

The Skinny

(the Somewhat delayed, Kind of Intermittent Newsletter for the New Year)

from the desk of **Peter Kauffmann**

December 27, 2012

maybe January 1, 2013?

January 17, 2013????

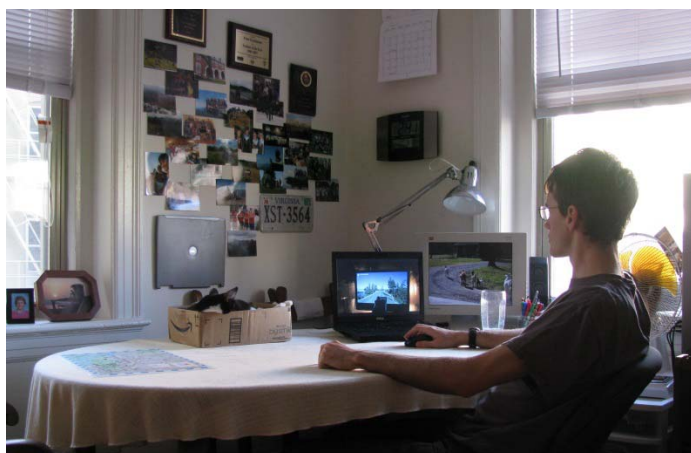
that's the one!! → January 25, 2013

Hey everybody! Happy Holidays! Happy New Year! Happy... National Squirrel Appreciation Day!?

Yeah, this letter is running more than a bit late, as is the established tradition for all Kauffmann family holiday newsletters. But hey, that just means there are more interesting things for me to talk about!

Year Two in the Nation's Capital

This year has been a good year, mostly because I've actually been able to settle into something of a routine. For the first time since 2004, I've been able to go a whole year without having to move to a new dorm room or apartment, and I've got to say: it's really nice.



That means that I'm in my second year of living and working in the District of Columbia, and I honestly find it to be a great place to be. The people are great, and there's always something to do. There's never a dull moment, no matter if I'm walking through Dupont Circle to work and I stumble across a crowd of people in top hats trying to divine the weather from a stuffed groundhog named "Potomac Phil" or if I'm simply out for a bike ride and come across a throng of political demonstrators in front of the White House.



18 Months into the Job and Still Not Sick of it Yet

And for me a big part of enjoying life in the 51st state (not that we're bitter) is having a job that I actually enjoy. I really feel like I'm making a genuine contribution to the region, even if I do typically describe that contribution as "making sure real estate developers don't screw up traffic around here too much."

But there's a lot more to what I do than that, and in the past year I've had the opportunity to work on lot of really neat projects that tie into my interests, especially in promoting alternate travel modes. I've helped plan a shuttle bus system for a local university, proposed design standards for pedestrian-friendly streets down by the Fish Market, and made a whole lot of flashy maps. They even let me design a bike lane!

Sure, some projects have been challenging and some have been drawn out and frustrating, but most of the things I've done have been incredibly fulfilling. After all the excitement of the past year, I can't wait to see what the next one brings.

Being a Tourist in My Own Backyard

Another great part of living in the District is all of the fantastic sightseeing opportunities. Sure, DC has museums out the wazoo (and boy, is that painful), but there's plenty of other, more eccentric stuff to see if you know where to look.

Transit Tourism

The first thing to see also happens to be my newest hobby: visiting Metro stations. When working for a transportation firm, it really helps to know your way around the region, and there's no better way to get the feel of DC's neighborhoods than popping out of the local Metro station and hitting the streets.

All in all, this year I visited 28 Metro stations, which brings my total up to 67. Only 19 more to go!



Visiting the Mountaintop

I've always had a bit of a thing for visiting state high points, so it's no surprise that I finally made my way up to Fort Reno, the highest point in DC. However, as you might expect the high point isn't really that high given that it's only three miles from sea level. In fact, I think we've got the only state high point with a street address (38th and Chesapeake) and we definitely have the only one that's accