to the Shinjuku Gyoen park for our allotted time slot at 3pm.

The blossoms in this park were even better! They were all in full bloom and quite frankly perfect! The sun was lowering in the sky and a small breeze through the park was sending petals floating through the air like pink edged snow flakes. This park wasn't quite as busy (probably because you had to pay to get in) but made for a much calmer atmosphere for us to wind our way through the 900 cherry blossom trees that reside here. Everyone was very respectful of the trees no touching the branches or the petals and taking only photographs. A magical few hours in this park that neither of us will forget.

Honestly the photos don't do it justice but here are just a few.





## Izakaya 🍎

Needless to say once we learnt about Izakaya we wanted to visit some – and boy they didn't disappoint. We just wondered around Shibuya till we spotted a Izakaya that had space and tried our luck. We visited some that were slightly more refined others which were evidently local haunts.

All served delicious food and of course beer, sake, whisky and sours! The food included delicious slow bbq'ed prawns, scallop ceviche, crab croquette, kerachi fried chicken and sashimi – mmmm!

We witnessed some of the heavy drinking culture in Japan featuring a few very drunk individuals and a passed out man – who we later found out was the owner of the bar we were in. We drank our way through many Shochus (hard liquor made from grain and vegetables) before making it home in the wee hours – sore heads in the morning but a great experience.



## Tokyo Sky Views

On our second day after Raman saved us from our hangovers we did a little more exploring before heading to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building to ascend to the 45th floor for some incredible panoramic views across the city. We timed it just right to get views as the sun went down.

Tokyo truly is a mega city! It feels like we've done an impressive amount in 2 days but we haven't scratched the surface. We've managed a mere 40k steps in 2 days!

I've also started collecting eki stamps. Train stations and other tourist attractions have rubber stamps which you can take a little book to and stamp. They are often tricky to find – but that's part of the fun!



## Closing

We have a few more nights in Tokyo to explore some of the other districts before we make our way to Hakone via train.

So far we are loving Japan! The food and people are amazing. It feels safe yet culturally very

different. We are also loving the language barrier makes things a little more interesting! Point, order and eat!

For anyone left wondering about the blog title its from a song from Fast and Furious Tokyo Drift – we are avid fans of the abysmal series of films.



## A taste of Tokyo and April showers at Fuji

April 9, 2023

Categories: Japan

Tags: Tokyo; hakone; Fuji; food; sake;



Our step count just keeps rising in Japan! So much to see and never enough time to see it all. This

week we continued our exploring of Tokyo and then headed to the nearby region of Hakone to cast our eyes on Mount Fuji (or try too between the rain and clouds).

## Tasting Tokyo's food and drink with Aki

We had a food and drink tour booked in the Ueno area of Tokyo. Slightly less touristy with more locals.

Aki our eccentric tour guide took us around several drinking and eating spots allowing us to try a whole range of food and drink leaving us extremely full and a bit tipsy by the end.

Highlight was the deep fried yellowtail tuna – just delicious. The lowlight was grilled pork oesophagus which was pretty nasty – but kudos to the Japanese for not wasting any of the animal. However I will say the pressure cooked oesophagus, wasn't too bad.

As we had already discovered the drinking culture in Japan is pretty wild. We tried more shochu but this time with a light beer as a mixer – remarkably quite tasty! Also more sours and a stronger Japanese beer Kirin. We also did a Sake fountain where sake is poured till it overflows the glass into a bowl and you must slurp the first few sips – fun and all delicious.

Aki was telling us that it's quite common for Japanese people to drink till they pass out in the street. Where they will be left till they wake up, and in some instances dust themselves off and head back into the office. He assured us if we got into this state we would wake up with all our belongings as the Japanese wouldn't rob a drunk person. Needless to say we won't test that theory...

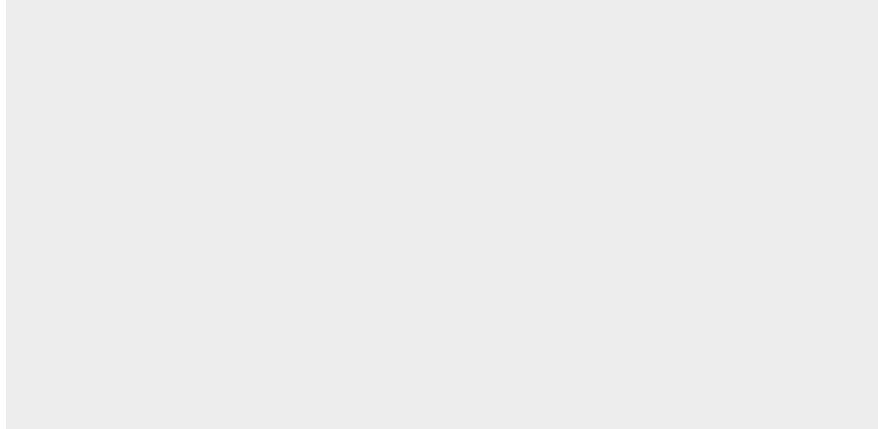


## Tokyo Temples, Art and Arcades

The rest of our time in Tokyo we spent exploring various temples, art galleries and hitting up the old school arcades. We also had great omakase at a sushi restaurant – mmm.

Tokyo is just so vast and we really don't feel like we scratched the surface in the 5 days we spent there. An amazing city that we will for sure come back to in the future!





# Hakone

Hakone is famous for two things, hot springs and it's incredible natural beauty with (on a clear day) incredible views of Mount Fuji. The best way to see Fuji is to complete the Hakone loop (series of train, bus, boat and cable car rides with stunning views). Both were on our to do list.

However we were hit with adverse weather on our full days in Hakone and due to the heavy rain, fog and strong winds both the boat and ropeway were cancelled for two days. That said our time here hasn't been wasted, we've embraced Onsens, we managed to see Fuji on our first afternoon and we visited the open air museum. We also used the rain time to get some planning done for our next leg.

I couldn't not mention our accommodation. We were staying in a capsule hostel where we had our very own pod. Think large coffin with comfy bed, light and usb ports! That said it's very comfy, quiet and most importantly cheap.

## Onsen Experience

The 温泉 onsen is an essential part of Japanese culture. An Onsen is a hot spring public bathing facility. The usually outdoor pools use naturally hot water from geothermally heated springs. It's a must do experience in Japan and for anyone who knows me I LOVE a hot tub, bath or jacuzzi – we loved it so much we went twice. Before Japanese people had baths and running hot water at home the onsen was the way Japanese people washed – now it's very much a relaxation activity.

For those new to Onsens they are segregated by gender, you must wash thoroughly before entering and one must enter without any bathing suit on – oh and it seems customary to wear a wet white towel on your head (which can be used to cover your modesty as you move around). It's also worth noting in most onsens tattoos are not permitted (due to association with Yakuza)!

Our first trip to Tenzan Onsen was in the evening just as the sun was setting. Once you've stripped off you enter the outdoor area which has several stone pools each filled with different temperature water. There are washing stations along the edge to scrub yourself down and then you soak and sauna and soak some more. We were surrounded by bamboo and flowers with a canopy of red and green acer trees above us. The only noise above the low whispered chatting was the trickle of water. Very very zen!

After our soak we went to the restaurant upstairs for Shabu Shabu, a traditional Japanese hot pot where you cook meat and vegetables in a bubbling pot in the centre of the table. Then finally make a ramen with the broth at the end – it was delicious!

On our second visit we went early in the morning for a soak whilst it was raining. We sat in the spring under the acer trees with rain bouncing and steaming off the water – it was rather magical and very peaceful.

After boiling in the water there are various spots around the traditional wooden building where you can take a seat or have a lie down to continue the relaxing. We will be on the look out for more onsens in Japan for respite from the busy days and tired legs.

No photos inside of this experience for obvious reasons 😊. But a couple of the building and the Shabu Shabu.



## Natural Beauty and Fuji

Despite the adverse weather we did manage one afternoon of blue skies where we managed to see Fuji across the lake and took one of the cable cars to get a view from higher up.

To get to the lake you take a small local bus which winds up through the mountain towns. Out of every window there is a sea of green trees and scattered like little snowflakes are pops of white and

pink cherry blossoms like a scene from a painting. Hundreds of cherry trees in a sea of green – just beautiful.

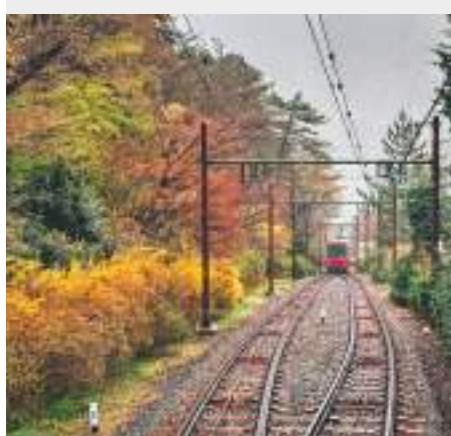
Then we reached the lake where you can see Mount Fuji rising from the sky line – an epic view!

(approx 100km).



# Hakone Open Air Museum

Between the continuous rain we took the train up to Gora to visit the open air museum there. In order to scale the steep climb it switches back on itself 4 times. We were lucky that the rain held off for a few hours for a good explore of the sculptures in this museum.



## Closing

Next up Kyoto via the Shinkansen (bullet train). What a way to travel!

Speeds of 320kmph, average delays last year per train was 12 seconds, 0 deaths or collisions on record. You can see why it's classed as the quickest most efficient train service in the world.



## Exploring the old capitals of Japan – Kyoto, Osaka & Nara

April 16, 2023

Categories: Japan

Tags: Castle, Deer, Food, Kyoto, Osaka, Tea



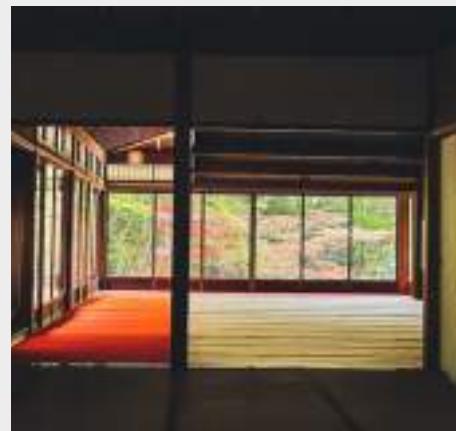


This week we've been exploring the Kansai region staying in two of Japan's previous capital cities: Kyoto and Osaka. We also did a few day trips to nearby towns including another Japanese capital Nara where we met some friendly deer.

# Kyoto

Kyoto was once the largest city in Japan as well as being a previous capital. It is famous for its refined culture and charm of rural Japan in a city. It is home to over 3000 temples and shrines as well as some of the best restaurants in the country. Needless to say we had lots to try and see in 4 days.

Some snaps from across Kyoto, more about the food later.



## Tunnel of Orange – Fushimi Inari Shrine

Fushimi Inari Shrine is a Shinto shrine known for its 10,000 orange torii gates. Founded in 711 AD it's one of the oldest shrines to Inaki – god of rice and sake.

To reach the shrine at the summit you take a 45 minute walk up the winding path filled with orange gates. The first 15 minutes is jam packed with tourists even though we arrived before 9. But once you get past the crowds it's a beautiful peaceful walk under the gates with great views across Kyoto. And once you get away from the crowds great to take a few photos of. For those interested the two most

prominent religions in Japan are Buddhism and Shinto.





<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/videoleap-dd12d149-dc0e-4abb-af10-4f4b31824dae.mp4>

Short video of the shrine with music from Tamaru Handpan a local musician.

## The way of Tea – Japanese Tea Ceremony

You are greeted by your host and welcomed into the light and spacious room. In the middle a black lacquer hearth with a pot bubbling a way. Mats are laid out on the tatami floor inviting you to sit down and a small shelving unit with utensils sits in the middle of the room. There is an inscription on a scroll and a small vase of flowers in the corner of the room.

This is where the tea ceremony takes place. Tea ceremonies is a tradition steeped in history. And whilst today tea ceremonies are more of a hobby, in the past they were a key part of Japanese culture. Every step of the ceremony is quite specific and must be followed with exact precision (down to specific positioning of pots and utensils) although each tea house may have a slight variation on

the steps broadly speaking it's similar.

One of the main purposes of the ceremony is for guests to enjoy the hospitality of the hosts. We were lucky enough to have a host who talked us through the process as the tea master conducted each of the steps to produce us the best bowl of Matcha we've had yet. We were then lucky enough to have a go ourselves – although I noticed they swapped out the priceless heirloom utensils (probably sensible as there was a charcoal open fire and they were wooden). We each had a go at following the many steps to produce a bowl of tea for the other.

We then had a long Q&A session with our host about the process, teaching and tea culture today. A very restorative few hours learning and drinking tea in a tranquil environment.



## Osaka

Next stop was Osaka a mere 25 minutes on the bullet train from Kyoto. Osaka is the second largest city in Japan and also was once the capital of Japan. The castle here is a national landmark and the city is home to the oldest temple in Japan.

My summary of Osaka is it's a smaller slightly more gritty version of Tokyo with less queues. But we totally loved it. Great bars and restaurants on every corner and some lovely day trip opportunities near by such as Himeji castle and Nara to see the deer.

Again too much to call out everything that we saw but here are some snaps of our time in Osaka.



## To Himeji Castle

We had an early start for our day trip to Himeji to beat the queues at the castle. We were there before the gates opened at 9. But this was very much worth it.

Himeji castle is a hilltop complex sitting in the city of Himeji which is about 30 minutes from Osaka by train. The castle is one of the best surviving examples of 17th century Japanese architecture. The castle was miraculously spared during the American bombings in the war. The city painted the whole castle to camouflage it which must have played a part as the nearby city was in fact heavily bombed.

The castle and gardens are incredible and a lot of work has gone into preserving this monument.

Most recently a 5 year renovation took place to replace the roof and redo a lot of the exterior plaster – you could still visit during this time to observe the renovations. However about 70 years ago an even more extensive renovation took place where the entire building was deconstructed, re-enforced and put back together over the space of 8 years. Which is an incredible feat especially without the technology we have today. We saw the 3D model which was used as a guide – no computer generated image just a small wooden replica.



## Feeding the friendly deer in Nara

Nara is 30 minutes east of Osaka and although these days it's a charming small town, it was once the capital. We came to see the main sites, such as the giant bronze Buddha at Todai-ji (housed in the largest wooden building in the world), Kofuku-ji and the other various shrines dotted around, and the Yoshiki-en gardens. But most of the day revolved around interacting with Nara's famous locals – the (somewhat) tame deer that roam Nara-kōen.

Nara's deer are the symbols of the city and are famous across Japan and the world. The deity enshrined at Kasuga Taisha Shrine is said to have ridden to Nara upon a sacred deer, and it's because of this legend that the deer have always been considered sacred and have been loved and protected. Whilst there's abundant grass around which makes up most of their diet, Nara is dotted with vendors selling shika senbei – "deer crackers" – that tourists can buy and feed to the deer. It's due to this close interaction with humans that the deer have learned to bow their heads to cracker-loaded locals and tourists. The deer are extremely cute and mostly polite with their bowing, though if you take too long to get your crackers out you may get a nudge or even a bit of a nibble on your shirt. It's fair to say I spent a couple of thousand yen on ensuring my pockets were packed with crackers at all times, and the clever deer clocked me pretty quickly as someone who could be easily manipulated for a virtually endless supply of crackers.

At first sight of the deer we thought they looked a bit rough scraggy and wondered if this human-reliant diet was maybe bad for the deer – they looked slightly reminiscent of urban foxes with their patchy fur. But it turns out because it's spring they're just moulting their winter coats, they're completely healthy. The crackers are made locally from just what flour and rice bran, with no sugar so safe for the deer (and very dry and bland to the curious humans that try them). The crackers are a registered trademark of the Foundation for the Protection of Deer in Nara, and a portion of their profits goes to efforts to protect the deer. All this information meant we could mingle with the fluffy locals guilt-free.

It was very peaceful and enjoyable wandering through the park, stopping at tea houses and feeding almost every deer that bowed in our direction (as soon as they see or hear the rustling of the crackers, their little heads start bobbing up and down furiously), especially when we reached the far side of the park away from the majority of the tour groups that get off their big buses and walk no more than a few metres from the main sites.

After a quick beer we headed back to the station to get the train back to Osaka, where we spent the whole evening at an Izakaya, sandwiched between two groups of office workers who seemed very happy it was Friday, drinking beer quicker even than us. After a few small plates, a few sakes and many beers we stumbled home to rest our weary legs.





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## More about the food and drink in the region

I know I've mentioned a little about the food here but I just wanted to elaborate a bit more. We already loved Japanese food and coming here has only solidified that. From the £1 egg sandwich from 7/11 to a omakase (chefs selection) of sushi everything has been delicious.

To try and keep our costs down we have been having a few meals from the convenience stores which they heat up on the spot for you. It costs about £2.50 for a take soba here the quality of the food is pretty good especially for the price.

However in the last week we've tried a few local delicacies in the Kyoto/Osaka area which deserve a special mention:

- Takoyaki (Octopus balls) is a ball-shaped Japanese snack made of a wheat flour-based batter and cooked in a special molded pan. They pop a small piece of octopus in the middle and bake – just delicious!
- Kushikatsu (deep fried skewers) – these tasty snacks go great with a beer. They take any meat, fish or veggie and dip it in a batter and deep fry. Dip into ponzu or soy – taste sensation.
- Okonomiyaki (Japanese Pancake) – this is cooked on a hot plate in front of you – batter sandwiched with a meat or fish – beef in our case. Then flipped till it's cooked through then you devour!
- Chicken Skin Gyoza – not sure if this is a local delicacy but they were damn delicious and we didn't see them in Tokyo or Hakone.

No trip to Japan would be complete without a sushi conveyor belt visit. We found a fantastic place in Osaka (Daike Susan) where we made our way through about 8 dishes of sushi between us – the quality was brilliant and the price was reasonable. The man behind us had 10 dishes just to himself – impressive!

We also tried a sensational Kobe beef burger in Himeji at a place famed for its reasonably price Kobe. It was the best beef I've eaten ever!

The snack game here is very strong too. Every trip to 7 eleven it's hard not to try a new snack. Chocolate covered pocky sticks, soy crisps and matcha Kik-Kat's are up their with the favourites.

The last thing I'll mention on the food and drink is we found ourself in an all you can drink shochu sours restaurant. We even had a tap on our table piping sours directly into our glasses – dangerous. We got our money's worth for sure – but not sure it was worth it for the sore head the next day!



## Closing

Another wonderful week of exploring in Japan. Next up Naoshima (AKA art island) followed by Hiroshima and a quick stop back in Tokyo which then completes our time in Japan. Can't believe how quickly it's gone.



# A week of art and culture – Naoshima, Hiroshima & Team Lab

April 23, 2023

Categories: Japan

Tags: art, atomic bombs, drains, Hiroshima, Naoshima, ramen

Of course we aren't slowing down for our last week in Japan. We are cramming in as much as possible. A quick stop on Naoshima to see the art before getting the bullet train down to Hiroshima with a plan to learn all about the atrocities on 6th August 1945 and the aftermath. Then a flying stop back in Tokyo before our flight.

## Naoshima aka Art Island

Naoshima is a small island in the Seto Inland Sea. In the 90s it was a sleepy remote island until one businessman had a vision to make it one of the world's most unique destinations for art lovers and travellers.

It was a little tricky to get 3 trains and a ferry but was very much worth it when we arrived.

We hired e-bikes (which we were glad due to some large hills) to get between the galleries and outdoor sculptures scattered across the island. The gallery buildings themselves are incredible works of architecture by architect Tadao Ando.

We were restricted on where we could take photos but we did catch a few below.

A couple of things which stood out on the island:

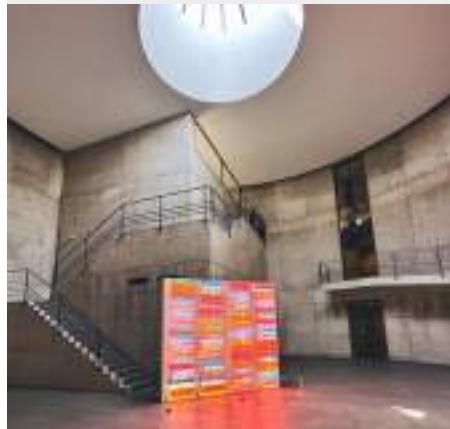
- The iconic yellow pumpkin by Yayoi Kusama was a must see. Although it's only recently back on display after it was swept away into the sea during a typhoon. It was recovered and has been restored recently.
- The country flags you see below were made with sand and a colony of ants were allowed to

live in them for a period of time creating a maze of tunnels through the flags – very unusual.

- The concrete architecture of all the buildings was just stunning especially with a clear blue sky and the sun casting wonderful shadows.
- The neon words below by Chris Glass were very cool although all the words only light up in unison once every 10 minutes.
- We also saw a lovely Monet exhibition in the midst of all the modern art.

A fantastic whistle stop tour of the island – we left feeling very cultured.





## Staying in Hoshikuzu (a Traditional Japanese House)

The accommodation we had booked on Naoshima was also a great cultural experience. We had booked a traditional Japanese house for the evening. We hadn't quite realised when we booked that we were getting the whole 3 bedroom place to ourselves.

But it was a fantastic stay – I pulled together a short video below to show you some of the insides of the building.

The walls really are paper thin I think I was awoken by a neighbour across the street blowing his nose. We felt a little silly locking the doors at night as if anyone did want to get in we were a tear away.





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## Hiroshima

Our main aim here was to visit the museum and peace memorial park. The city itself had a good vibe to it everything is evidently very new and rebuilt post the bombing. We also took a day trip to nearby island Miyajima.

Overall a nice city with good food and drinking options (with much less queuing needed).

## Peace Memorial & Museum

It is estimated that the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on the 6th August 1945 killed 135,000 people and it's near impossible to put a number on the volume of people impacted by the radiation in the area.

The museum we visited was filled with facts and witness accounts of the bombing and the aftermath. There is a far too much to try and share in this post. We both found it incredibly informative but also bought to life how evil nuclear weapons are.

The bomb blast which exploded 600m above Hiroshima destroyed 67% of all buildings within the city – the mass majority of them completely floored. The before and after photos show the true devastation. One building very close to the epicentre of the bomb blast was the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall which miraculously was not completely destroyed and was one of the only structures still partially standing after the bomb. After lots of debate it was agreed to keep the structure as a reminder and a memorial. You can see a few photos below of the building – or at least what is left of it. Seeing this building and the bent steels and rubble really visualises the severity and devastation of the bomb.

Below I also took a photo of the memorial park and you can see the Hiroshima Flame of Peace which will remain lit till all nuclear weapons are abolished.

The final photo is one of many origami birds which are sent in by schools to the children's peace memorial to commemorate all the children who died in the bomb blast. There were several large outdoor glass rooms filled to the brim with these small paper tributes. There is more of a story behind these for anyone interested – [link here](#).

We are very glad we visited Hiroshima and had the opportunity to learn more about this devastating event in Japanese history. But the fact this city has bounced back and now has a growing population is a credit to the Japanese people's resilience.

One question we both had was why Hiroshima? Why not another city. We did a bit of research and there was no single reason. There was a military presence here, it hadn't been as bombed as other cities in Japan and this meant photographs could be taken to see the impact of an atomic bomb on a real city.



## Day trip to Great Torii Gate on Miyajimacho Island

We took a short day trip timed with the tides to the nearby island. To see the giant Torii Gate which at high tide is submerged. Creating the illusion that it is floating. We also wandered around a few ancient temples here.

This island is also home to a deer population however these deer are much less polite and not to be fed. We witnessed a lot of people being head butted and a number of map and train ticket thefts by deer. Needless to say we steered clear.



## Tokyo Team Lab Planets

Having missed the opportunity to visit this modern art exhibit when we were in Tokyo first time I managed to source us tickets on our return trip.

TeamLab is an international art collective and they run digital art exhibitions across the globe. Formed in Tokyo the group consists of artists, programmers, engineers, CG animators, mathematicians and architects who refer to themselves as “ultra-technologists”. TeamLab creates artworks using digital technology – right up my street!

The experience itself was not like any other. Despite it being VERY busy with tourists we still enjoyed it. Each space is wildly different some featured knee deep water others you laid beneath hanging live flowers which moved up and down above you. There were outdoor and indoor spaces to explore. A remarkable place which I tried to capture the essence of in the video below.



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## Closing

After a lovely last dinner with my friend Louise (and her mum) who were also in Tokyo at the same time, it was time to say goodbye to Japan.

Final words on Japan – what an incredible country! Hospitable people, delicious food and a rich history which comes alive with its castles and temples. We didn't scratch the surface of Japan in 3 weeks and will definitely be back in the future.

You may remember from an earlier blog I was collecting Eki stamps at stations and landmarks. We did a lot of exploring and I collected a book full of stamps across the three weeks.

## Epilogue: No Ramen No Life

I didn't mention Ramen in the food section last week primarily as it's everywhere not just specific to a region.

It's been a staple food for us here in Japan. Cheap, quick and oh so delicious. We've been hunting out the best Ramen as we've travelled and have tried a lot of different types. Usually we are too hungry to document them but I can recap a few of the variations.

- Various broth thicknesses – we had one like thick gravy and others with a very thin but flavour packed liquid.
- Noodle thickness – we've had hard and medium thickness. Both delicious the hard noodles are akin to al-Dente pasta and actually I would highly recommend them this way
- Toppings – aside from the incredible pork that gets placed on top we both loved a soft boiled

egg on top, seaweed paper is a must and I can't get enough pickled ginger. There was one point where I just ate a bag of it from the shop 😅

Most Raman restaurants have a sort of vending machine when you walk in with lots of buttons with different Japanese writing on (outlining the various types of ramen and side dish). Generally we take a bit of a gamble putting some cash in and pressing some buttons. You are then given two small tickets which you hand to a waitress as you are seated and 5/10 minutes wonderful dishes arrive. We also learnt that you can ask for a bib to avoid tshirt drips – genius!



## Epilogue 2: Manhole Covers

I'm sure you didn't expect this section. But I couldn't not share some snaps of the colourful manhole covers here in Japan. Even the none coloured ones are easy on the eye with intricate designs.



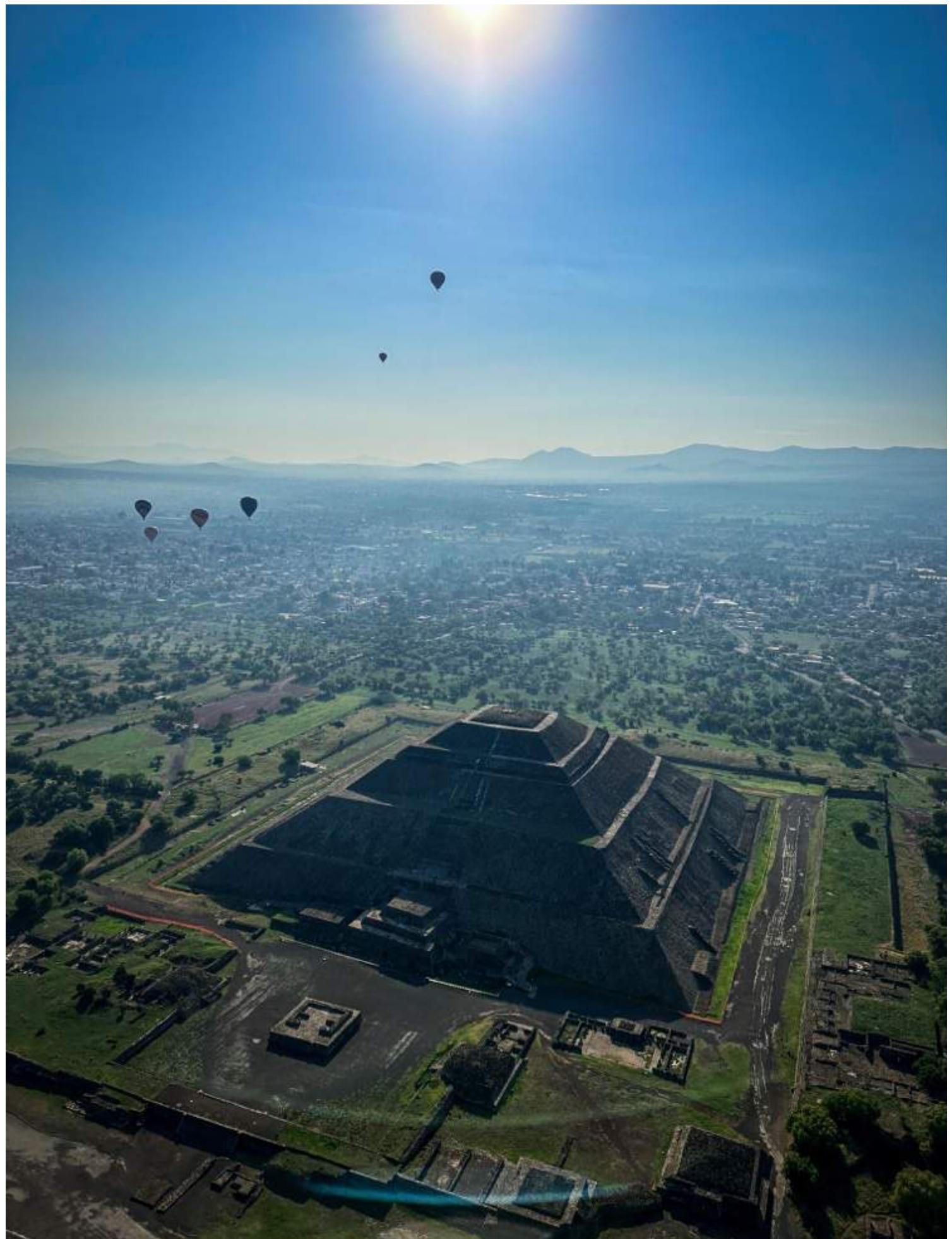


## Viva La Mexico

April 30, 2023

Categories: Mexico

Tags: art, Food, Guadalajara, Mexico, Mexico City, museum



After a very long day of travel and a large time zone shift we were both very happy to arrive in sunny Mexico. For our first week we are exploring Mexico's two largest cities – Guadalajara and Mexico City.

## Tequila Train to Tequila

First up TEQUILA! A trip to Mexico wouldn't be complete without visiting the town of Tequila where the wonderful Mexican spirit originates. Tequila is located 60 km outside of Guadalajara.

And what better way to see it than by train. Jose Cuervo run an express train from the city to the town of tequila for tourists to explore. We had an action packed day centred around tequila. First stop visiting the agave plantations where all the agave is grown – we also sampled some tequila with breakfast here (it's 5pm somewhere). Then we headed to the distillery to learn how it is processed – at the end of the tour we had a tequila cocktail. We then had some free time to explore the beautiful town of Tequila and drink some more tequila from a traditional Cantarito (ceramic cup). We then watched a traditional show with music, dancing and sword throwing – with free flowing tequila. Then we boarded the tequila train home for two hours where we tried yet more tequila with our new friends from Chiwauwau.

As you can glean from the above lots of tequila was consumed whilst we were both feeling the wrath of jet lag. But we had an absolute scream.

Mexicans are slightly obsessed with electrolyte drinks to help avoid hangovers. So given the copious amounts of tequila we tried one and did mostly avoid the hangover so will get on the electrolyte bandwagon whilst we are here!



## Guadalajara

With a population of 1.5 million and growing Guadalajara is Mexico's second largest city. We had 5 nights here to adjust to the time zone and settle into Mexico after a frantic 3 weeks in Japan.

The city had a great vibe to it and we stayed in a hostel near one of the trendy food and drink streets – a great spot to get our fill of Mexican cuisine. We even indulged in one fancy restaurant whilst we were there – Alcalde run by an ex-Noma chef. Utterly sensational!

Guadalajara also has some incredible art scattered around the city as well as some truly incredible cathedrals and churches. Just wandering around there was always something to see.

We also hit up several of the museums and a wrestling match – more below.



## Lucho Libre

Lucho Libre translates to 'Free Wrestling' and is the most popular style of professional wrestling in Mexico. It consists of highly trained wrestlers (aka luchadores) performing a wide variety of high flying acrobatic moves often in elaborate masks and costumes. Like WWE wrestling we know in the western world all the stunts are carefully choreography.

Large beers in hand we watched three matches (each with three rounds) of the action packed entertainment. It was all rather camp, in a fantastic way. The whole stadium was packed and raucous

– there was one point where coins were launched at the winning team. Metal rained down on the wrestlers. If you are on the front row the wrestlers might fly off the ring into your lap. We had one close encounter which I filmed below.

A brilliant night out and I can see why Mexicans love it, the atmosphere was electric with various chants in Spanish which we did our best to join in with. Great entertainment for all ages and an opportunity to hurl abuse and let off some steam.

The whole thing was live streamed so if you fancy looking out for us in the crowd the link is [here](#).





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## Guadalajara's Museums

We were lucky that on Sundays all the museums have free entry so we worked our way around several during the heat of the day – which was a cool 36 on this particular day. We got to see some incredible art and learn about the history of Mexico and Guadalajara.

One thing which specifically stood out to both of us were the incredible murals in the Hospicio Cabanas previously a hospital and orphanage and now UNESCO heritage site.

Orozco painted 57 murals inside the building in the late 1930s and they are considered his masterpiece works. Orozco is known for his political murals and initiating the Mexican muralist style in the 20s. We spent a lot of time sitting and deciphering the murals – and trying to listen into any English tour groups.



## Mexico City (CDMX)

From Guadalajara we took the overnight coach to Mexico City. Midnight till 7am. It was remarkably pleasant – the seats were big and comfy and reclined all the way back so we got a reasonable amount of sleep. There were even screens with Spanish movies and an old Adele concert if you couldn't sleep.

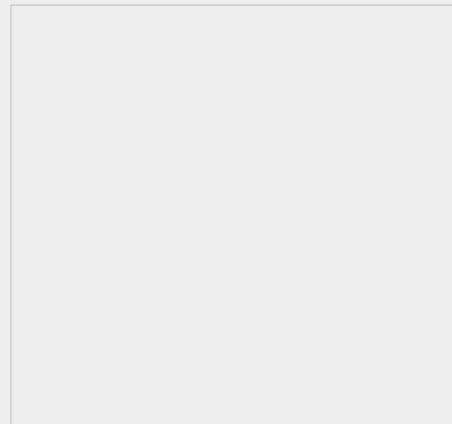
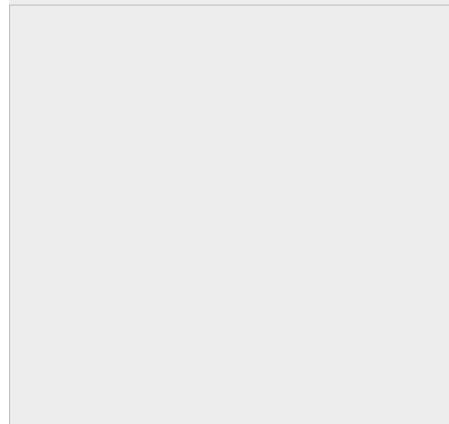
We had 4 days to explore the wonders of Mexico City. Home to 22 million people and a city which is sinking 40cm each year. Yes you read correctly sinking caused by subsidence as the city was built on an old lake bed. We also got to see some buildings across the city which you could see visibly sinking/leaning.

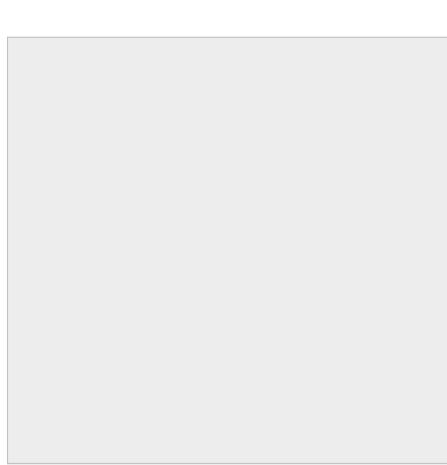
Mexico City like Guadalajara had an incredible atmosphere. We arrived on Thursday and the bars and restaurants were booming. Mexico City is a much larger city and you can really get the big city atmosphere here – lots more corporate buildings and sky scrapers and after work drinks was clearly popular on a Thursday & Friday.

We visited several of the museums and explored the historic centre which is a hive of activity between all the incredible old buildings. The street food stalls here are everywhere selling delicious

treats. There are also people selling anything and everything on the street from a man selling plasters (yes only medical plasters) to a man selling guitars, which he had a stack of 6 on his shoulder – anything you need you can find from a street seller. We saw Aztec street performers blessing passers by as well as drumming and dancing. As I said an absolute hive of activity and energy.







## Hot Air Balloon Flight over Teotihuacan

After a last minute decision to splash out on a Hot Air Balloon flight we began with a very early start at 4am. We were driven to the balloon base near the ruins and our pilot Juan took us on an incredible flight at 7 am across the estimated 1800 year old Mexican archaeological complex. For anyone who hasn't been in a balloon it's like effortless floating into the sky, very peaceful except for the odd blast of the burner to keep us afloat. A truly unique way to see these ruins from above.

After the balloon ride we headed to view the ruins on foot with another local guide. We walked around the two main structures, the pyramid of the sun and pyramid of the moon.

The sun pyramid is 65m high ranking it at the third largest pyramid in the world. What's super interesting is there are varying views as to its purpose and it's likely to have had many across the years.

What is fascinating about both pyramids is they mirror the mountain ranges behind (you can see in one of the photos below). They were likely mirrored due to the ancient people's beliefs that the mountains were alive and therefore were worshiped. The question still lies as to how they mimicked the mountains perfectly without modern tools or lasers – as it is deemed an almost impossible task to reach the accuracy of these pyramids without modern tooling – one of life's great mysteries.

The wider Teotihuacan area is believed to have started as a religious area and grew out to be one of

the largest ancient cities in the Americas around the first century AD.

We learnt a lot about the different people who occupied Teotihuacan and the wider Mexico during our tour but there is far too much to explain. However if you want to read more I recommend this article on pre Hispanic Mexican history – [link here](#).





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## Closing

Largest cities of Mexico officially explored! Next stop Oaxaca and then to the pacific coast to Puerto Escondido for some time on the beach.

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## Escaping the big cities: Oaxaca and Puerto Escondido

May 7, 2023

Categories: Mexico

Tags: Food, Mexico, Mezcal, Oaxaca, Puerto Escondido, taco

This week we are escaping the large cities of Mexico to explore the quaint city of Oaxaca (home of Mezcal) to the south west and on to Puerto Escondido on the pacific coast for some sea and sand.

## Oaxaca

Oaxaca is the capital city of the Municipality of Oaxaca. Oaxaca city with a population of <300k is known for its incredible food and mezcal as well as it's colourful flag covered streets and markets.

It was nice to feel the smaller more local vibe of Oxaca. The city has some fantastic bars, restaurants and street art all within a stone's throw of each other. We also had a number of day trips planned to the surrounding areas.





## Hierve el Agua & Mezcal Tasting

Hierve el Agua is a set of rock formations around 90 minutes from Oaxaca. It's home to an incredible petrified waterfall and set of natural pools that you can swim in. We decided to join a tour with locals to visit the site.

The incredible waterfall like rock formation has been formed over many many years. From the mineral spring water high in calcium and other minerals depositing against the rock and slowly building up in the same way a stalagmite forms.

We did an hour hike to get the best views of the petrified waterfalls before taking a dip in the pools filled with the mineral rich water which is said to have healing properties.

The water was very refreshing but I'll be honest it was rather green due to the mineral rich water – James said it looked like Shrek's swamp. Regardless we had a good swim to cool off. We also took a dip in a second pool which was filled by a mini petrified waterfall which whilst rather beautiful in real life looks like a scene from stranger things in my photo.

Despite the green water and sci-fi like waterfalls we had a great time at Hierve el Agua.

On our way back we stopped at a Mezcal distillery to understand the process and of course try several Mezcal.

For those wondering how Mezcal differs from tequila. Theoretically Tequila is a type of Mezcal. Mezcal doesn't have the same geographic limitations and strict standards that tequila does. Tequila is far better known due to some clever marketing and also an image was created that Mezcal is for peasants. Having tried some of the best Mezcal in Mexico it's clearly not just for peasants and is a far more complex drink than tequila.

It's a much more smoky flavoured spirit leaning more towards a whiskey and there is a huge range of taste profiles you can get across the various Mezcals. It obtains this smokey flavour through its low and slow roasting on hot stones (vs tequila which is hot and faster). Mezcal is also often aged in barrels like whisky – we tried some 8 year aged Mezcal which was delicious.

We tried 6 Mezcals from different ages and processing methods and a further 8 Mezcal flavoured liquors before getting our bus back to Oaxaca. I said we were tequila experts in the last blog apparently we are now Mezcal experts too. Since our tasting I've been on the straight Mezcal instead of cocktails or beer – I'm a convert!

My mum also asked about the Mezcal worms. The worms you see in Mezcal bottles are actually Agave worms which are pests for anyone trying to grow Agave for Mezcal. However they bring a unique earthy flavour when added to a bottle of Mezcal hence seeing the worms often in the bottles. We also tried crushed worm salt around the rim of our glass – actually quite delicious.

I suggest you try a Mezcal at your next Mexican restaurant – just make sure it's an artisanal one and

not mass produced.



## Monte Alban

Monte Alban is deemed the most important archaeological site in Oaxaca. It was inhabited over 1500 years ago by a succession of different people across a few thousand years. It was abandoned before the Spanish colonisation which is why it was not destroyed or built over.

We had a tour guide Jorje who has been guiding at this site for 20 years. He shared a whole wealth of knowledge about the site and the various peoples who occupied it. It was utterly fascinating.

Whilst the city spilled across the various mountains nearby the higher class people lived in an area carved out on top of the mountain. You can see the ruins of in the photos below. The population in this area grew to approx 20k which was huge for the time especially with an average life expectancy of 32.

The city hub on top of the mountain was fully paved to allow every drop of water to be collected into giant cisterns. The position on top of the hill allowed them great visibility and they plotted the stars

and movements of the sun to create a very elaborate calendar which was primarily used to drive the agriculture in the surrounding valleys. Again I was hugely surprised to understand how much science was used by these ancient civilisation.

Whilst we wondered around the sounds of cicadas was deafening – I caught a snap of one shedding it's skin below.



## Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca

We visited the incredible botanical gardens in Oaxaca where a slightly sassy Canadian lady gave us a really insight full tour and explanation about many of the flora in Mexico.



## Oaxaca Food Tour

We took a fascinating tour with Elizabeth a local from Oaxaca. Lucky for us we had the tour to ourselves.

We wondered through the many markets of Oaxaca trying many delicious foods. We went to the Smoke alley where we sampled incredible grilled meats.

We had a delicious empanada with Grasshoppers in which were salted and super tasty. We sampled

several local drinks and of course some more Mezcal.



## Puerto Escondido

After another night coach weaving through the mountains for 10 hours we arrived at Puerto Escondido.

Puerto Escondido is on Mexico's pacific coast. It's known for its beautiful beaches and buzzing nightlife.

After a day of relaxing on the beach we headed to watch sunset with a group from our hostel. Unfortunately there was no sunset due to cloud but there was plenty of beers and margaritas to follow. All I'll say about the night is I arrived home in someone else's shoes – it was that kind of night! Great fun dancing on the beach!



## Mexican Grub

To think fajitas, burritos and tacos equals Mexican cuisine is a cardinal sin! We had a list of dishes we were keen to try whilst we were here and I thought I'd give you a bit of an update on our progress.

- Pozole Rojo – A traditional soup/stew with meat and corn. Incredibly well seasoned and garnished with cabbage, radishes and avocado. This was heart warmingly delicious – although was a tad too hot on a 30 degree day.
- Tortas – Mexican sandwich, usually in a soft roll (sometimes pastry) with meat and lots of

fillings like cream, salsa, lettuce. Blooming delicious and great to soak up booze after a heavy night on the tequilas!

- Chilaquiles – chopped up corn tortillas in a sauce. This is a breakfast/brunch food. The tortillas go soft in the sauce which was a tad unusual but really worked and was delicious
- Tostilocos – common street food based on branded tortilla chips with toppings and sauces poured into the bag or on top. Imagine Doritos with chilli sauces poured into the bag. A very tasty snack!
- Michelada (drink) – this is lime juice mixed with chilli sauce, tomato sauces and spices topped with beer. Remarkably it works a think beer Bloody Mary – good for a hangover.
- Black Mole – Mole means sauce and black mole is very traditional sauce made from smoked black chilli, prunes, resins and chocolate. The meat is then coated in the sauce and you enjoy in a taco shell. The flavour is incredibly intense but delicious. One was enough for me!
- Hot Chocolate (drink) – yep that's right the Mexicans know how to create a world class hot chocolate. It's not too sweet much more spiced with cinnamon but is very delicious even on a hot day.
- Tlayuda – think Mexican pizza – crispy tortilla base topped with cheese meat and spicy sauces. Very messy to eat but a great crispy lunch.

Of course on top of these dishes we've had a ton of tacos too as they are a staple here with all wonder of fillings. From fish to various meats, squash to shrimp and all delicious!

Some photos of the dishes where where remembered to snap a photo before devouring!



# Closing

Another great week! Next stop Guatemala on Tuesday ahead of hiking up Acatenango to watch an active volcano next Friday.



## Guatemala's capital cities old and new

May 14, 2023

Categories: Guatemala

Tags: Antigua, Guatemala City, ruins

To get to Guatemala from Puerto Escondido we had two options. Option one several buses through Mexico to the border. Cross by foot with luggage and hop into a van (that waits until it's full) to take you to a bus station where a further bus or two was needed to get you to the city... Needless to say we opted for option two which involved a flight back to Mexico City and then one down to Guatemala City – much easier and actually worked out a similar price as we would have needed a night stay near the border with option one. The only hitch was James was somewhat unwell. So the two flights, one with significant turbulence were definitely his least favourite of the trip – since then he's been on some meds to fix him up! Again big up to our remote GP Tash in the UK providing 24/7 remote patient care (and to the prevalence of cheap antibiotics in Central America).

## Guatemala City

Guatemala City is the largest city in Central America with 3.7m living there (note Mexico whilst often clustered with Central American countries but is actually classified as Northern Americas). People don't often have a lot of good to say about the city and I can see why. It's a big dirty city where fumes and pollution are high. It has a reputation for crime but in recent years certain neighbourhoods (zones) have gotten much safer for tourists, and there's trendy coworking spaces, coffee shops, bars and clubs springing up. There are a few nice museums and an old centre which are apparently nice to visit, but most tourists land at the airport and go straight to Antigua. With James's health we decided to stay in and around the hip area (zona 4) we had booked a little AirBnB in for 2 nights. To be honest I was also pretty worn out after 4 days of partying in Puerto Escondido.

There really isn't much more I have to say about Guatemala City I wouldn't rush back but we had a nice wonder around, did some life admin and saw some cool street art before making our way to Antigua.



## Exploring Antigua

Antigua means “ancient” or “old” in Spanish. Antigua was once the capital of Guatemala until a large earthquake in 1773 caused catastrophic damage to the city which resulted in most of the population moving out to create the new capital which is now known as Guatemala City. The city was mostly

abandoned and used as a salvage yard to help build Guatemala City. However fueled by a coffee boom in the early 18th century the city began to grow again and many of the old buildings were restored. Today Antigua is Guatemala's most visited destination. And once we arrived we could see why – its absolutely beautiful and I just couldn't put my camera away.

Antigua is full of restored churches and also old ruins of churches and convents (more below). It has a buzzing food scene and great little bars. Its streets are all cobbled which make it a great city to walk everywhere.

There are three volcanoes in Antigua – Fuego, Agua, Acatenango. Fuego is the most active, erupting around 5-9 times per hour. You are meant to have incredible views of the volcanoes from town.... we got a bit unlucky with the weather and its been very hazy so you can just about see Agua from town and the others you can't make out at all. Despite not seeing the Volcanoes we were both in awe of this town's beauty.

I mentioned last week we had planned a Volcano hike for Friday but given James's health we pushed it back to Sunday to see if we can make the trip.

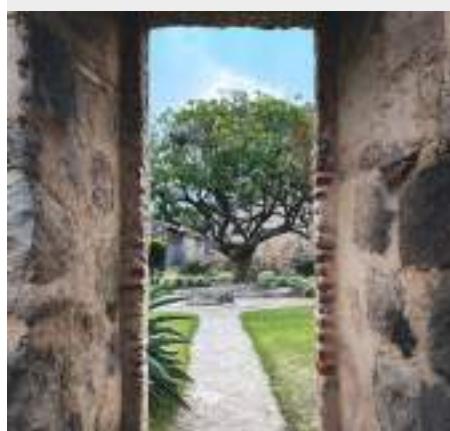
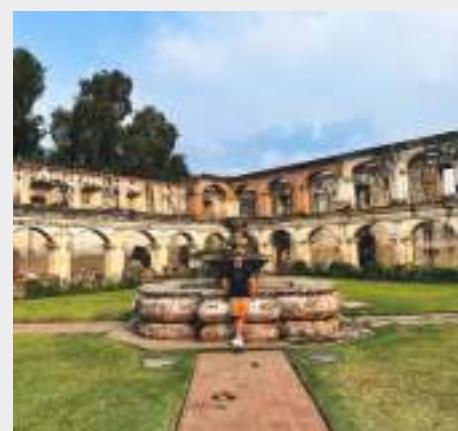
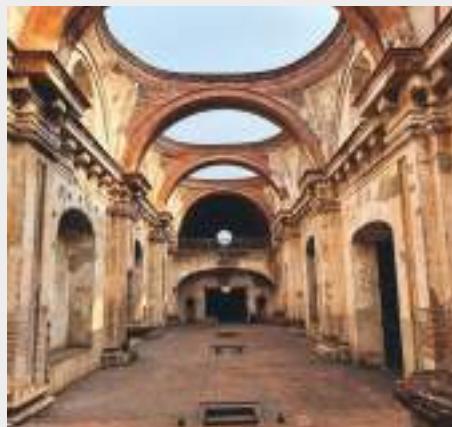


## Convento Santa Clara – Ruined Convent

We visited the ruins of the Convento Santa Clara in the late afternoon so the light was just beautiful on what is left of the 1700's religious complex. The site of this Convento has been impacted by many earthquakes with much of it rebuilt various times over the last 3 centuries.

Today you can wonder around what still remains today, view its ornate gardens and look at where the reconstruction works (for safety) meet with the original building. Antigua in general is a hugely popular place for weddings across Central America and this convent is a popular spot to tie the knot.

Below is just a small set of the photos I took – a beautiful peaceful place and by some miracle we had the whole complex to ourselves, not another tourist in sight.



## Hobbitenango

Trust us to find a knock off Lord of the Rings themed destination in Guatemala. Hobbitonango a play on Hobbit and the nearby volcano Acatenango is a rather strange experience – especially for someone who's been to the actual Hobbiton set in NZ.

First you're launched into the back of a pick up truck and driven up and up into the mountains where you reach an odd little spot with hobbit holes, a giant hand and a local chap dressed as Gandalf who loves waving (see video below). We had a wander around the place getting a few of the obligatory instagram photos watching the domestic tourists who were absolutely in awe of the place. To be honest it was all a bit tacky but rather amusing.

What we did miss out on again due to the haze was apparently some of the most incredible panoramic views of Antigua's volcanoes – which I do think would have drawn our eyes away from creepy Gandalf. But the weather (like James's stomach at the moment) is something we cannot control! A simple google of Hobbitenango Volcanoes does reveal what you see on a clear day – and it is remarkable. So I wouldn't rule out a trip to this odd place if you find yourself in Antigua – just do it on a clear day.





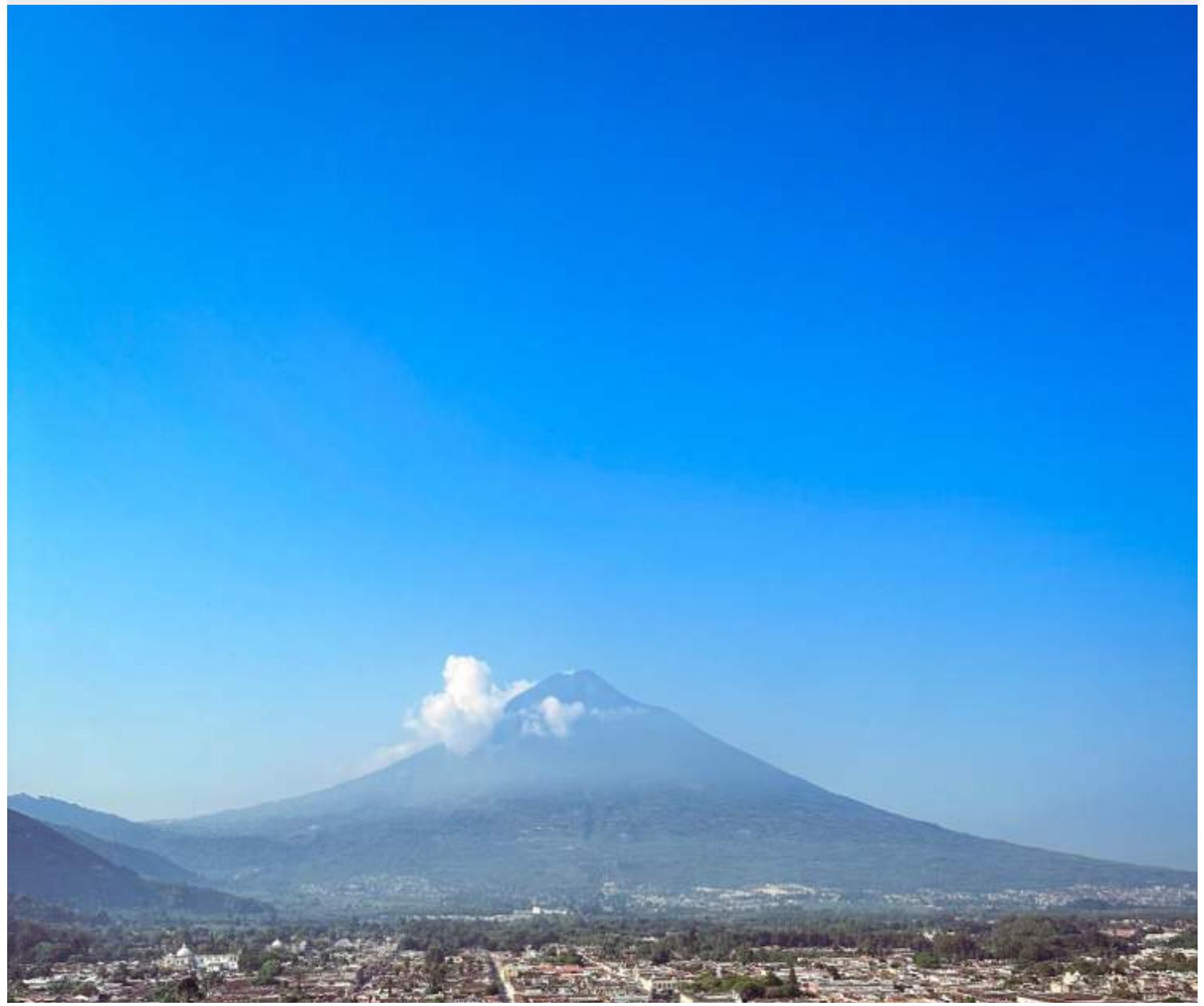
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## Closing

Bit of a rollercoaster week this week with the weather and James's health but hoping for both to clear up for next week. And regardless Antigua has been a stunning destination.

By the time you are reading this we might be half way up a volcano, health and weather permitting. I'll update you next week. After Antigua we are heading to a nearby lake Atitlán where we have treated ourself to a lovely little cabin on the lake side where we kayak to the nearby breakfast stop. Should be idillic.

After writing this post we did get up super early after torrential rains overnight to get our first clear view of the volcanos! Hurrah!





# Fire and Water: Volcan Acatenango and Lake Atitlán

May 21, 2023

Categories: Guatemala

Tags: atitlan, Guatemala, lake, volcano



This week we had two main objectives: climb Acatenango, an active volcano, and spend some time swimming and relaxing in Lake Atitlán.

## Hiking Two Volcanos: Fuego and Acatenango

Acatenango is a twin-peaked stratovolcano and its one of the highest in Central America. From Antigua many companies run excursions to climb the Volcano and stay overnight to climb the summit at sunrise. We had booked for the overnight expedition as we were keen to see sunset from 3,976 meters. This hike provides panoramic views of the entire region but also offers a unique vantage point to witness the nearby (and highly active) Volcano Fuego.

We arrived at the briefing the night before expecting it to be filled with experienced hikers given the difficulty level of the hike. We were surprised to find most people had little hiking experience and we were among some of the most experienced hikers (and we aren't that experienced). One of the main reasons for the difficulty level is the altitude – in the top few hundred meters there is 40% less

oxygen in the air – meaning you get puffed much easier. There was only one family who had experience hiking at altitude the youngest of the two kids was 11 joining us on this expedition! One person arrived on the day in a beach hat, trainers and floaty trousers which gave me a good giggle – to her credit she did make it up the mountain.

The hike itself is very varied you pass through several very different terrains on the ascent. There are four distinct zones; farmland, cloud forest, high alpine forest and finally a volcanic zone. Each bringing incredible nature and their own challenges. Each zone also had its own weather conditions added to the challenge.

We were able to borrow a set of warm clothing from the expedition company which was an experience in itself – they let you into a room which resembled a small charity shop with some hanging rails and bin bags of clothes – random jumpers, ripped jackets, odd gloves and the odd bit of technical wear. James and I salvaged the best gear we could. We were also able to rent hiking poles from the locals for £1 – these were a godsend especially on the descent.

After a 7 hour hike to base camp James and I were surprisingly feeling pretty energised and the views were just incredible that we decided to do the add on hike of 3 hours to the other Volcano – Fuego which sits nearby. After nearly 10 hours of hiking and 1800m of altitude gain we wolfed down some pasta and settled into our sleeping huts to get some kip before the 3am wake up to climb to the summit of Atenango for the sunrise... But did sleep come... no it did not.

Luckily as I laid awake I had an incredible view of the stars and through the crack in the door could see Fuego erupting in the distance – not bad!

3am came around and we put on all our layers ready for the summit. Less than half the group decided to come. Although we were accompanied by the family I mentioned earlier including the 11 year old who really put everyone who stayed at camp to shame! This was the toughest 90 minutes yet – no sleep, high altitude and loose rocks to reach the summit. At the top it was f'king freezing! But as the sun started to rise through the clouds the feeling of cold drifted to the back of our minds and we watched in awe as the sky moved through a range of colours and began to illuminate Volcano Fuego which was visible across the ridge. We were on top of the world – just magical!

Our small group was joined by a few other groups at the summit and much to James's delight several

dogs who made trotting around at altitude and the cold look easy. After we were about frozen to our core and the sun was up we started the decent to camp. This however was far less gruelling. The loose ground gave way nicely under the feet allowing you to effortlessly ski down the side of the volcano – easy on our knees and incredibly fun. Although we may have been slightly delusional at this point due to lack of sleep and oxygen we laughed our way down to camp with shoes filled with volcanic gravel.

After a quick breakfast refuel we began the decent which took a quarter of the time of the ascent and had us back to the bottom in time for lunch.

All in all an incredible experience with a wonderful bunch of people. Including a lovely Polish lady from Katowice (Poland) – she was rather shocked when I said I had been to see family there! This was our toughest hike of the trip so far and we certainly need some time to let our legs recover before the next hike.

As our hands were mostly clinging to our walking poles we didn't take too many snaps but here are the best of the bunch.





## Lake Atitlán

Next stop Lake Atitlán for some much needed R&R.

Lake Atitlán is 31 miles from Antigua as the crow flies. Not as the shuttle bus/taxi flies. It took about 3 hours to get to Panajachel the main town on the lake where all the boats leave from. And we slept most of the way given our lack of sleep and Volcano decent earlier that morning.

The lake was formed approximately 84,000 years ago by a volcanic eruption and is the deepest in

Central America at 341m at its deepest. The lake sits 1500m above sea level meaning the temperature here is a bit cooler than our other stops in Guatemala and is subject to interesting changes in weather.

At Lake Atitlán there is a phenomenon known as Xocomil, which consists of a wind that normally starts around 12:00 or 1:00 p.m. and it stops blowing around 4:00 p.m. This wind makes waves and can sometimes be dangerous. In the most extreme cases boats have sunk.

The lake is circled by steep, verdant hills and is known for its Mayan villages. There are also several volcanoes surrounding the lake. This picturesque spot is a hugely popular spot for both local and domestic tourists.

We were staying at one of the villages around the lake accessible only by boat called Santa Cruz. Luckily we had planned to arrive after 4pm to miss Xocomil – although it was still a bit choppy.

We were staying in a beautiful spot overlooking the lake to recharge after our expedition. The mornings at the lake were absolutely stunning – clear blue skies and hot sun. But by 2pm the clouds roll in and the rain, thunder and lightening – stunning in a different way. We enjoyed maximising the lovely weather in the morning outside kayaking for our breakfast and then retreating inside for the wet afternoon and watching the rain smash onto the wavy lake from our covered terrace.



## Closing

And that brings our brief 10 days in Guatemala to a close. We've found Guatemala incredibly expensive vs our expectations but what made up for this is the wonderful people and simply jaw dropping nature. On Friday we flew across to Yucatan in Mexico to explore Cozumel, Merida, Valladolid and Isla Holbox. First stop Cozumel one of the number one spots in the world for diving. I do hope we get to see a shark!



## Back to Mexico: Exploring the Yucatan peninsula

May 28, 2023

Categories: Mexico

Tags: Chichen Itza, Merida, taco, Tour, Valladolid





With a pit stop back in the UK approaching we have 2 weeks left to explore some of the Caribbean side of Mexico. Starting with Cozumel for some diving and then making our way to Merida and Valladolid to explore some more Mexican cities before a final stretch on the beach on Isla Holbox.

## Diving in Cozumel

Cozumel is a small island off the east coast of Mexico – the Caribbean Sea side (another sea to add to our list of swimming in this year). It's mostly known for its world class diving.

We had 3 nights planned here with two days of diving. After a bit of a horrific journey to the island involving planes, taxis and boats featuring accidents and delays. We arrived to the beautiful island.

We had 4 incredible dives. The visibility here is just second to none – It was like being in a swimming pool. We were lucky enough to see so much incredible marine life including several turtles and an eagle ray – no sharks I'm afraid. As the visibility was so good you could really see some of the tiny marine life up close, examining the corals and strange looking creatures which live on and between the coral. Just beautiful – we could both see why this is one of the top dive sites in the world.

We were also very glad to have Mexican food again – lots of tacos were consumed. And we tried lion

fish – which for those who don't know is an invasive species from the med which has invaded many coral reefs across the globe and causes irreversible damage by eating small fish and corals with very few predators – you can feel guilt free about eating this fish and what's more it's delicious.



## Mérida

Mérida is the capital of Yucatan state in Mexico. Mérida was named after Mérida, Spain because the Maya ruins that the Spanish conquistadors found in the settlement of T'ho reminded them of the Roman ruins of Augusta Emerita – there are three other cities with the same name – one in Spain,

Venezuela and finally one in the Philippines. Now it's a cultural hotspot in Mexico attracting domestic and international tourists to explore this old city and its rich history. Here we took a free walking tour to explore all the key sites and learn about the history of the people here in Merida before and after colonisation.

The large cathedral you see below was actually the first cathedral in the Americas built in 1562. As you can see its not coated in gold or heavily decorated and the inside was also very minimal with a few statues. This was in order to build at speed as the Spanish needed these Catholic sites to start evangelisation of the Mayan people.

There is a slower pace of life here to Mexico City or Guadalajara but you can tell its a big city. The roads were busier and even though there are a lot of tourists here they are evenly matched by the locals unlike some of the other tourist towns we've been too.

We had a lovely few days exploring the city, it's free museums and its bustling nightlife.





## Valladolid

Valladolid was first built in 1543 first on a different location but was then relocated to its current location in 1545. The current city resides where an original mayan village existed named Zaci. It was likely moved as Zaci was situated near several Cenotes.

Historically these were the key source of water for towns in this area especially given the hot climate here. It's likely the city was moved to this site with better access to

water.

The Mayans used the Cenotes not only for drinking and bathing but also for human sacrifices. Many human remains have been found at the bottom of these Cenotes where the sacrificed individuals were thrown in as a tribute to the gods. They believed these Cenotes were a direct path to the underworld. Whilst science can't prove any doorway to the underworld it does state that many of these Cenotes are extremely deep the deepest reaching 103 meters.

Today these Cenotes are popular tourist spots where you can swim. They are surrounded by incredible rock formations, hanging tree roots and have a wide range of aquatic and bird wildlife. They are also quite beautiful and a great spot to cool off in from the midday heat. We swam in a few whilst we were here. You can dive into the depths of these Cenotes to see the aquatic life which lives in the dark – one for our next trip to Mexico maybe!

We also visited the convent here in Valladolid which at night had a great light show projected on it outlining the history of Valladolid. And of course we sampled more great tacos and tortas.



## Chichén Itzá Tour

Chichén Itzá was a large pre-Columbian city built by the Maya people of the Terminal Classic period. It was recently classified as one of the 7 new wonders of the world along with Colosseum, Taj Mahal, Christ the Redeemer, Petra, Great Wall of China and Machu Pichu.

We had a day trip booked from Valladolid to see the old city and some surrounding sights. After an early start we arrived to a fairly quiet site – by the time we left it was absolutely heaving with tour buses from further afield. So we were glad we arrived early. Also it was 35 degrees so we were there before it got to boiling point.

The site is made up of various buildings and temples, some which are currently a pile of stone which they are looking to re-construct. There are about 20 buildings currently all joined by various paths. The most famous and well restored is known as the Castle or Pyramid of Kukulcan. In the 1920s this building was restored on three sides taking stone from the rear side to reconstruct. The restoration gives some indication of what this great building was once like, although when it was in use in approximately 550AD to 800AD – the pyramid here were likely covered in a form of plaster and painted in wonderful Yellow, Green and Red colours.

What are the Mayans known for? Blood and Human Sacrifice? Yes true – but they were also deeply religious, and worshiped various gods related to nature, including the gods of the sun, the moon, rain and corn. They were very intelligent people who used a lot of science and astrology to steer the people.

Chichén Itzá is by far the largest Mayan city known to archaeologists and many say one of the best preserved archeological sites in the world. The site itself is not exclusively Mayan there are influences from other Central Mexican populations from the time period. Which could mean Central Mexicans travelled here and influenced or the Mayan people travelled to central Mexico to get these influences and bring it to this site – something we will unlikely ever know.

I mentioned that the Mayan people were incredibly intelligent, they had their own language which is still spoken today and there was a written form of the language too. We know they documented their rich history in various texts. However when colonised the Spanish burnt most of the history to erase their past. However a few texts still exist which have allowed historians to piece together elements of the Mayan peoples history but many gaps still remain today.

The city was likely abandoned at some point due to lack of resources in the area. The population around the site will have increased to a point where there wasn't enough to sustain the people and therefore forced them to move out of the city and let nature retake the site for a century or two.

A really interesting site and such an interesting history of the Mayan people. It was worth melting in the 35 degree heat for.



After Chichén Itzá we visited Izamal. The 'Yellow City' (you can see why below. We arrived into the city soundtracked by Coldplay's Yellow – our guide thought he was hilarious). A beautiful city where all the buildings have been yellow since the 60s. Its also home to another Mayan Pyramid and a convent which was built on the site of a demolished Mayan Pyramid so the walls are constructed with the stones of the Mayan Pyramid. This convent was the home to the first Catholic church in Mexico and the city was often used as a place to bring Mayan people to evangelise.

A town of three cultures – Mayan, Spanish and the modern people. A beautiful calm place for a stroll and very photogenic.



## Closing

That's a wrap on Mexican cities for this trip. Yesterday we took a coach to the coast and then a boat across to Isla Holbox. A chilled out island which is still somewhat undiscovered although still quite touristy. Its got a sleepy vibe which is perfect for 5 days of chilling before our flight back to the UK.



## Holbox and time for a Hiatus

June 4, 2023

Categories: Mexico

Tags: Isla Holbox



Our final week in Mexico has been spent chilling on Isla Holbox on the coast of the Yucatan peninsula.

## Holbox

Isla Holbox sits north off the Yucatan peninsula and you reach it by boat. The island is mostly car free, the only motorised vehicles are golf buggies which cart people between the ferry port and their hotels.

Holbox is part of Yum Balam Nature Reserve. The reserve both on land, in the air and sea is home to a great array of wildlife. Including turtles, whale sharks, flamingos and pelicans just to name a few.

The beaches on the north of the island face out to the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. They have very fine soft white sand which creates a very reflective bottom of the sea. This time of year there is also a lot of seaweed on the beaches which is slightly less photogenic. I've honestly never seen quite so much seaweed in one place.

Along the north beaches you can find a huge sandbank which is a few hundred meters from the main island – you can wade out to it and walk along for an hour or so. On our walk we saw hundreds of fish and several baby rays chilling out in the shallows, safe from predators.

The island is of course touristy but has a very chilled out vibe and hasn't yet reached the same fame as places like Cancun meaning some areas are a little more untouched.

It's not the easiest to get to but well worth it.

We had incredible weather for the first few days and then last few we've had lovely mornings and biblical storms in the afternoons taking out power and internet. We both enjoy a good storm so haven't minded too much. Although we ideally needed a kayak to get to dinner one night as all the streets were flooded knee deep.



## Return home

After a bit of a mammoth journey of Golf Cars, Boats Mini Buses, Planes, Trains, Taxis we made it home ready for some home comforts. Best of all we bought the sun with us!

# Closing

So that's part one of our trip over. 9 incredible months, 255 days of travel across 13 countries. But now time to catch up with family and friends for 4 weeks.

On A Jolly will return in early July.

Take care and thanks for reading. Hope you enjoy reading the blog half as much as I enjoy writing it!



## The blog is back: First stop San Francisco!

July 2, 2023

Categories: USA

Tags: San Francisco





I'm sure you've all been missing the blog and will be glad to see its return for our final leg.

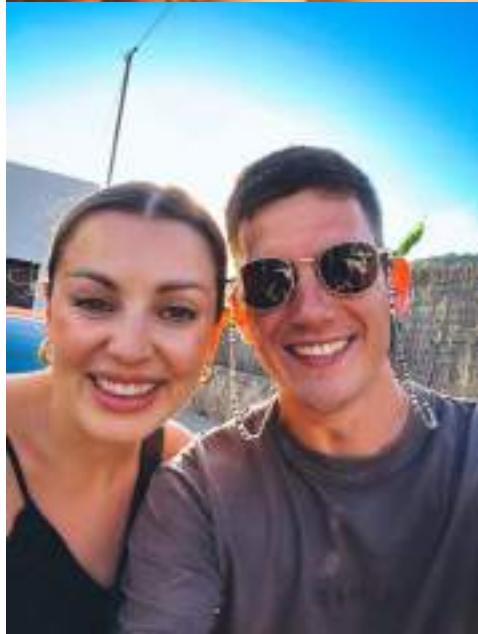
We've had a whirlwind visit back to the UK and we have packed a heck of a lot in!

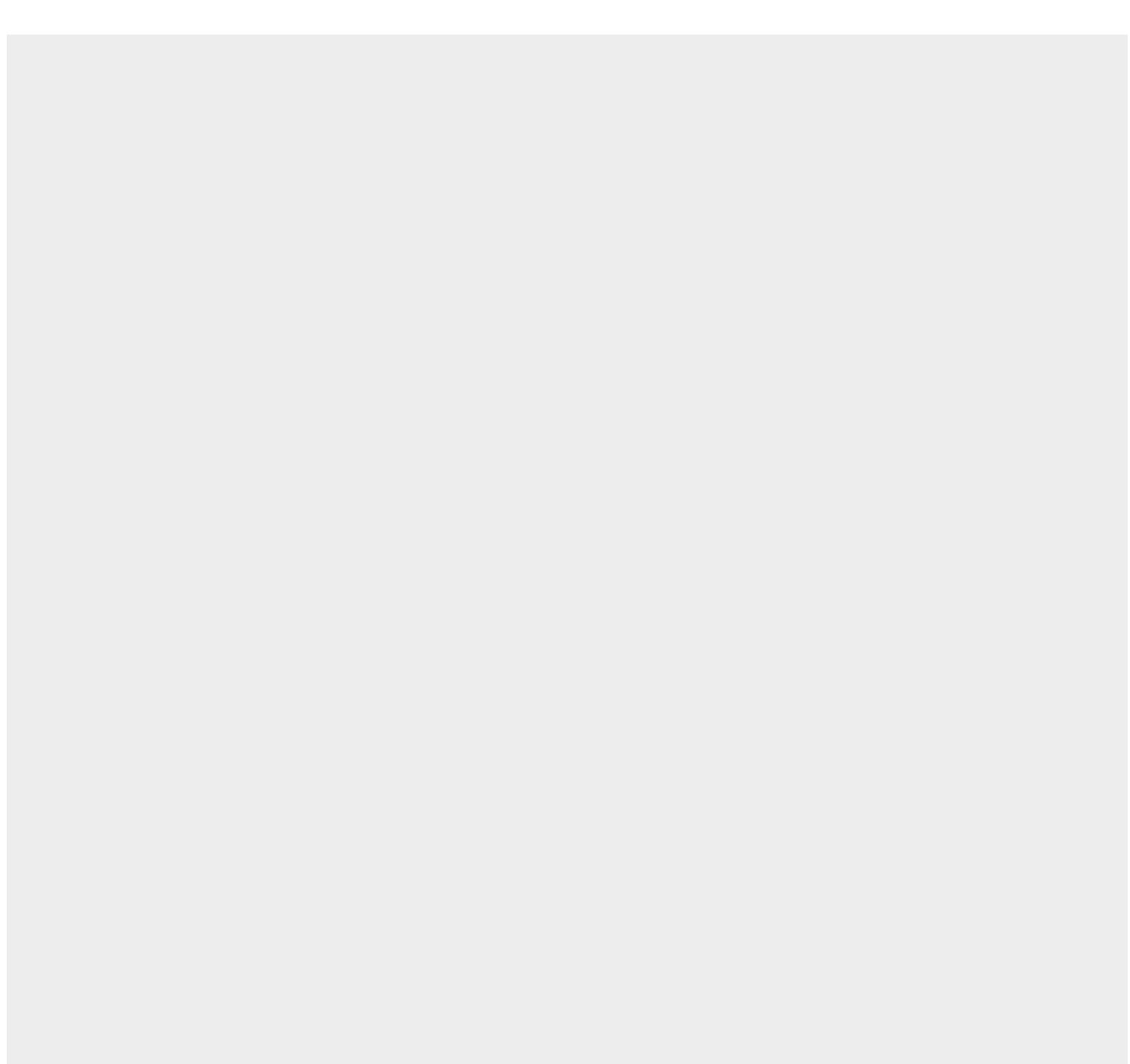
A wonderful wedding on the Devon coast, a hen do in Ibiza, a birthday celebration weekend in Bath, a trip to Glastonbury and lots of time spent with our friends and family.

It was a little strange saying goodbye again but we were both very excited to get our US trip on the road!

A couple of snaps which capture just a little of our month back in the UK.







## Our Route in the US

Over the next 76 days we will wind our way up the west coast states of California, Oregon and Washington with a final stop in Vancouver, Canada at the end.

We've been doing some intense planning on our rough route primarily as you have to book ahead for a lot of the National Park camp sites so we've needed to revolve some of the trip around those key stops. But we do still have some flexibility in the route and the bookings get less the further down the 2 month plan. Recommendations welcome in the comments!

We are picking up our wheels on Monday!

State	Destination
California	San Francisco
California	Santa Cruz
California	Sequoia National Park
California	Yosemite National Park
California	Lake Tahoe
California	Napa Valley
California	Fort Bragg (Mendocino)
California	Humbolt Redwood SP
California	Eureka
California	Del Norte Redwood SP
Oregon	Crater Lake
Oregon	Bend
Oregon	Cape Perpetua
Oregon	Champoeg SP (Willamette Valley)
Oregon	Portland
Oregon	Mount Hood
Washington	Colombia River Gorge
Oregon	Cannon Beach
Washington	Hoh Rainforest
Washington	Olympic National Park
Washington	Mount Rainier National Park
Washington	Bellingham
Washington	Seattle
British Columbia	Vancouver

## San Francisco

In the meantime we have 5 nights to explore San Francisco. With a stroke of luck a friend of a friend needed a cat sitter for our dates so we have a feline friend (Luna) and an incredible 3 bed apartment for 5 days of exploring San Francisco.

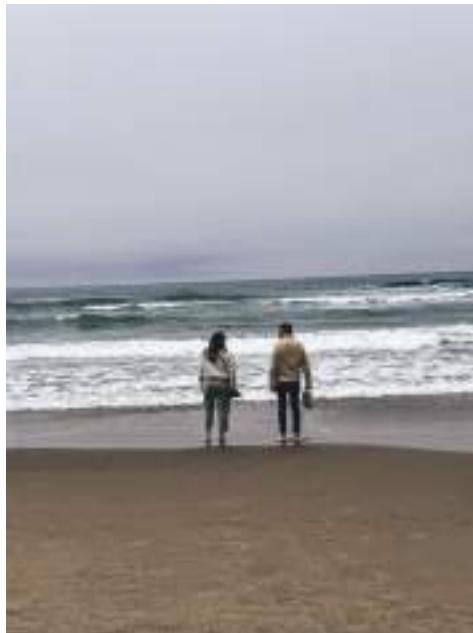
We are also lucky that one of our pals (Phoebe) lives just an hour away in Santa Cruz and came across to show us around San Fran on Friday and Saturday.

We also picked up a National Parks pass for \$80 which gives us access to all of the parks across the US and many museums and exhibitions are either free or heavily discounted. We explored one of the maritime museums in Fisherman's Warf whilst wandering around the area.









## Our trip to 'The Rock' Aka Alcatraz

After rewatching The Rock last week we had booked a 3 hour round trip to Alcatraz. The morning fog (called Carl) had lifted mostly by the time we reached the pier for our ferry crossing. You get a few hours on the island to explore the old prison with an audio guide and several exhibitions. After bumping into someone James knew from the UK in the queue (small world), we headed across to learn more about the prison.

Alcatraz opened in 1934 and was open for around 30 years till the early 60s at which point it had become too deteriorated and expensive to run leading to its closure. Also the government wanted to refocus on reforming prisoners not just locking them up.

Whilst it was one of the most high security prisons, home to some of the worse criminals in the US, the prison itself was pretty state of the art when it opened. It was famed to have some of the best prison food in the country and also one of few prisons to have hot showers. Also the views from the island in a clear day are pretty spectacular.

Besides being locked up for most of the day life didn't sound too hard at Alcatraz. All prisons got their cigarette allocation of two boxes on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday – if you smoked or not. In the 50s a radio system was added allowing prisoners to tune into one of two radio stations from their cells.

The men read various literature from the library and also taught each other new skills such as

painting and crochet (yes you heard that right some of the US's worse prisoners were knitting to kill time).

The site was heavily manned by guards and extensive fences and watch towers. In case of incident the dining room ceiling was rigged with tear gas which could be triggered if anything kicked off. The closest they came to using it was when the prisoners got sick of eating Spaghetti bolognaise too frequently.

Over its 30 years as an active prison around 1500 men passed through the prison many serving life sentences. The prison closed on March 21st 1963 with some prisoners being transferred and others being released based on individual assessment.

There were several escape attempts which often led to prisoners being shot and killed as they attempted to scale the fence. However three men did escape by using spoons to chisel the air vent holes big enough to crawl through the utility passages. They also left papier-mâché heads in the beds to fool the prison guards in the morning. To this day no one knows what happened to the three who escaped. It's highly likely that they drowned in the 2 mile swim across to San Francisco in the freezing cold water which also has very strong currents. But half of me hopes they did make it across and live out their lives happily like in Shawshank!

We found the tour very interesting and I also loved wandering around all the dilapidated buildings and the gardens which have now been created on site.

The final exhibition that we saw was called Red Power. This exhibit was on the Native Indian occupation of the island from 1969-1971. It's believed although there is no written history that the island was once a spiritual place for the Native Indians before being taken over by the government and converted into a site for a prison. So to make a great statement across America a group of Native Indians occupied the island to raise awareness of the cruelties faced by Native Indians. But unfortunately the media portrayal of the events made it fairly unsuccessful and those occupying the island were forcefully removed in 1971. However this occupation gave birth to further political movements across the US many of which still continue today. So whilst not hugely impactful at the time the occupation poses a very important moment in the history of the indigenous Native Indians in America.

Much of the graffiti still remains across the island to recognise this period and the exhibition is well

worth a visit if you are in San Francisco.

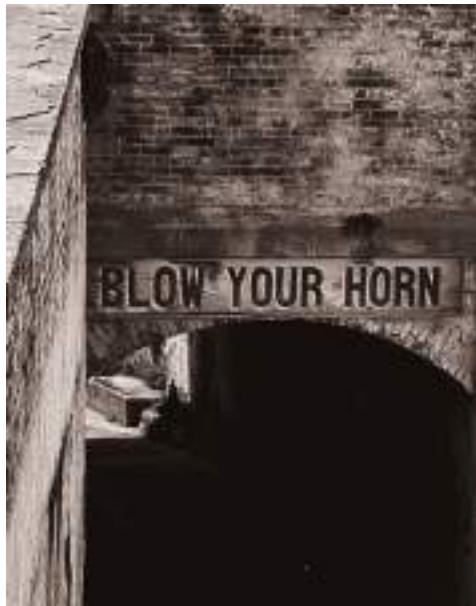
All in all a fantastic day out. We concluded the day with some Vegan Sushi (which was delicious) and a night out at 1015 one of the clubs in San Francisco. Needless to say by the end of the night with Jet Lag creeping in we were very ready to get to sleep!











## Golden Gate Bridge

One of the must do's in San Fran is to see the Golden Gate Bridge. For our first day the whole bridge was covered in a fog (as I mentioned before the fog here even has a name – Carl). Due to its position San Fran has its own microclimate the warmer ocean breezes blows over the cold water, forming tiny liquid droplets AKA fog. This fog likes to sit right across the bridge as the fog get sucked in through the golden gate. So day one we had no success in seeing the bridge... see photo one!

Day 2 we went to see the bridge close up and whilst Carl was still hovering about we got a few nice photos. As we walked back to the car Carl was on the move so we raced back and ended up with about an hour of clear blue skies and not too much Carl. We just sat in awe of the incredible bridge for some time basking in the sun!

I did a little bit more research to see if the bridge is in fact continuously painted as many rumours exist. And it looks like it is – there are 33 painters who work on it daily (weather conditions permitting) and it takes 3 years to fully paint and maintain every inch of it!







## Closing

On Monday we are meeting up with a friend we met in Mexico for a day out in her neighbourhood and Tuesday we head to Santa Cruz to explore Phoebe's neck of the woods before heading to our first camping destination Sequoia!

We do need to make a pit stop to stock up on camping gear on Tuesday which just so happens to be 4th July which could make for an interesting shopping experience – I'm half expecting to need to wrestle for a discount sleeping bag – wish me luck!



## Cruz'ing Around California: Cities and Parks

July 9, 2023

Categories: USA

Tags: California, Camping, Kings Canyon, San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Sequoia



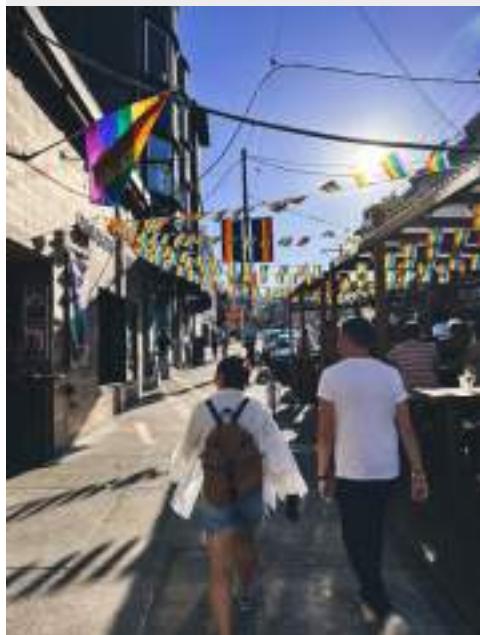
The first full week in the US is complete, including visits to National Parks and 4th of July celebrations. Not to mention, we've been very lucky with the weather so far!

## San Francisco Continued: Exploring Castro and Mission

Over the next few days, we explored the rest of San Francisco. On Monday, our friend Angela took the reins as a tour guide and showed us around The Castro and Mission. We explored several small eateries and shops in the vibrant and lively streets, spent a few hours people-watching in Dolores Park before heading for a few drinks to experience some of the city's bars. It was a fantastic day spent exploring with the best tour guide.

On our final day, we visited the Ferry Building Marketplace and then headed to Chinatown where we sampled several dim sum options available in San Francisco. Overall, we had an amazing five nights experiencing San Francisco, and it's somewhere we will definitely return to when we aren't on a budget to try more of the city's restaurants and bars.







## Waymo – Driverless car

One thing I have to mention separately were our taxis around San Francisco. Angela is a beta tester for Waymo – Google's driverless taxi system, so while we were with her, we traveled around in

several driverless Jaguars (for free!). What an experience! The first one was slightly terrifying, but the trust in the system grows. They take you for a smooth and safe ride to your destination, and there's no awkward chat with a driver. It was a bit odd being the center of attention as people stop, point, and take photos wherever you go, as it's quite a new and exciting mode of transport in San Fran. But once you got used to the lack of driver and unwanted attention, it was actually rather pleasant. We would set our temperature and music before the car arrived, and off we would go! A personal highlight was when a woman in front waved us past without realizing there was no driver. Not quite sure how, but we moved past and overtook her at that moment – very clever technology!





## Our new ride

From driverless cars to picking up our own ride! We headed to Sixt to get our car for the 2-month road trip. We had opted for a budget-friendly low-end car, but it must have been our lucky day as we got upgraded to a brand new BMW X3 with only 200 miles on the clock. So much for an inconspicuous car for our road trip, but it's pretty sexy and nice to drive with a full front-to-back sunroof.



## Santa Cruz Dreaming

From San Francisco, we Cruz'ed (yes, I went there) down to Santa Cruz where Phoebe lives. On the way, we stopped at far too many shops to pick up all our camping gear for the 2 months – REI, Walmart, Trader Joe's, Dick's, Target, Big 5...

We arrived at Phoebe's beautiful home, which is one block from the ocean – idyllic! We arrived on July 4th and headed to a local party at a Pottery Studio where we met lots of locals and some expat Brits to celebrate the holiday. As the fireworks started, we had to go on a bit of a mission to find one of Phoebe's cats who hadn't come home. He showed up pawing at the door at 4 am, thankfully!

We loved exploring Santa Cruz. It's a laid-back beach/surfer city with a slower and safer pace of life than San Francisco.

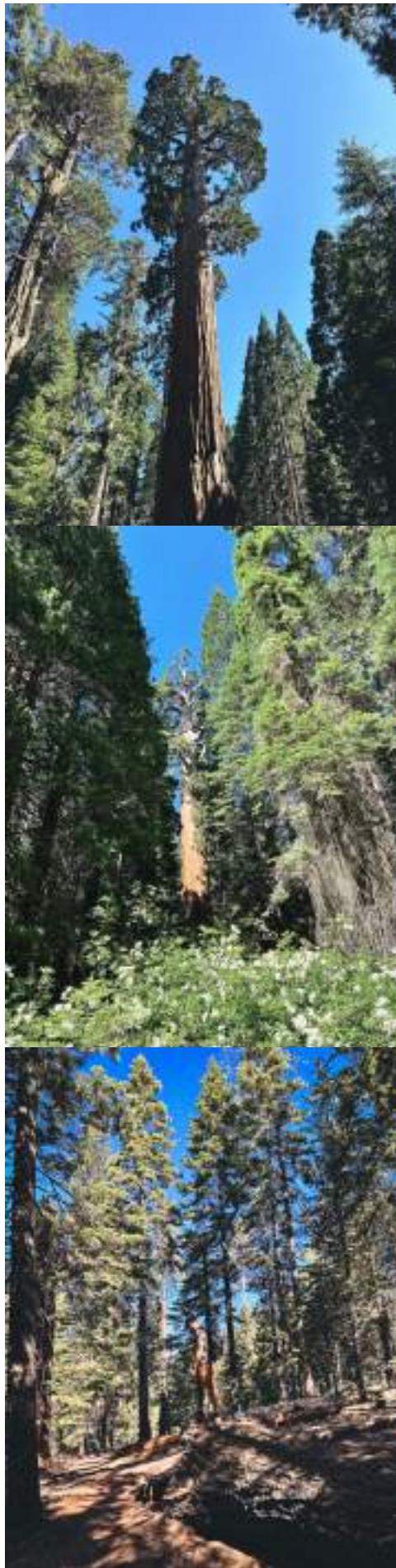


## National Parks: Sequoia and Kings Canyon

On the first night of camping, we stayed in Kings Canyon National Park which adjoins Sequoia National Park, where we had luckily managed to book a night of camping in the park. Most sites are booked out 6 months in advance in the national parks, but we kept checking (or rather James kept checking), and we seem to luck out on getting the odd cancellation night. We arrived at a wonderful campsite with a fire pit and bear locker waiting! We set up in no time – despite all the gear being new. James' expertise and my scouting, and the tent was up in minutes. We then headed out on a quick 4-mile hike before dinner to see the area near the campsite. It was simply stunning – giant trees surrounding us, some burnt to a crisp in the forest fires, others surviving despite being charred alive. Amazing views in every direction! The first test of the new cooking gear was a success – smash burgers done with no problem, along with a pre-prepared potato salad. Who knew prepping before camping was a thing – simply genius! The next day, after a mostly comfy night's sleep, we packed up and headed for a longer 8-mile hike around Kings Canyon to see some of the most epic trees and ex-trees (aka stumps) in the area, including the General Sherman Tree, which is the largest (by volume) tree in the world.









We then hopped in the Beamer, which we are calling Xzibit, and headed South towards our next stop, Sequoia National Park. Our friend Jess, whom we met in the Philippines, has a family who owns a few acres of land just by Sequoia National Park – when I say “just by,” I mean 30 ft from the park entrance. We were lucky enough to be allowed to stay at their place which is being renovated. It was perfect for us and the hot shower which has recently been plumbed in was a huge bonus!

It's the most incredible spot, situated meters from a huge river with fast-flowing water from the mountains. We braved a dip in the freezing water before feasting on pre-made Chilli on the deck, watching the water, before having a huge fire nearby and sleeping outside under the stars. A few snaps from paradise below.

?







## Closing

It's been a busy start to our trip! We've been so lucky to have free accommodation for most of our first 10 days in the US. Generally speaking, everything is more expensive than I expected, but if you look carefully (hence us visiting several shops), you can get good deals on things. For example, we found 12 beers for \$8 at Trader Joe's. The other annoying thing is Americans LOVE bulk buying, which isn't ideal for camping, but we are making it work! Our budget will take more of a hit as we start to stay in a few motels and Airbnbs.

Next stop, Yosemite, where we managed to get 2 nights of camping in one of the sites there – James had to get up at 7 am two mornings to secure reservations one week before, almost as tricky as getting a Glastonbury ticket! From there, we head up to Lake Tahoe, where we are planning a horse trek, then onward to Napa Valley, where we plan to sample the local produce, and then up the west coast to Redwoods National Park for some more hiking.



## Forests, Lakes and Wine!

July 16, 2023

Categories: USA

Tags: California, Napa, Tahoe, wine, Yosemite



This week we've hiked in Yosemite National Park, swam in Lake Tahoe and drank plenty of wine in Napa Valley.

## First stop Yosemite

After repacking our car with a supposedly better system for all our camping gear, with all foods and toiletries separated as they have to go in bear lockers on camp sites, we headed off to Yosemite National Park – which is the 6th most visited national park in the US.

The park is a four-hour drive from where we were in Sequoia. We were surrounded by beautiful landscape the whole way.

We were lucky enough to secure two nights of camping in Yosemite valley and had a great spot with a fire pit. We could see and just about hear Yosemite Falls from our campsite. After a chilled night and some flame-grilled veggie pasta, we hit the hay early to prepare for our hike the next day.

We were hiking the 4 Mile Trail – which, by name, doesn't sound too grueling until you see the elevation. Over 1,000m of elevation, which was a 2.5-hour climb (we are glad we bought hiking poles). But the climb was worth it. All the way up, you were treated to vistas of Yosemite – the falls one way, El Capitan the other way, and the Half Dome as well. And only when you reach the top can you see all three together and cast your eyes across to the other side of the valley.

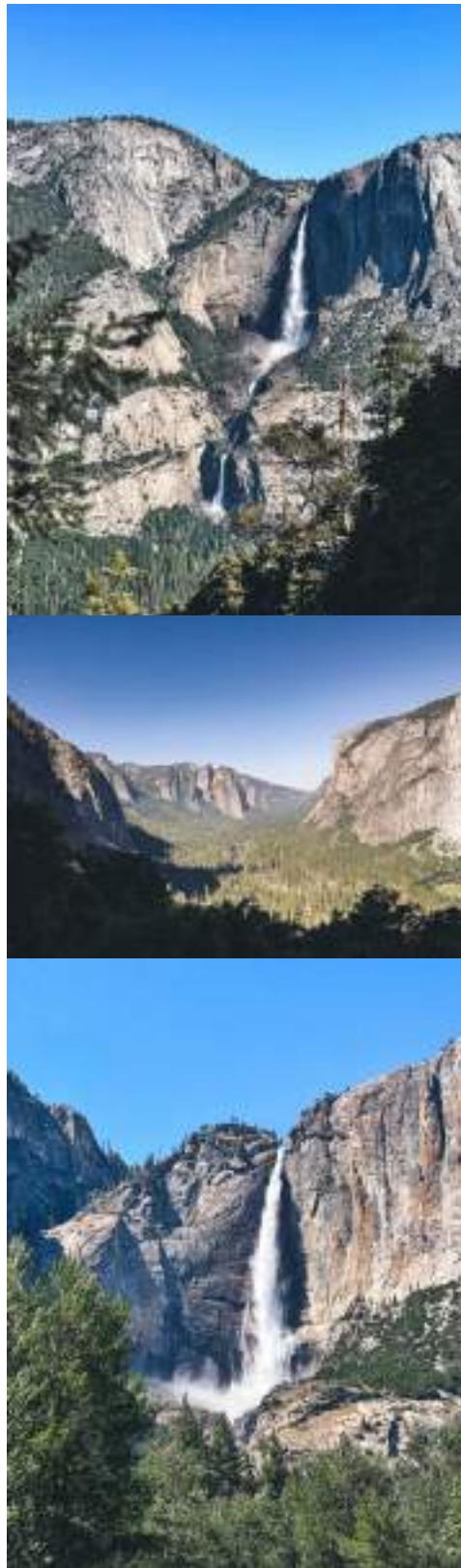
Quite a hike, although not the hardest we've done on this trip. There is also a driving route to the viewpoint (cheating if you ask me) – but due to the damage from winter, they only open on weekends, so there were hardly any other people at the top where we stopped for a picnic with a view!

The cold beers from the Yeti cooler went down a treat when we arrived back to camp. With sore feet, we scavenged firewood, ready for a chilled evening by the fire.

Before the drive to Tahoe, we took a small 4-mile there-and-back trail along the Mist trail, which was recommended by someone at the 4th of July party. This takes you along side several waterfalls and as per its name can cause you to get rather wet depending on which way the wind is blowing.

An amazing few days in Yosemite Park we've seen nothing like it over the last 9 months and were lucky to be able to camp there.









## Lake Tahoe

Driving to Tahoe was a 4.5-hour drive, and we passed through varying wilderness (forest, alpine, rocky, hilly), and altitude (from 1500m to 2500m), at one point passing through still snow-covered peaks.

Lake Tahoe is the second deepest lake in the US, and I overheard a man saying it could cover the whole state of California with 8 inches of water if it were emptied – that's quite a lot of water.

We had our first private room in an Airbnb, we were staying with a lady and her 3 crazy poodles (Stanley, Lola, and Birdy). A lovely home nestled between pine trees on a quiet street. Perfect for exploring Tahoe. We visited a local BBQ joint for dinner, which was delicious!

Then we spent the first morning planning out more of our US trip and in the afternoon went to explore one of the nearby beaches at Zephyr Cove – a beautiful spot overlooking the lake. We spent quite some time chilling at the lake and had a good swim in the cold but pleasant water, which is

outstandingly blue.

On our second day, we headed off early to hike up to one of the waterfalls on the west side of a the lake. Given the harsh winter, the waterfalls here are still full due to the late melting snow. So it was worth the hike to see cascade falls. We then hiked down to Emerald Bay for another swim in the lake and a picnic.

Later that evening we headed down to the bay near where we were staying to watch some live music which the town puts on every Thursday for free. So we enjoyed a sunset with local bands accompanied by some dinner from local food trucks (Philly Steak Sandwich and Tacos). A perfect end to our time in Tahoe.



## The Wine region of Napa Valley

Anyone who knows us knows we love our wine, so we couldn't miss making a quick pit stop in Napa to sample a few of the local wines.

There is also a heatwave sweeping across the US, which, generally, we haven't seen much of due to altitude or proximity to the coast. However, the temperature soared to 38 degrees in Napa during our stay.

We stopped at our first vineyard, Artesa, about 45 minutes from where we were staying for a tasting. The owners are Spanish and mostly have vineyards in Spain. This place was aesthetically beautiful, more like an art gallery. And the wine was equally beautiful – we bought a few of their cheapest bottles to take camping with us. Traditional wines with a mixture of grapes but mostly Spanish.

We then headed to Calistoga, dropped off our bags, and went to Tank for our second tasting. Tank is a bit of an outlier in the valley as they produce very experimental limited-release wines – usually 500 cases per batch, and when it's gone, it's gone. The bar was really trendy, set in an old gas station complete with old fuel pumps. The bottles also matched the aesthetic; each label is custom designed for the wine range by various artists and designers.

The wine was really interesting too – quite a few Italian grapes used, which took us back to Tuscany. But then some very experimental mixtures giving some weird and wonderful flavors. They had a couple of standout bottles that were delicious.

We closed out the wine tasting with a delicious Italian meal in the town.





We could easily have spent a few days in Napa experiencing more of the wines, but it's very expensive. The tastings here can cost up to \$150+ at the most premium places. Ours were \$30 and \$60 per person. It's not like Europe where you can rock up and try for free! To save our budget, we only booked one night and then headed up the coast along Highway 1 towards the redwood forests, with a stop in a seaside town called Fort Bragg. It was a beautiful drive along Highway 1 towards the redwood forests, which follows the sea along the rugged coastline with wild waves and rock faces.





## Closing:

We've added 1,400 miles to the clock on Xhibit the Beamer so far. We have a little less driving planned over the next week as we hop between a few of the redwood state parks for some more camping and hiking. We also have a stop planned in Eureka.

So far, we are loving road tripping! The nature here is epic. While the weather has been kind to us, we continue to find it amazing how changeable it can be. In just a 45-minute drive, you can go from below 20 to nearly 40 degrees – you don't have to drive far to get your hot sun fix!



## We are going on a bear hunt in the California Redwoods!

July 24, 2023

Categories: USA

Tags: Bear, California, Elk, Eureka, Forest, Fort Bragg, Redwoods



This week was spent winding our way up the North California west coast and reaching Oregon.

## Crusty seaside town of Fort Bragg

Our first stop was two nights in Fort Bragg, 20 minutes north of the picturesque town of Mendocino. Fort Bragg is a little more rusty and run-down, which gives it a bit of a unique charm.

Here we had our first stay in a motel as it was the only option within our budget. We were both pleasantly surprised with the room (after a 3 hour delay getting the keys...). Comfy bed, hot shower, large TV, fridge freezer, and microwave – so you can't really complain!

We explored the nearby beaches and coastal trails while we were here. We visited the famed Glass Beach which, in the early 1900s, was the town's garbage disposal area where all rubbish was burnt then dumped into the ocean, including all their used glass bottles.

Then over the following 50 years, that glass has been flattened down, broken up, and smoothed into glass-like pebbles, which over the years washed up onto the beach thus creating the tourist attraction of Glass Beach. However, due to many people taking the pieces of glass over the last 50 years, there is actually very little glass left on the beach. So not really the spectacle that it used to be.

We tried some of the local seafood at the fishing harbour – their version of fish n' chips and some fish tacos. Pretty tasty but no match for a chippy back home.

We also took the heritage 'Skunk Train' which takes you along an old stretch of the railway line that was once used to transport trees from the forest to the lumber yard and also at one point carried passengers.

It was called the skunk train as the fumes from the petrol engine and the oil heater (for passenger carriages) mixed together to create a foul smell that locals could smell before they could see the train.

A slightly crusty seaside town with a bit of history and some nice bars and restaurants.





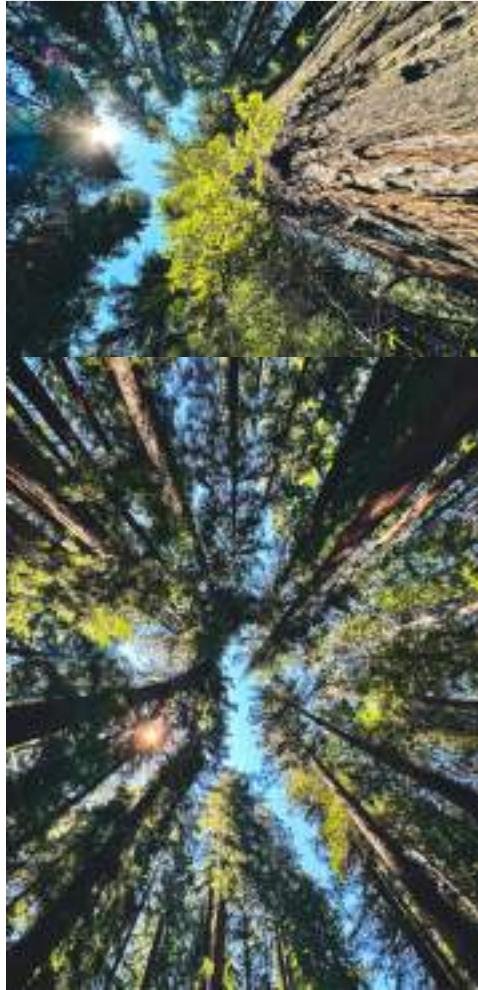
## The Avenue of Giants: Redwood Forests

The redwoods state and national parks span over 130,000 acres along the northwest coast of California. We had planned two camping spots and a town stay with lots of stops in between to see different parts of the forests.

First thing I will say is these trees are so bloody tall. At times you simply forget they are towering above you. The tallest Redwood is 150m high, which is over twice the height of York Minster.

Secondly, they grow in close proximity to each other and despite having shallow roots (just a few meters deep), have no problems staying upright as they link together, creating a carpet-like root system (some hundreds of meters wide). But sometimes they do fall; we saw many downed trees across the forests, and these can take up to 400 years to decay, but during this time, they become vital to the wildlife in the forests and eventually put minerals back into the soil. We made a special trip to see 'the corkscrew' which is two redwood trees that have twisted around each other as they've grown – quite remarkable.

Thirdly, despite there being an abundance of wildlife in these forests (flora and fauna), all the forests have been extremely serene and peaceful. Very still and very quiet – if you stop to listen, you can't hear a thing if the wind isn't blowing.





As you head further north in California, the redwood trees stay the same, but the rest of the plant life surrounding them shifts. As there is more moisture in the air and as the forest gets closer to the coast, you see a lot more moss and ferns – the floor of the forest becomes a thick bed of green vegetation.

For the Star Wars fans, we also visited the forest where the Ewok scene from Return of the Jedi was filmed – no Ewoks were spotted!





We thoroughly enjoyed our time camping in the peaceful Redwoods. They are also nowhere near as busy tourist-wise as Yosemite or Sequoia. Meaning there are fewer people around. We did a 12-mile hike through one of the forests to a swimming hole and saw only 5 people – so you do feel more remote and at one with nature.

## Bear Hunt: Success

James was desperate to see a bear while we were here. I wanted to see one but from a safe distance. I wouldn't say I'm scared of bears, but just very wary. We bought bear spray (from the gun section) to carry with us on any longer hikes away from civilization – but we didn't realize it's actually illegal to have in National Parks as it's classified as a weapon, guns are also illegal in the national parks. So we've just been hiding it when in the national parks.

One evening we were just cooking some bananas on our campfire, and I spied something moving under one of the trees in the meadow 100m from our tent. I was sure it was a bear or a large dog... but we had only seen deer in this field so far but had heard tales of the bears visiting to eat the ripe apples in August.

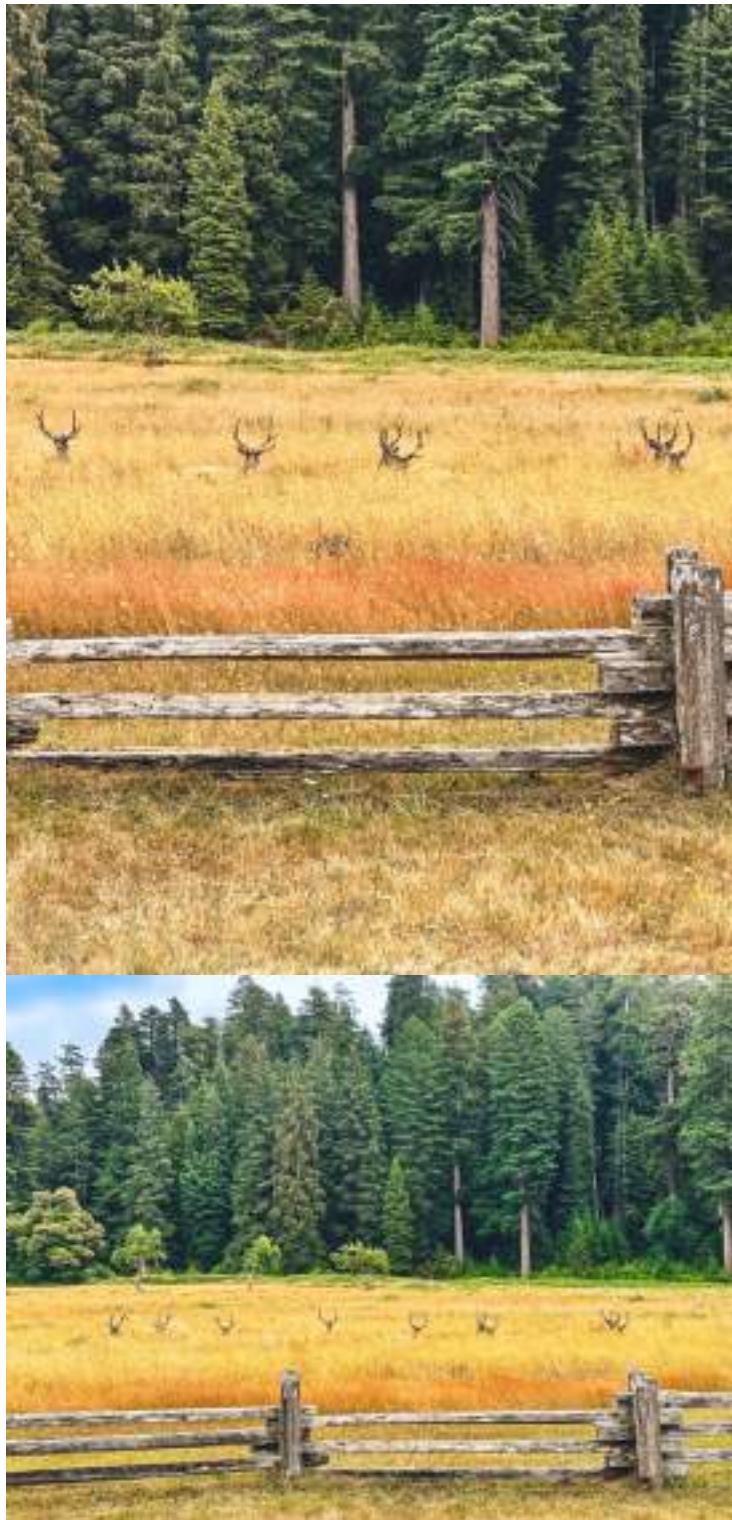
But my eyes were not deceived, for it was a small black bear reaching into the apple tree for some tart unripe apples – still good nutrients.

We watched the bear till daylight had all but faded away. The bear was the size of a large dog and not phased by humans (there was a family having a loud feud just by the edge of the field, and he didn't budge). He was just reaching for apples and scratching on the tree. After seeing the bear hanging out, not interested in humans, I've felt much more chilled about the bears around while we are camping.

We've also been lucky enough to see lots of deer in the various parks and a herd of Elk on one of our drives between campsites.



That's him under the tree in the middle



## Pit stops: Eureka and Ferndale

On our way between the redwood parks, we stopped at a couple of towns along the drive.

First, we stopped at Ferndale, a quaint town with an old Victorian high street and some quaint shops. We had coffee and watched a film crew down the street creating fake rain to film a commercial.

We also stayed a night in Eureka (the largest coastal town between San Francisco and Portland) to prepare some food, restock and refreeze before more camping. Eureka has a heritage as a fishing and logging city and was involved in shaping the industries.

A lovely quaint town to spend a night in.

We also treated ourselves to a food truck dinner (seafood tacos) and a few beers at a local brewery. The beers were only \$6, which is the cheapest we've seen in the US – so we had a couple to accompany our games of Shuffleboard.







## Closing

California complete! We've had an amazing time exploring the west coast of this state. The weather has been true to form with mostly wall-to-wall sunshine. The people have been friendly, and the nature has been sensational!

You've got a lot to beat, Oregon – but let's go! We arrived at Oregon's Crater Lake on Friday with plans to hike around the lake and do some whitewater rafting. Later this week, we've got our longest stay since San Francisco planned. We have 4 nights in Bend, where we need to catch up on life admin/planning and do a bit of preparation for our return to the UK. Then we head to the Oregon coast to explore more of the rugged landscape.



# We've had a whale of a week snaking up Oregon – Otterly brilliant!

July 30, 2023

Categories: USA

Tags: Beer, Bend, Cape Perpetua, coast, hike, Oregon, rafting, smiths rock



We've spent just over a week in Oregon, and we've crammed a lot in! Hiking in forests, exploring a volcanic zone, trekking river trails, White Water Rafting, Tubing on the river, an ale trail, and trying lots of amazing food and coffee! We also took care of some life admin and did a bit of relaxing.

We also spotted some incredible wildlife this week too.

## Crossing the border into Oregon – Crater Lake:

Our first stop in Oregon was Crater Lake. After a fairly lengthy drive and a pit stop at In-N-Out Burger, we arrived at Crater Lake, where we had a few nights of exploring and some white water rafting planned for Sunday.

As I mentioned before, Crater Lake is the deepest lake in the US and the 9th deepest in the world. It is believed to have formed around 7,700 years ago in a mass eruption, causing the mountain there to collapse, leaving the crater, which then filled with water to create the lake.

The lake itself was just stunning crystal blue due to the lack of rivers running into it with sediment. We drove around the rim of the lake and stopped at many trails and view points along the way.







## Whitewater Rafting on the North Umpqua River:

After our whitewater rafting experience in NZ, we were keen to do some more. So, we booked a rafting trip on one of the rivers near Crater Lake. The North Umpqua river is 115 miles long, and we were rafting on a small section full of level 3 and 4 rapids with various bizarre names that made no sense to us.

We had a fab day out with a father and daughter who joined us in the raft. It felt like a private tour. We even did some rock jumps into the rather chilly river, given that it's filled with run-off from the mountains.

## Inside a mile long Lava Cave:

Our next stop was Bend. We decided to explore the Lava Caves just south of Bend on our drive there. Here, there are some great trails through volcanic terrain and an amazing opportunity to walk through a Lava Cave – a mile long tunnel burrowed by Lava. It was 5 degrees underground and pitch

black – so a rather different hike compared to many of our others.

I wasn't aware of how volcanic this area of Oregon was. There are volcanic buttes scattered all over the place, which you can hike up, and five volcanoes that are still very much active, although they haven't erupted in many years. Mount Hood is even classified as a stratovolcano with 'Very High Threat Potential'. We will be visiting there in a few weeks, so we'll keep an eye out for eruptions!

Fascinating landscapes to explore and quite different from the other volcanic areas we've visited in NZ and Guatemala.





## Blissful Bend:

Bend is a lovely little city sitting on the Deschutes River in Oregon. It's become a tourist hot spot due to its supposed 300 days of sunshine – and indeed, it was very sunny during our stay. The city has access to lots of great hiking in the surrounding areas and boasts an abundance of breweries, 26 of them, in fact.

Bend even has an ale trail app where you can check in as you visit the various breweries. We managed to tick off 10 of them in 4 days, which I think is pretty good going. We even received a prize for completing one of the sets of breweries in the old town – though whether our commemorative glasses will make it back to the UK in one piece is yet to be seen! We managed it with one out of two Tequila jars from Mexico.

We also went to see some free live music in Drake Park, which had a lovely atmosphere.

There was also a series of air quality warnings while we were here, and lots of outdoor areas were closed due to a forest fire raging 80 miles away, which blew smoke into Bend. Fortunately, it didn't disrupt our time too much.

We really loved exploring Bend but also managed to take care of some life admin and catch up on proper sleep in a bed!





## Tubing in Bend:

One of the top things to do in summer in Bend is to take a tube down the river. Lucky for us, our Airbnb host lent us a two-person tube. We had a few deflation issues along the way, including a pit stop halfway to borrow someone's pump before we sank – adding to the thrill.

There were hundreds of people floating down the river with us, creating a super atmosphere. Despite alcohol bans, most people found ways to sneak cans or fill bottles with alcohol to bring along. We didn't swim this time, as the water was pretty chilly, especially as we slowly sunk into it – we were glad of the sun to keep us warm.

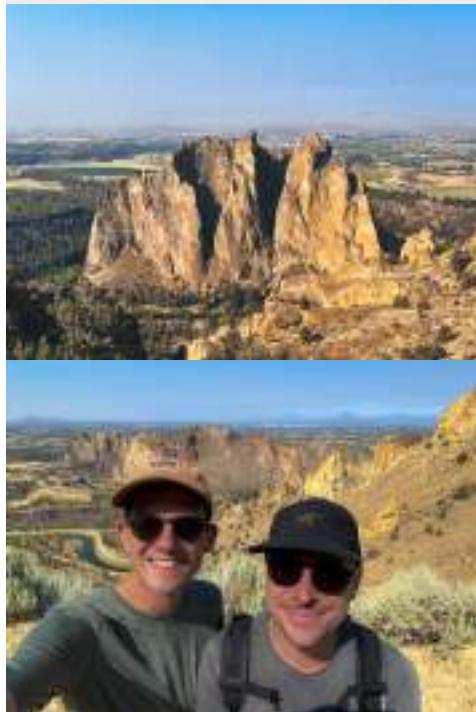


## Hiking Smith Rock:

We couldn't go four days without one decent hike – as our US pals would call us, we are becoming very Granola (the term here used to describe people who are outdoorsy). We headed to a nearby state park that is home to Smith Rock, a hot spot for hikers, climbers, cavers, paddleboarders, etc.! We picked the most challenging hike called 'Misery Ridge.' However, it wasn't a misery for us; we completed the 10k in two and a half hours, which included two summits – so a fair bit of elevation.

There were breathtaking views along both summits, across onto the beautiful colored rock faces and down towards the winding river and gorges. Quite a different landscape to other areas we've visited in Oregon.





## Oregon's epic coast: Cape Perpetua:

Cape Perpetua is a large forested area along the Oregon coast. Many call it the most beautiful

stretch of the Oregon coast. The rugged coast is home to several tourist hotspots where eroded coastline has created unusual rock formations, and waves churn, surge, and collide spectacularly.

Unfortunately, we could only get one night in the campsite here as it's so popular, but it was just enough time to explore the area.

The drive along the coastline itself was magical and reminded us a lot of the west coast of New Zealand. We stopped and did several hiking trails along the coast line which offered stunning vistas down the coast.

We visited a few of the so called ocean blow holes which can jet water up to 20 feet. However we didn't see anything of that magnitude even at high tide – we saw more of a splash and bubble. Apparently you need to visit in a storm to get the best show. Needless to say the rock formations and tidal pools were still stunning even without the water show.

We are also master fire makers and have got our camp cooking down to a tee now – few snaps below.









## Wildlife update: SNAKES, COYOTES AND WHALES:

To add to our list, we've seen quite a few snakes since we've reached Oregon. Mostly small, and thankfully, no rattlesnakes yet.

We were lucky enough to see an otter during our whitewater rafting. Apparently, they are quite rare to see, so we were very pleased.

Also we've seen a few wild coyotes. One at a distance across some fields but another just running along the side of the highway.

And then we were super lucky to spot a large grey whale off the coast at Cape Perpetua! We watched them for about 30 minutes feeding. So amazing. I got one awful photo for proof below – nearly as bad as the bear one.





## Closing:

A really fantastic first week in Oregon! Its beautiful landscape is less populated than California, and the people here seem more laid-back and always up for a chat. Excited to see what Oregon has to offer as we explore its wine region and one of its largest cities – Portland.



## An intereSTING week of wine, rail biking and hiking

August 6, 2023

Categories: USA

Tags: Festival, hiking, Mount Hood, Oregon, Rail Biking, wine



This week, we ventured north to Oregon's Willamette Wine Valley and then headed to Portland, a city known for its trendy food trucks, coffee shops, and breweries.

## Wine Country – Willamette Valley

Willamette Valley is 150 miles long. It has volcanic and glacial soils with added great weather, proved to be perfect for growing vines in the early 19th century. Willamette Valley is mainly known for its Pinot Noir grapes but also produces excellent Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Riesling (our favorite), Chardonnay, and many other grape varieties.

We spent a few nights camping in Oregon's largest wine region and enjoyed several wine tastings. The prices were much more affordable compared to Napa Valley and booking wasn't required. Surprisingly, we found Willamette wines to be on par with Napa's Pinot Noirs.

After seeing some live music at one of the walkable vineyards one evening we stumbled upon huge

bramble bushes so gathered as many as we could carry – delicious on pancakes the next day!

At our campsite we attended a star and meteor gazing event with the local Park Ranger, who brought along a local astrologist with their large telescope. It was a wholesome experience as we observed stars, satellites, and even some huge meteors, with the International Space Station passing overhead.







## Big trip to Portland

Our trip to Portland was delightful, exploring the city's coffee, beer, food trucks, and iconic spots like

Voodoo for insane donuts and Salt and Straw for fantastic ice cream.

We also visited the oldest rose garden in America. Followed by Powell's, the largest independently owned bookshop in the world – the store was humongous and absolutely buzzing with people exploring the new and used books.

Although Portland is sometimes associated with homeless issues, we found that recent efforts, such as banning camping on the streets and establishing safe rest villages, seemed to have improved the situation.

Overall, we had a fantastic time in Portland, a fabulous city close to Oregon's wilderness.









## Active Stratovolcano: Mount Hood

Also known to the native Americans as Wy'east, Mount Hood sits around 50 miles southeast of Portland and is an active stratovolcano. It is the second most climbed mountain in the world (second to Mt Fuji, Japan). Standing just shy of 3500m, its last minor eruption was in 1907, but scientists believe it is due for another eruption soon.

The mountain has 12 glaciers, and there are parts of the mountain where you can ski year-round.

Needless to say, we won't be climbing this one, as while it's the 2nd most climbed in the world, it's pretty technical, requiring crampons, ice picks, and ropes. It's also bloody cold up there. Instead, we

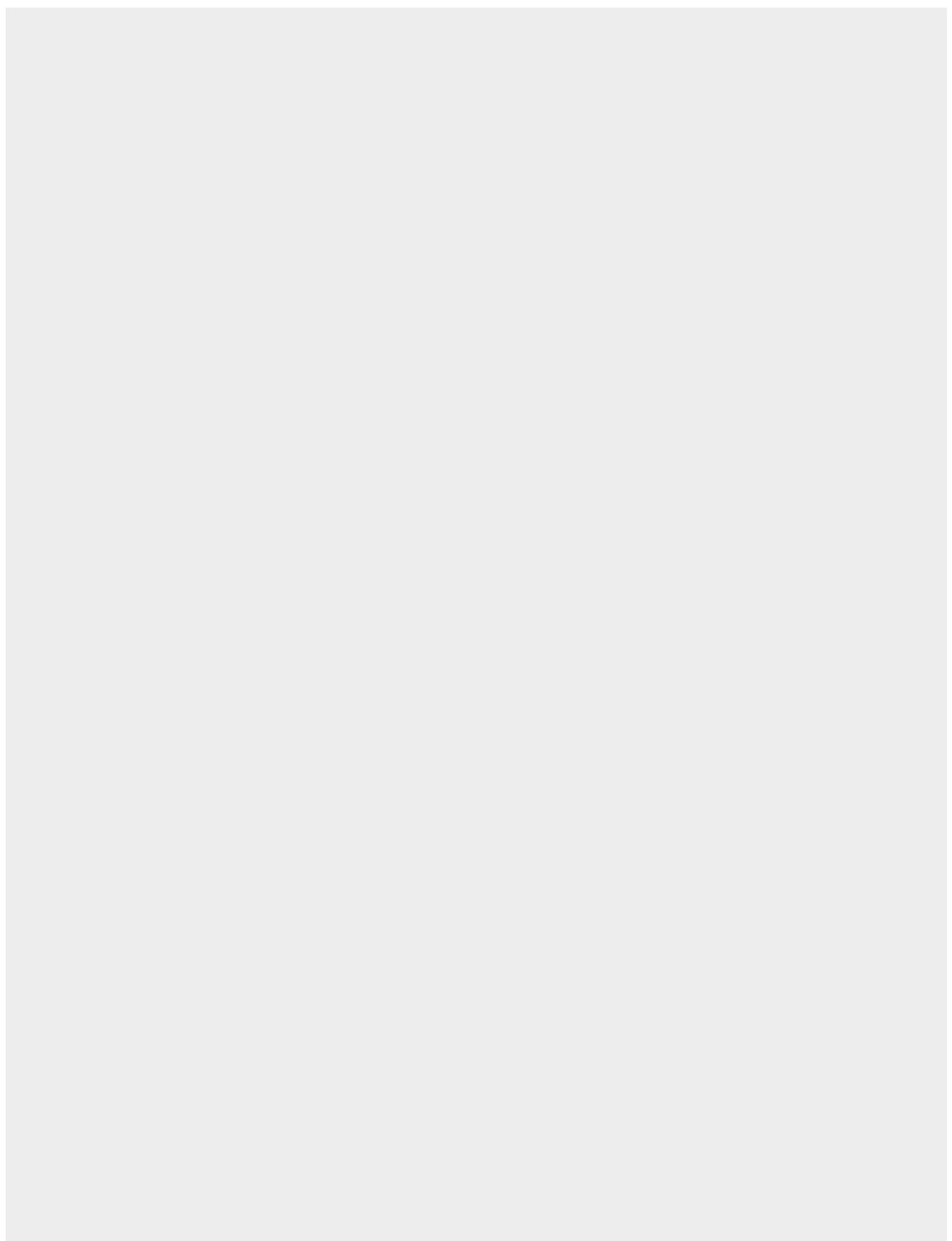
explored the surrounding natural area of beauty – lakes, rivers, waterfalls, and a spot of rail biking.



## Multnomah Falls

Sitting not too far from Mount Hood along 'Waterfall Alley' is the highest concentration of waterfalls in north Oregon (90 falls in a 70 mile stretch). Multnomah Falls is the largest of the falls, both the upper and lower falls combined reach 191m high – the equivalent of 2.5 York Minsters stacked.

The waterfall was magnificent, with a bridge halfway up. It was like a scene from Lord of the Rings. We did a lovely 5-mile hike around the area and saw several other waterfalls.





## Rail Biking

Another key attraction near Mt Hood is rail biking along a stretch of heritage railroad. Think pedalo on rails. This stretch of railroad operated between 1906 and 1987. Over its years it was predominantly used to move lumber and fruit and the workers to and from the town.

It has been operating passenger excursions since 1987. In 2022 was bought by an investment firm who plan to extend the use of the line to the complete 22 mile route. It's evidently proving a success with tourists.

You pedal your way alongside the hood river through forests and over bridges – it's very scenic.

There is one switch back where we all hopped off and the spin the bikes around – at which point for the second time this trip I was stung by an angry wasp, OUCH. We did have some power assist for the steeper bits. And the journey back down was much quicker – we managed to hit a top speed of 19mph. A really fun activity.

Afterwards we also visited one of the nearby lavender farms and tried some of their lavender and honey ice cream – delicious!





## RVs are taking over the world

When you're driving around the US and staying in many campsites, you can't help but miss the HUMONGOUS RVs that people drag up and down the country. So I wanted to share a few photos of just some of the beasties we've seen.

I then got quite curious about these monsters, so I did some Googling. Some of the largest ones have a floor space of 350 sq ft – which isn't far off the size of our one-bed flat! They weigh up to 14 tonnes (the same as 28 grand pianos or 8 adult walruses) – this is for the all-singing, all-dancing models. They have multiple bedrooms (up to 3), multiple bathrooms, washers, dryers, full kitchens with kitchen islands, 50" TVs... Honestly, these things are mega! The most expensive ones reach soaring prices of \$4-500k!

Absolute monsters! Not something we'd ever invest in, but they bloody love them here. And when we were being attacked by mosquitoes or wasps, I was slightly envious! I couldn't not include one of the floor plans I saw so you can see the scale of these things.

There are obviously many people with normal-sized caravans, which are more than sufficient for any camping trip, if you ask me. And the benefit for us is everyone has their own showers and toilets in their RVs, so the shared facilities are always clean and available to use!



These ones mount on pick ups

## Closing

What a week! This next week we will be dipping between Oregon and Washington as we hit a few key sites along the state border before making our way up into the Washington Peninsular. Neither of us can quite believe we are on our last 5 weeks of the trip – where has this year gone.

I also couldn't not mention that one of our campsites this week was hosting a hippy festival with about 50 hippies who've been running the event for about 50 years. We were invited to join in the festivities and across both our nights were treated to live music before a short wonder back to our tent in the forest – idillic!



A dam good week: hiking on mountains, kayaking on rivers and paddling in the sea

August 13, 2023

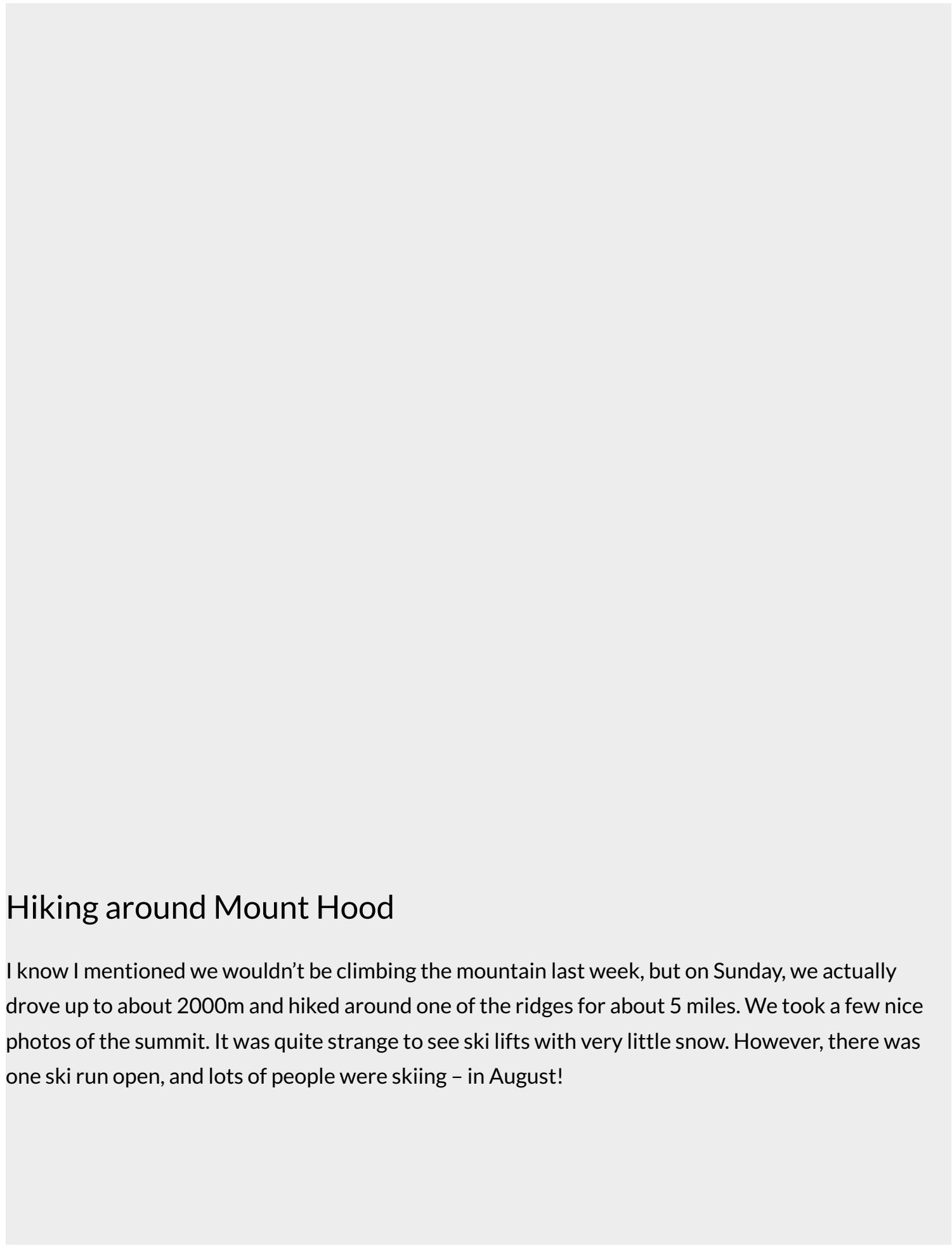
Categories: USA

Tags: Cannon Beach, Caves, coast, Mountains, Oregon, Rain, Washington



This week, we've been on the north side of the Columbia River compared to last week, which marked our first stops in Washington. We then followed the river back to the coast to visit a few more sights in Oregon before continuing further into Washington.

We've also been playing "spot the license plate" to see how many state license plates we can find, we're currently up to 39 out of 50 (plus a few Canadian ones).



## Hiking around Mount Hood

I know I mentioned we wouldn't be climbing the mountain last week, but on Sunday, we actually drove up to about 2000m and hiked around one of the ridges for about 5 miles. We took a few nice photos of the summit. It was quite strange to see ski lifts with very little snow. However, there was one ski run open, and lots of people were skiing – in August!





## Exploring Columbia River Gorge

We had a few nights of planned camping at various spots along the river, as well as 2 nights in a nice cabin with river access, allowing us to recharge after a lot of camping. The area is filled with beautiful hikes, several of which we completed. We were also fortunate to kayak on the river near our cabin, a magical experience with only a few people out in the morning. By the afternoon, the river becomes a hub for hundreds, if not thousands, of wind surfers.



While driving between various hikes, we spotted the North Bonneville Dam and its advertised visitor center. It sounded interesting, so after a quick federal car search on the way in, we headed for a self-guided tour. It proved to be absolutely fascinating! The Columbia River is, in fact, the largest hydro-power-producing river in North America, with 14 dams across two countries. The dam we visited has 18 turbines which can produce over 1,200 megawatts – enough to power 900,000 homes. It has an on-site museum which explained its workings – super interesting.

What we found even more intriguing was the way the dams provide fish access upstream. Although new dams now require fish access, it used to not be the case, and many dams across the US still

obstruct fish migration, posing a significant environmental issue. However, in cases where dams have been recently removed, fish have immediately begun to return to migrate and reproduce – nature at its finest.

At the Bonneville Dam, they have a highly successful fish access system, including a ladder – yes, a fish ladder – and a route that mimics a stream's natural flow, guiding fish from the lower part of the dam to the upper part. We observed this from above and also through viewing windows into the 6ft deep ladder itself. We also learned that there are people who count the fish passing through the dam day and night. They use a special keyboard with different fish species and hit the corresponding keys each time a fish passes – talk about a unique job! This data is crucial for scientists and to demonstrate that the dam isn't impacting fish migrations. The data indicates that fish can migrate just as easily through these ladders as they can naturally.

If you're interested in learning more about hydroelectricity, I could talk about it all day. If you'd like to read more, this article provides a comprehensive insight – [click here](#).





## Back to the coast: Cannon Beach & Oceanside

Situated about 30 miles south of where the Columbia River meets the Pacific, Cannon Beach is a seaside town with expansive sandy beaches and the iconic Haystack Rock. We spent two nights here to explore the area and nearby beaches. Cannon Beach is one of the top places to visit in Oregon, so it was rather touristy, but we still managed to find some secluded hikes and stretches of beach.

We had also received a recommendation for Oceanside, which shares many similarities with Cannon Beach but is much more residential and less frequented by tourists. We arrived at Oceanside during a heavy rainstorm, which, to be honest, was some of our first proper rain. It felt like a trip to Scarborough, so we put on our jackets and waterproof shoes and set off for a soggy beach hike.

The atmosphere was quite dramatic as we strolled along the quiet, misty, rain-soaked beach and ventured through a long cliff tunnel to reach a hidden beach. Here are a few snapshots from Oceanside.







Cannon Beach on the other hand is undeniably charming, but as I mentioned, it revolves heavily around tourism; nearly every other building is a motel or lodge, many of which cost a staggering minimum of \$200 per night. Even our campsite was \$50 per night and fell far below the standards of many others we've stayed at. Nevertheless, it was very convenient, only a 5-minute walk to the beach.

Whilst the main beach felt busy with people it's so huge that it didn't feel crowded. We had a good wonder up and down before settling in with a few beers to watch the sunset. We even witnessed an eagle attack the seagulls nesting on the rock.

Interestingly, there is also an abundance of rabbits here. Wild, yet they belong to the domesticated breed. Back in the 80s, a family released a few pairs of domestic rabbits (to be 'free'), and their population exploded. Now there are hundreds of them scattered about – very cute but they do look a little out of place. Read more about abandoned rabbits [here](#) – the reality is they don't have the best lives in the wild.

A lovely town with good bars, restaurants and expensive accommodation. We also visited seaside just north of Cannon Beach – it had much more of a UK seaside vibe with large holiday apartment blocks and amusement arcades. There was also a humongous Volley Ball tournament taking place across the beach.







## Cheese Cheese Cheese

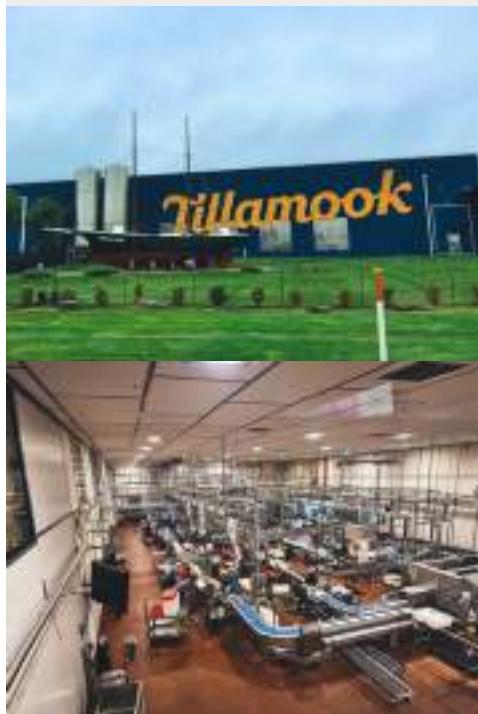
Cheese in America just doesn't compare to that back home. It's rarely aged and often lacks flavor. However, we were recommended to try Tillamook cheese and visit the creamery near Cannon Beach to sample the cheese and learn about its production process.

The creamery was massive and a major tourist attraction. As it was raining outside, people had flocked indoors to visit. There was an extensive viewing area that guided visitors through all stages of cheese-making, along with plenty of free samples (we filled our pockets).

Tillamook ages its cheeses from 60 days to 5 years and maintains approximately 15,000 tons of cheese aging in cold storage facilities across the US at any given time. That's a lot of cheese!

While Tillamook was tasty, it doesn't hold a candle to Pilgrim's Choice Extra Mature, if you ask me!

We've also noticed across America that they love their swag—whether it's state-themed, national park-themed, Bigfoot-themed, or even hotel-themed, you'll find T-shirts and mugs branded with various themes. Needless to say, there was a HUGE swag shop with cheese-related merchandise. I've been collecting pin badges in the US, so naturally, I now have a cheese-themed one!

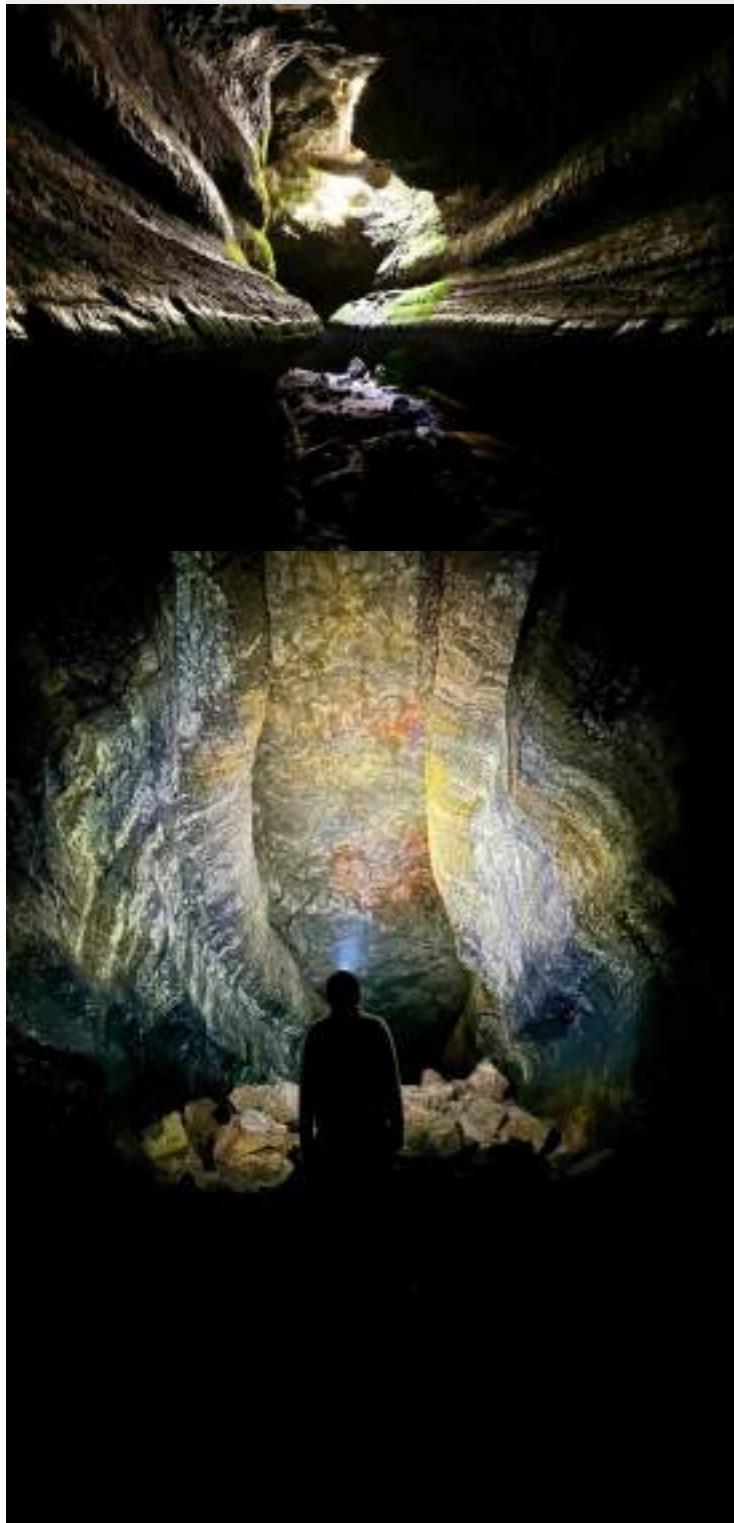


## Caving at Mount St Helens

Our final stop this week was near Mount St Helens. Yet another stratovolcano this volcano is also active. In 1980 it erupted changing the appearance of Mount St Helens forever. Prior to erupting it was the 5th highest peak in Washington. The eruption caused a huge landslide and the explosion resulted in Mount St Helen's summit becoming 600m lower. The eruptions blast also destroyed 230 square miles of forest in minutes.

We hiked up to a great view point and also descended into the lava caves below. Unlike the caves we went to in Oregon these ones required a lot more crawling and climbing to make our way through the

1.5m pitch black tunnel. Far more exciting!



## Closing:

Next stop before we reach the Washington Olympic Peninsular is Mount Rainier a 500,000 year old volcano. Then we will begin our counterclockwise journey around the peninsular to explore all the key sites.

A final shoutout. James's New Zealand summary video is now live on the [videos page](#).



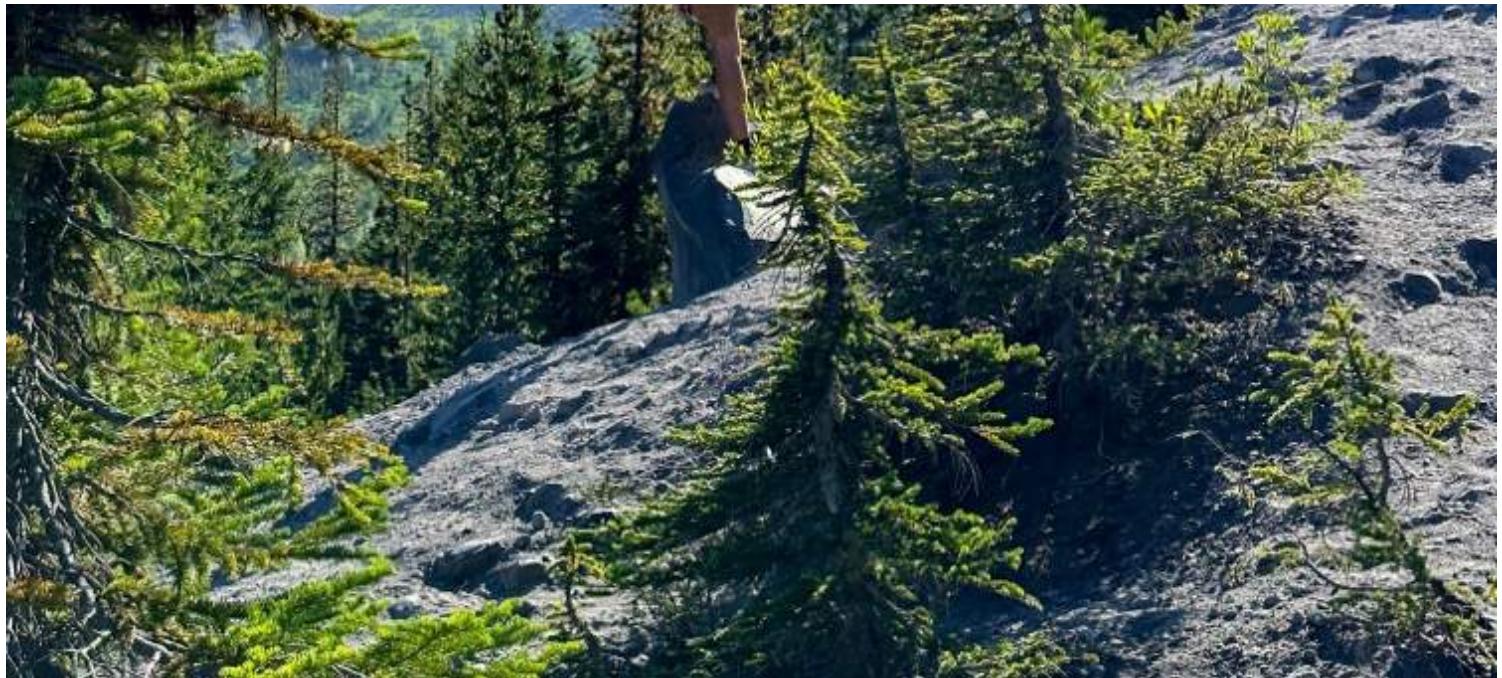
# Each day is a gift. And to waste that day is inexcusable.

August 20, 2023

Categories: USA

Tags: hiking, Mountains, oysters, Washington





Came across this quote this week and it felt apt for the title of the post – if not the whole blog.

This week, we were exploring more of the mountainous regions in Washington and starting our loop around the Washington Olympic Peninsula. Our first stop was Mt. Rainier.

## The most epic mountain hiking

Mt. Rainier, also known as Tacoma, boasts a summit sitting at 4,392 meters, making it the tallest in Washington state and the entire Cascade range. It is also home to 25 glaciers, making it quite the spectacle!

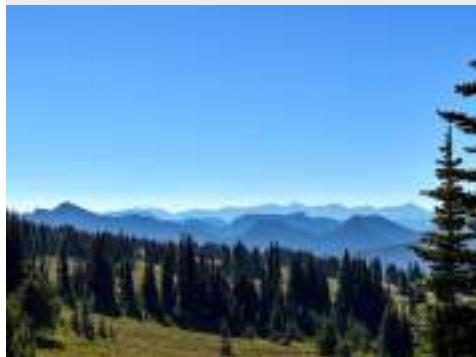
We were headed for a first-come, first-served campsite by a glacial river with views of the mountain (which is also a volcano – I’m sure you’ve got the gist that most of the largest mountains here are volcanoes too). Luckily, we managed to secure a spot in the afternoon after quite a queue to get into the national park. The next two days we were there, the camp was full up by late morning.

Washington was going through a heat wave, so even at altitude, we still had scorching weather. Not ideal for hiking, so we got up super early to hike several of the nearby peaks. One was home to an old disused fire tower, which was used as a lookout for forest fires. Fire monitoring is all done by satellite now. There was amazing scenery in all directions, just mountains and trees as far as the eye can see.

We were also here at the peak of the Perseids meteor shower. So, we set up our blanket and pillows outside to watch. Among all the meteors, we saw several incredible shooting stars flying across the

sky – the best we've ever seen. Absolutely amazing. The meteors themselves are of sizes between a grain of sand and a pea, but due to the speed at which they hit the atmosphere, they burn up in an incredible flash across the sky!





## Passing through Olympia:

We made an overnight stop in Olympia, the state capital, as part of our route. It lies 60 miles southwest of the largest city in Washington – Seattle – which will be our last stop in the state.

Olympia turned out to be a cool city with a nice vibe. We were only here primarily to stock up before heading to the peninsula, but we decided to visit the Capitol building and take one of their free tours.

## Touring the State Capitol Building

We arrived at the Capitol building with minutes to spare before the free tour started and just our luck, we were the only ones on the tour.

We had a great private tour of the legislative building with your guide Alan – learning all about its history and the inner workings of the Washington state government. We had lots of questions, much to Alan's enjoyment.





## Native American Museum – People of the Water

Whilst it's believed there has been human occupation on the Puget sounds since the last glacial retreat, the current tribe living near to Olympia 'The Squaxin Island tribe' finds its origins tracing back thousands of years before westerners arrived and still today the tribe resides in the area and is currently around 800 people in size.

We visited an incredible museum run by the tribe, which outlined stories of their people and past, as well as countless artifacts collected from the area – many from the muddy banks of the Puget.

Native American tribes each have different cultures, languages and ways of life. Evidently much changed when European settlers landed. But many tribes still preserve their cultures and traditions (this museum being a great exhibit of that). Today many tribes operate casinos, resorts, and cultural centers, providing economic stability for the tribe and promoting cultural heritage.

There are around 150k native citizens across Washington state which accounts for 2% of the population. Officially, Washington state recognises 29 tribes but many others exist.

The quote you see as the title of the blog was from Joyce, one of the tribe's elder members who passed away several years ago. It really resonated with me enough to note it down.

"Each day is a gift. And to waste that day is inexcusable. Account for yourself. Be useful." – Joyce Simmons Cheeka



## Shucking Oysters at Hama Hama:

We were very keen to try the local Olympia Oysters on the east coast of the peninsula. We were recommended Hama Hama to try some of the best in the area.

As the restaurant was closed when we called in our only option was to shuck the oysters ourselves. Neither of us had done it before, but it was a great opportunity to learn a new skill with a tasty reward.

With a bit of patience and a short guide provided with the oysters, we made our way slowly through half a dozen without any cuts or stabbings. We had a selection of delicious toppings and enjoyed the oysters overlooking the beautiful Puget Sound.

We also bought some local clams to whip up a delicious linguine vongole. It's amazing to have access to such fresh and relatively cheap seafood.



## Cabin Life at Sky Haus

We had also found another incredible wilderness cabin to hunker down in for a few days while we restocked and prepped for the next leg of camping.

We were in the middle of nowhere, and we just enjoyed being in nature. We watched the stars, the deer frolic in the fields, cooked up some tasty food on the BBQ, and finally played cornhole (also known as "sack toss", or "bags").



## Lake my Crescent

After the cabin, we planned to hit the top hike in Washington, 'Hurricane Ridge,' but due to a recent fire, capacity is capped and it was closed by the time we arrived. We will try again next week.

So instead, we decided to hike Mount Storm King, which promises epic lake views. A great hike, quite challenging as it's a 700m uphill climb for 2 miles and the last section requires climbing along several ropes to reach the best view.

Despite the swarms of wasps, the 360 vista was breathtaking and well worth the uphill effort. There is nothing's better than dunking in a crystal-clear lake to cool off after a strenuous hike.



## From coast to coast – La Push

Our final stop this week was on the west coast of the Olympic Peninsula. A coastal beach area called La Push. The North Pacific Ocean here is ferocious as it crashes against large sandy beaches. There are whole trees which have been thrown up the beach by the power of the ocean.

We hiked along several beautiful stretches of beach over the course of our stay and dipped our toes. No swimming here as there are lots of sneaker waves that can come out of nowhere and pull you out into the big blue.

We also headed to watch the sunset too. It's a lot cooler by the coast – beanie hats and fleeces were back in action.







## Closing

We are really loving Washington so far, and the peninsula is just natural beauty after natural beauty! It does feel somewhat undiscovered here except for local tourists.

We've got a few more days exploring the peninsula before we take the ferry across to Bellingham to stay with our friend Jess, whom we met way back last year in the Philippines. We are super excited, and she's planning to take us across to the San Juan Islands, which sit in the Puget Sound for some crabbing, beachcombing, and island hopping.

Only 4 weeks till we return to the UK! Where has the year gone!



## Olympic Peninsula: Hikes, Rain and Vampires

August 27, 2023

Categories: USA

Tags: Forks, hiking, Hoh Rainforest, Hurricane Ridge, Rain



This was our last full week solo exploring the rest of the Olympic Peninsula before we meet up with friends in Bellingham, WA, and Vancouver, Canada!

## The home of Twilight – Forks

We had a night planned just outside of the sleepy city of Forks in a 'Tiny Home' – a very small cabin but with all the necessities.

From the cabin we checked out Forks, which is the city where the Twilight series of books and films were set. While neither of us are huge fans, we were intrigued to see the town. I was also shocked that Forks was classified as a city with a population of <4,000 people.

The city was filled with hilariously cheesy twilight related signage. The visitor center had created a driving tour around some key sites, which we later learned was all fabricated as the film was mostly shot in Oregon! The town was just used in the books. We did visit Bella's truck, which was parked at the lumber museum – but even then, we aren't sure if it's the actual truck or just a similar one. Even the coffee shops had Twilight-themed drink names and all the shops had tacky Twilight souvenirs which some tourists were going mad for.

While it was rather hilarious to us, fans travel from all over to visit. There is even an annual Twilight gathering in Forks where many of the cast come to meet their fans. You have to applaud the city for embracing Twilight and drawing in the tourists to what is otherwise a very sleepy small place with not much going on.

Why Forks, you might ask... the author of the book looked up the雨iest place in the US, and the Washington Peninsula was at the top of the list. Although we hadn't seen much rain yet... See the next chapter!!!







## Epic views at Cape Flattery

Cape Flattery is the northwesternmost point of the continental United States. We hiked the main trail there which offers stunning views of the Pacific Ocean and its rugged coastline. It's in a Native American reservation so is totally managed by the local tribe.



## When it rains, it pours – Hoh Rainforest

We had two nights planned in the peninsula's most popular sight, the Hoh Rainforest! This is the only rainforest in the US. People travel from all over the states to visit. We had luckily secured a campsite for two nights (we had to get up at 6am two weeks before when they opened reservations).

The Hoh Rainforest can see up to 14 feet of rain each year (about 15 times the amount of rain in

London per year). And combined with the moisture from fog, it creates the temperate rainforest conditions perfect for the flora and fauna that exists there, especially the moss. It's also worth mentioning that the rainforest contributes massively to carbon recycling – so it's great for the planet.

As I mentioned the rainforest is host to some of the most incredible moss we've seen. While similar to the moss in the Redwoods, this was on a much grander scale. Beard-like moss growth hung from every tree.

Did you know clubmoss (the beard-like moss) feeds only on air and light? The rainforest atmosphere supplies enough moisture and wind-borne nutrients.

We did a beautiful 12-mile hike around the rainforest and along the Hoh River before returning to our campsite. Then the rains came! We were in a rainforest after all. It poured for about 4 hours solid. We took shelter in the car, which became our makeshift cinema for the afternoon (yes, we watched the *Twilight* film).

Luckily, due to James's expert tent skills, we were mostly dry in the tent. But we were both kept awake as it poured on through the night.





## Sol Duc Falls and Hot Springs

Our final camping stop in the US was along the Sol Duc River. We prayed for some sun to dry out our

soggy tent, but we had no such luck but there wasn't any more rain at least.

There are two main attractions at Sol Duc: the famous three waterfalls and the hot springs. We visited both.

Firstly, we hiked the 10k trail to the falls to marvel at its size and height. Most other visitors chose to drive much closer and do a short 1k amble to see the falls so the trail was mostly quiet however there were a lot of wasps! It was James's turn to get stung this time – right on his ankle. That makes 3 stings between us so far on this trip!

We then hiked back to the hot springs to have a soak in the toasty outdoor pools. Not as glamorous as it sounds, as it was quite crowded and lots of kids snorkeling in the hot pools. But still nice to rest the legs.



## Hurricane Ridge Hike

Having completed our last night camping, we tried again to get up to Hurricane Ridge. This time we were early enough to drive up to the park. We could see the remnants of the visitor center, which recently burned down, hence the capacity limits on visiting. We cooked up breakfast with a view and dried out our damp tent in the morning sun. Very peaceful, bar more harassing swarms of wasps.

We then completed a 6km hike with incredible vistas of the surrounding mountains and, in the distance, Mount Olympus. Beautiful, although not as spectacular as Mount Rainier in my opinion. For conservation reasons all the trails here were paved which feels slightly less adventurous than many of our other hikes. We did, however, get to see a marmot in the grass, which at first we were both convinced was a rock until its head moved. Looked like a dog sized guinea pig to me.

Did you know Marmots are large rodents belonging to the ground squirrel family? They are very social, living in family colonies.





## Port Angeles

Before leaving the peninsula, we had one night in Port Angeles, a city on the north coast overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Port Angeles has historically been tied to industries like logging and fishing, but it has diversified over the years. Tourism, healthcare, and education also play important roles in the local economy today.

We had booked onto an underground heritage city tour to understand more about the city's history and how it was "raised out of the mud". Our guide led us around the streets and under the streets of Port Angeles while talking us through the city's history. It certainly has a longer history than many of the cities we've visited in the US.

By far the most fascinating thing to us was the fact that the city was first built right down at sea level as they leveraged the ocean tide for natural sewage. Properties were built on stilts and thin bridges connected them to raised walkways. But in 1914, it was decided to 'raise Port Angeles out of the mud' (as our tour guide put it). They brought in skilled labor and also enlisted everyone from the town to help construct a series of large 6ft stone walls which were then filled with mud allowed to dry. These then became the streets which were paved with cedar planks. When complete, the ground floors of all the buildings along the main streets became basements. A fascinating history for the town.

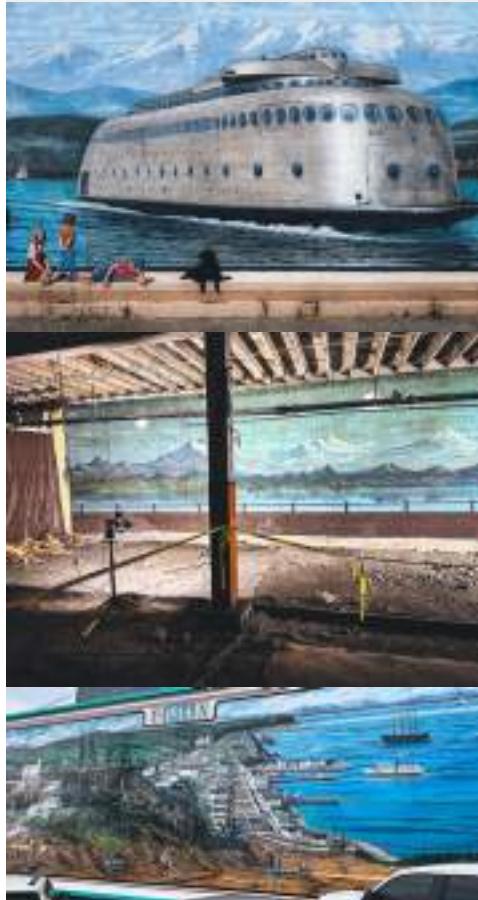
We were able to see many of the old buildings and visit a few basements and under street level walkways which still exist today. Although some have been filled in for seismic and fire reasons.

We also visited an old brothel, one of 7 that used to exist in the city – the US navy Pacific fleet spent 9 months of the year anchored in the sound just by Port Angeles, and many loggers visited the area, making it a hot spot for Brothels at the time. All the brothels were closed down in the 40s.

What about the natives? There is a rich history of the natives here prior to when the Europeans landed from the 1750s onwards. There were some incredible murals painted around the town, one of which gave a nod to the natives who lived here long before. The Native American story here is not a positive one, much like elsewhere in the US. The Native Americans in this area were exploited for their land, forced out of their homes and had no real way to fight back against the western invaders, despite having resided in these lands for thousands of years prior. What I found particularly gruelling is the fact that historians predict that around 80% of the natives were killed by the common cold or other ailments brought by the Europeans. The culture and traditions are still protected to this day and next weekend there is a huge festival which also includes many tribe members canoeing across the strait to Vancouver island and back.

We were surprised to find such a rich history here and thoroughly enjoyed our time in Port Angeles. We also had a cracking Thai meal – the best we've had outside Thailand. A little hidden gem!









## Ferry to Bellingham

While only 34 minutes long, the ferry crossing was a perfect way for us to get across the Puget from the peninsula to very near Bellingham, our next stop. It was also an opportunity to watch for whales that reside in the Puget Sound during summer. Unfortunately, there were no whale sightings on our

crossing, only birds and jellyfish.



## Closing

As I'm writing this, we've settled into Jess's house. Laundry is on, and we are preparing to head to the San Juan Islands tomorrow.



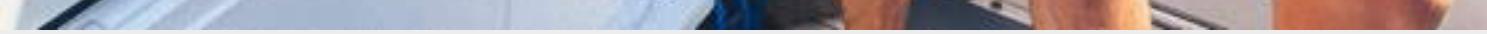
## All about the seafood!

September 2, 2023

Categories: USA

Tags: Washington; Bellingham; Island; San Juan; Cat; beer; crab; salmon





A killer last week in Washington! Insane seafood, living our best island life and exploring the largest city since San Francisco.

## Bellingham with Jess

Ninety miles north of Seattle along the Puget Sound sits the city of Bellingham. It's known for its picturesque surroundings – the sound has islands on one side, and the mountains on the other, with forests along either side. It's a haven for anyone who loves the outdoors.

We were staying with our friend Jess, whom we met in the Philippines, and her two Maine Coon cats, Red and Marshmallow. It was super nice to have our very own tour guide and to experience the local side of the city.

We hit up the famous shellfish farm (Taylor's), where we tried 12 different varieties of oysters (I didn't realize this many existed) with a lovely bottle of bubbles as the sun set over the Puget.

We then headed to a couple of the local dive bars in Bellingham as James was keen for us to experience American dive bars. Jess's friend took us to the hot spots, which were actually much nicer than I expected – the definition of a dive bar here is slightly different. We even tried a Peruvian bear fu\*\*er... which consisted of beer, rum and orange juice which went down the hatch in one – what a way to get the night going!!

The next morning we also witnessed fire fighting planes flying incredibly low to scoop water from a lake and douse a fire which lightning had started in the nearby forest. It's amazing how these planes work, dropping hundreds of gallons of water on the burning forest to slow and smother the burn.



## San Juan Island Life – Eliza Island

We were very lucky that Jess's best friend's family owns a house on one of the private San Juan

Islands. So we stocked up on food and drink, headed to a small pickup pier, and took their private boat over to the island for a weekend of antics.

The island itself was quite small; we walked most of it in under an hour. It had two large beaches and views out into the Puget Sound, although they were a little obscured by the smoke blowing in from forest fires. It felt like a little slice of paradise, surrounded by water – peaceful.

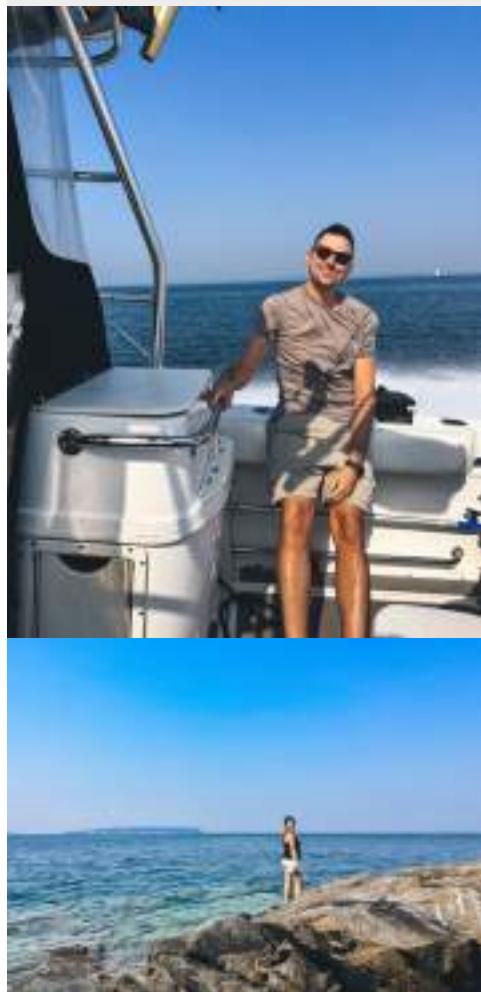
The days were spent swimming in the sea and hunting for agates (gemstones) that wash up on the beach, and the nights spent eating, drinking, and playing games – plus another dip to see the bioluminescent plankton.

Did you know Agates are formed over millions of years. Usually in the cavities of other rocks. In raw form are kind of ugly but can be tumbled and polished to reveal their beauty. They are a cryptocrystalline form of quartz (I had to look up what that meant – basically they are made up of tiny minute crystals and the crystalline nature of the rock can only be seen at a microscopic level). Apparently I'm becoming a rock nerd!

The seafood game was very strong on the island. We went out to raise the crab boxes each day, retrieving about 25 fresh crabs which went on to feed us for days. I've never eaten such fresh crab; we arrived back with the catch, cracked them on the beach, boiled them in seawater, and feasted – (sorry vegan and veggie friends reading).

One of the family members had also just been fishing in Alaska, so we had the freshest smoked and bbq'd salmon I've ever tasted, all accompanied by quite a volume of alcohol.

An idyllic, wholesome weekend – with a few sore heads along the way.







## Where are you Mt. Baker?

At 3,286 meters, Mt. Baker is the third-highest mountain in Washington. It's one of the most active volcanoes in the range and a hotspot for winter sports.

We drove up to do a hike near the summit. Unfortunately, we weren't blessed with the usual views, as low clouds had rolled in, creating a really moody atmosphere that obscured all our views. We were

lucky we could even see the trail. We still had a wonderful hike and managed to snap a few photos along the way – just none of the mountain hiding in the clouds.

We were quite soggy and cold after the walk, so we had most definitely earned a treat – delicious pizza, beer, and copious amounts of desserts were consumed post-hike – before returning home for cuddles with the cats.

An incredible few days with our incredible host Jess.



## Let's go Seattle

Seattle itself is the largest city in Washington and a huge economic hub. It's home to several large companies (Microsoft, Amazon, and Starbucks), creating lots of jobs. It's also a hub for younger people across the state, as it has several universities.

It's home to a few iconic landmarks: the Space Needle, Pike Place Market, and its large ferris wheel right by the water. It's also renowned for its coffee – often called the coffee capital of the US.

First, we said farewell to the car; we had added over 4,500 miles to the clock over the past two months. We had also gotten rid of all our camping gear through donations and sales, so it was quite nice to be traveling light again.

Then we made our way around the key tourist sights. We met up with a friend from Mexico for a few beers and we made sure to sample some of the local coffee. We even found a place that did an off-menu flat white.

We also had delicious sushi at a local restaurant (great fish here too, as it sits on the Puget). Although we had a bit of a spicy surprise, as one of our rolls had ghost chili laced throughout it. Note to self: read all the ingredients. Luckily, they had ice cream to calm our burning tongues.

Did you know ghost peppers offer an intense fruity, sweet chili flavor? The heat does not kick in for 30 – 45 seconds. Once the heat kicks in, expect sweating, watery eyes, hiccups, and shortness of breath. The burning generally intensifies over 10 – 15 minutes and subsides after 30 – 40 minutes.













## Taking the Amtrak to Canada

We had decided to take the Amtrak to cross the border to Canada. While not remotely the fastest

mode of transport, it winds its way along the coast, providing incredible views. We didn't spot any whales from the window, but we did enjoy the incredible vistas along the journey.

Did you know Amtrak was established in 1971 and today has 21,000 miles of track with 500 stations across 46 states? For comparison, the UK has 10,000 miles of track with over 2,500 stations. Quite remarkable when the UK is only 2.5% of the land mass of the USA.





## Closing

We waved goodbye to the US as we crossed into our final country of the trip: Canada! We've got two weeks to explore Vancouver and the surrounding area, including an exciting trip to Vancouver Island planned. Bring on Canada and hopefully some poutine.



## Sea to sky – Canada bears all!

September 10, 2023

Categories: Canada

Tags: Bear, hiking, Squamish, Vancouver, Whistler



Two weeks to explore Vancouver before we head back to the motherland. Of course, we made the most of every minute!

As a side note on US license plates we saw 46 out of 50 states – only missing Rhode Island, Connecticut, Delaware & Mississippi. Pretty good going!

## Exploring the city of Vancouver

Vancouver is home to 2.6 million people and is a diverse melting pot of cultures. It is surrounded by natural beauty on all sides, making it a great base to explore the surrounding nature.

The melting pot of cultures creates an incredibly diverse food scene for its size as a city. As we no longer had our camping gear, we were 'forced' to eat out for all our meals, allowing us to sample some of the incredible food scene here. Luckily, things are a little cheaper here than in the US. Although we've done the math, and miraculously the US was not our most expensive country by a long shot – it

comes in around 5th, primarily due to our camping half the time and cooking nearly all our own meals.

So far we've tried poutine, of course (chips, gravy, and cheese curds), sampled some local seafood, and had Indian cuisine (my first since being sick all that time ago in India). All the food has been delicious.

We had picked up another (much less snazzy and bashed-up) hire car to get to the surrounding hot spots.

We visited the Capilano Suspension Bridge. The current bridge is 140 meters long and 70 meters above the river. There were several other high treetop bridges and walkways. A unique experience; however, we went on a weekend, so you could barely move due to the other tourists.

We also visited the Bloedel Conservatory, an incredible glasshouse built in 1969 and home to more than 100 exotic birds and 500 exotic plant and flower species, all of which thrive in its temperature-controlled environment. It was built to give those visiting a "better appreciation and understanding of the world of plants."

Of course, we needed to fit in some hiking. Just 10 minutes from the city, there is a plethora of hikes. We completed the Grouse Mountain 900m elevation trail in 70 minutes. However, like in Bellingham, we weren't greeted with epic views of the city; instead, we had our heads in the clouds. However, we did get to see some Grizzly Bears, which were rescued and live in a large enclosure at the top of the mountain. So majestic, but their claws were large and looked rather sharp; we were quite glad there was a fence between us!







## Climbers Paradise – Squamish aka Skwaxwú7mesh

Halfway between Vancouver and Whistler sits the town of Squamish. In summer, it's home to incredible climbing, hiking, and lakes to paddle on. One hot spot is the Stawamus Chief Mountain, often simply called "The Chief." It is a famous rock climbing destination. If you haven't watched the Alpinist about a solo climber from Squamish, highly recommend it! It's also a popular spot for hikers, offering several challenging trails that lead to breathtaking viewpoints overlooking the town and surrounding areas.

When we arrived in Squamish we took the gondola up to one of the peaks there and did several shorter trails around the summit with epic views of Chief. We actually got some good views from the top of this mountain!

Interestingly Canadians refer to the indigenous people in Canada as the First Nations – which I think is a magnificent way to refer to the people who lived here first. Very quickly we noticed that the history and the culture of the First Nations is hugely respected and shared here which is very refreshing. Museums and plaques around the city always ensure that the history of the First Nations is also shared alongside the more recent history.

One thing which I found fascinating is the written First Nation names for Squamish and Whistler. Especially the one for Squamish which includes a 7 in it. I looked into it as I was intrigued the 7 represents a pause and is referred as a 'glottal stop'.

We also stayed in another tiny home near Squamish on a farm run by a few Brits. We got to feed the chickens, ducks, turkeys and rabbits, p the goats and dogs, watch the horses and large pig Huey trotting around the fields. It was like being in the movie babe.





## Whistler aka Skwikk

Most people who are into snow sports will have heard of Whistler. In the winter, it's the hotspot for hitting the slopes, often classified as the best resort in the world. While it's on our bucket list to snowboard here, there's no snow in summer, unfortunately. But the area is open to a whole range of summer outdoor sports, so we were keen to spend a few days and soak up the alpine summer vibes.

We actually extended our stay because our friend Ellie got stuck in the desert at Burning Man; she's made it home safely now.

The number one activity here is to take the peak-to-peak gondola, which runs between Whistler Mountain and Blackcomb mountain peaks. Before taking the peak-to-peak Gondola, we headed out on a hike around one of the peaks. Unfortunately, some rain blew in (mountain weather!), and we got pretty soaked, and our views were just of cloud 2 meters in front of us. Despite being soggy, we took the Peak-to-Peak gondola through the cloud to Whistler Peak, where we headed to a bar and picked

up a Caesar (a Canadian classic – think Bloody Mary with clam juice in it) – can't say I'd have more than one of these, but we were glad to try it.

We tried to wait out the rain and the cloud, but it was pretty persistent, so we ended up making our way back down the mountain to dry out.

While in Whistler, we also completed a few more hikes around the area including one to an epic nearby waterfall. The landscapes here are just breathtaking. Mountains, lakes, glaciers, thick forests, and roaring waterfalls. An incredible place to visit in summer. However we both left with an insatiable urge to snowboard.

Whistler, we will be back one winter when you're covered in a few feet of snow!





## Closing

An incredible first week in Canada. The landscape here is unparalleled, and I can really see why people move to Vancouver as you have everything on your doorstep. We've really noticed so many more Brits here than in the US (I suppose we are in British Columbia), and the chocolate is also much nicer here!

With just a few days left of the trip, we are taking the seaplane across to Vancouver Island for the weekend and then spending our last couple of days back in Vancouver before we fly home.

We are both feeling quite conflicted about returning to the UK. Extremely sad that the trip is coming to an end but excited to get home to see friends and family – especially new babies and puppies

which have arrived since we were back.

But first, we are going to enjoy every minute of our last 5 days!

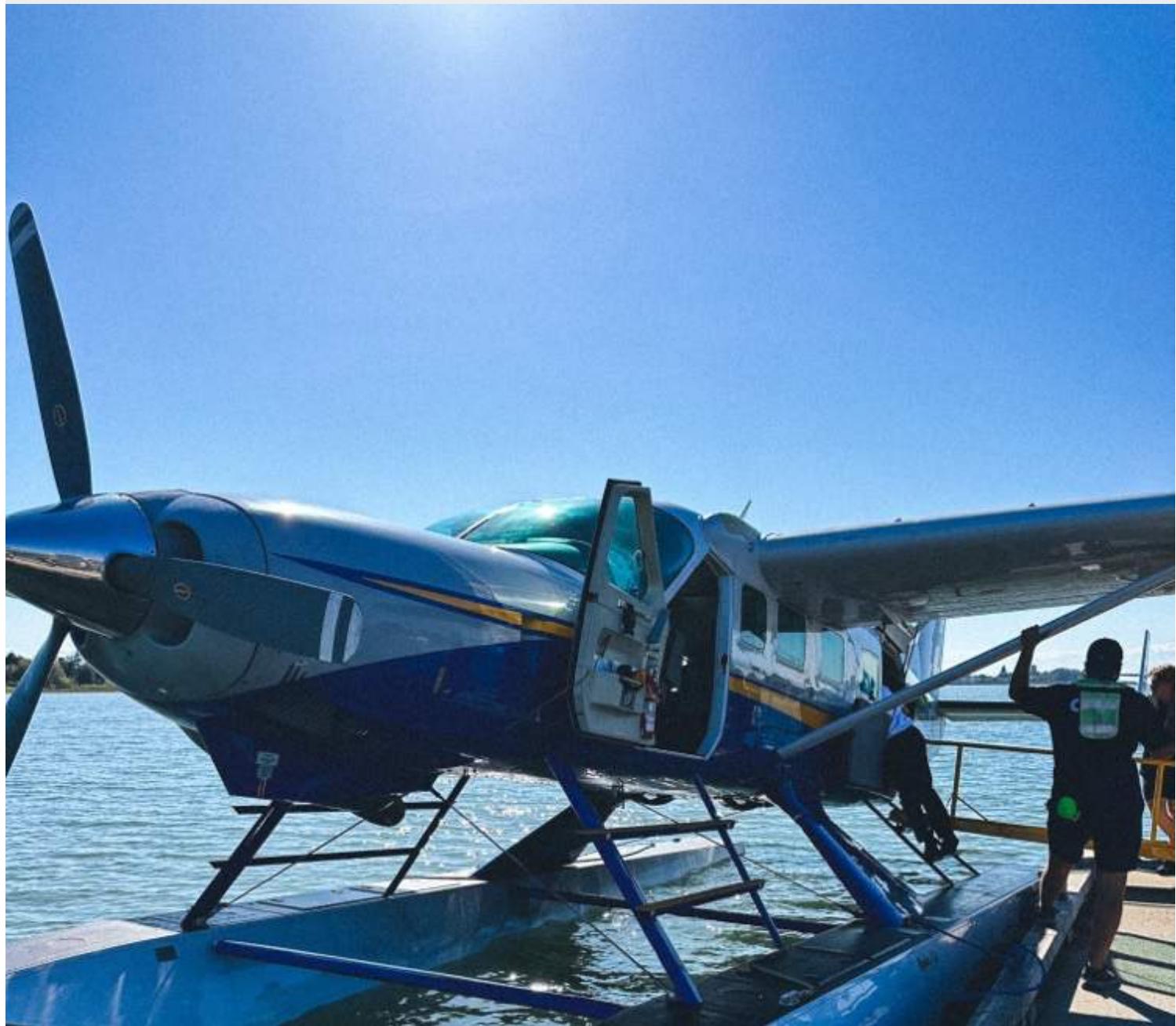


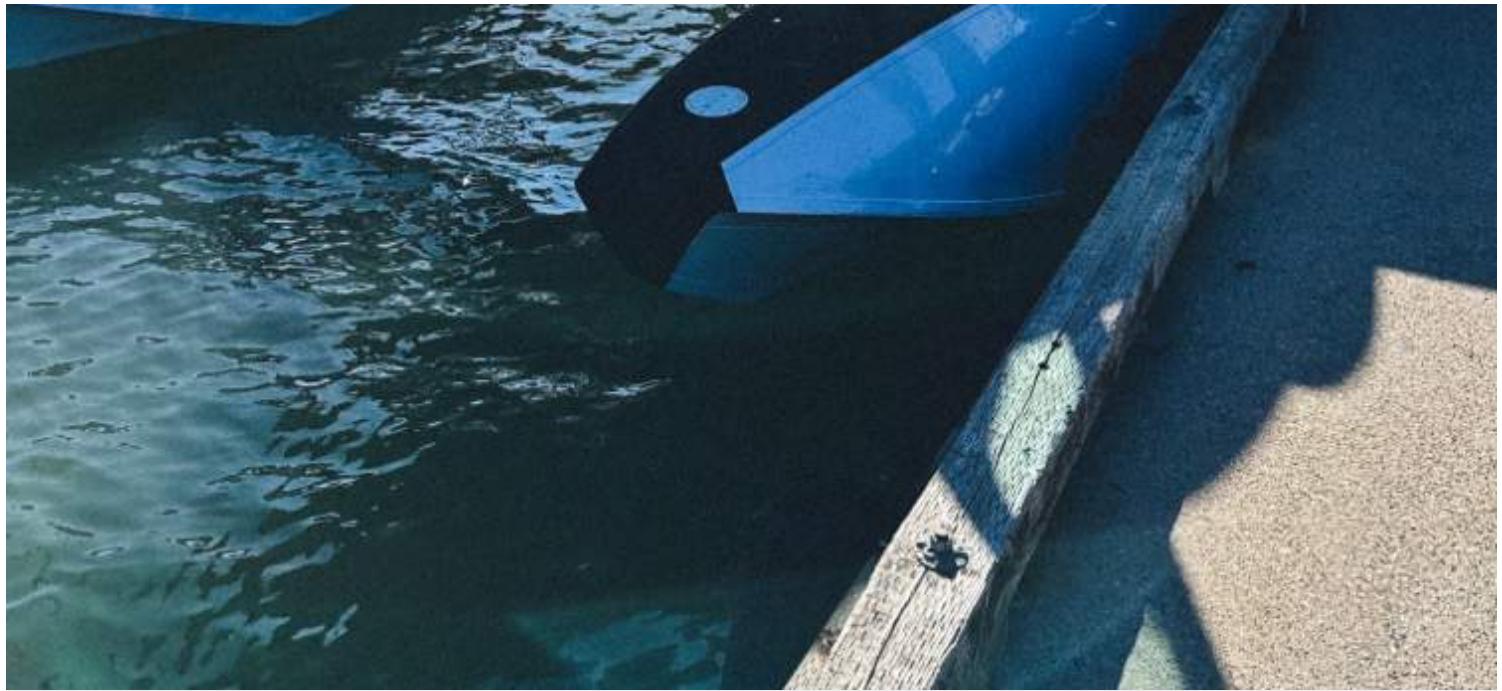
## Our last few days in Canada

September 14, 2023

Categories: Canada

Tags: Canada, Island, Whales





Just a quick mid-week edition to close out our time in Canada.

## Sea plane to Tofino

On Friday, we took the seaplane which was a short 50 minute flight from Vancouver harbour across to Tofino on Vancouver Island, where we were meeting Ellie's parents for our last bit of camping and to explore a few of the wonders on Vancouver Island.

Did you know Vancouver Island is a quarter of the size of England but has only a fraction of the population – with only 800k residents on the island?

What an exhilarating experience. So smooth taking off and landing on water. We were right at the front of the plane and could watch the pilot (yes, only one) flying the plane. I was glad the pilot didn't pass out or anything as I didn't fancy landing the plane myself.







Tofino sits on the west coast of Vancouver Island facing out to the North Pacific Ocean. It is renowned for beautiful beaches and surf spots along the coast. We hit up several of the beaches which were stunning – Ellie even braved a swim in the rather cold ocean.

We did a lovely hike around a lighthouse loop on the southwest. The hike started with no visibility (just our luck), but within 15 minutes, all the mist burned off and revealed sensational views of the coastline and out to the ocean. We even saw a porpoise hunting fish in a cove nearby.

A lovely few days soaking up our last bit of nature before we headed back to the city. We then took the ferry back across to Vancouver after our trip, and were lucky enough to see 2 whales on the crossing, which is apparently quite rare.



## Hiking to a WW2 Plane Crash

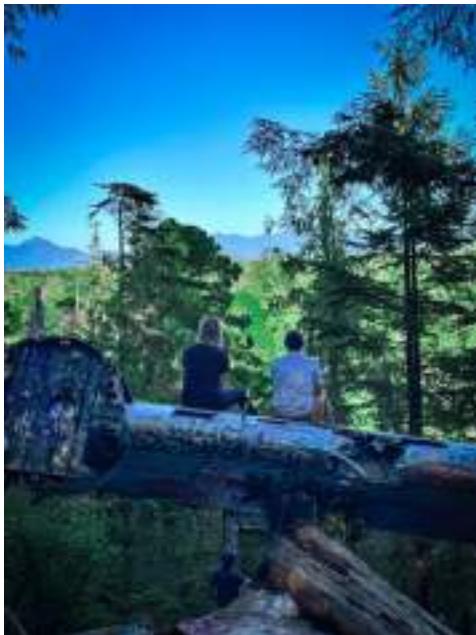
As I mentioned above, one of the hikes we did took us off-road into the wilderness on an unofficial hiking route to find a plane wreck. We weren't quite sure what to expect, but when we got close, the huge plane wreck emerged from the trees. It was well worth the interesting trek to get there.

We did a bit of research, and the plane came down in 1945 after the crew experienced a fault shortly after takeoff. The bomber was carrying several depth charges, but miraculously no one was hurt due to the pilot's skill bringing the plane down in the trees.

Apparently, the crew made tents from the parachutes and camped out till they were rescued.

A really interesting different hike.





I also forgot to mention we hiked to a train crash last week too. Apparently the train derailed in 1956 when a freighter heading south from Lillooet came into on an area under track repair with just a little too much speed. They recovered several of the carriages and salvaged anything of value but the most damaged carriages were left here to become graffiti artist canvasses.



## Vancouver City

In our last few days in Vancouver, we ticked off a couple of other tourist hot spots. We hired bikes and cycled the Stanley Park seawall, with epic views back across to the city.

We picnicked on the beach and also visited a few more breweries – it would be rude not to after all. A lovely last few days in the city.



## Closing

We've loved Canada and have only scratched the surface of this beautiful country. We are already

planning our return to explore more of the wilderness here.

One more blog to come at the weekend to close out the whole trip.

## Walking around the US with James

Here's a quick video compilation of our hikes across the US.



<https://onajolly.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/a459d5ee-e5c4-4653-ae07-af309f464c65.mp4>



And that's a wrap folks!

September 17, 2023

Categories: UK

Tags: home



360 days later and we are back in the UK. What an adventure we've had.

We've visited 14 countries across 6 continents, traveled over 60,000 miles by plane, train, car, boat, bike, scooter, foot, railbike, etc. (

We've seen the most incredible sights, met the most incredible people, experienced various cultures, and tasted some of the best food of our lives.

We saw 3 wonders of the world (Taj Mahal, Angkor Wat & Chichen Itza) and 5 of the natural wonders of the world (Great Barrier Reef, Ha Long Bay, Puerto Princesa Subterranean River & Milford Sound)

We've swum in more oceans, lakes, rivers, and seas than we can count. We've hiked glaciers and volcanoes at soaring heights of 4,000 meters above sea level and dived deep into the depths of the blue ocean, ascended into deep, dark caves and cenote's down to 30m below sea level.

The wildlife we've seen has been unparalleled. Leopards, elephants, whales, dolphins, turtles, rays, coyotes, snakes, spiders, eagles, vultures, and, of course, a lot of cute dogs!

People always ask what our favorite country was, and it's a really impossible question to answer as we loved them all. There are some favorite elements that stand out.

- The vibe and people in Sri Lanka really stole our hearts.
- The food in Vietnam was out of this world, and the Hmong women are absolute powerhouses.
- The wilderness in New Zealand, the US, and Canada was mind-boggling.
- The beaches in Australia and the Philippines were just perfection.
- The sheer scale of India is an incredible assault on the senses.
- The cities in Japan were beyond what we could have imagined.
- The ocean and diving in Mexico were sensational (the tacos were epic too).

This is a year we will never forget, and our appetite for adventure is stronger than ever! Now it's time to get back to reality, find jobs, and settle back into day-to-day life. We are both excited to spend time catching up with friends and family. While it's daunting, we are keen to get our careers back on track. I'm excited to have a fully stocked kitchen at my disposal again too.

If you want to see our whole route all in one place, you can do so [here on Polarsteps](#).

A few people have asked about our packing list; you can see it [here](#).

Over the last year, I've also been videoing 1 or 2 seconds every day, which I've pulled together into a montage. So here is the final result – it's a year in 8 minutes so buckle in!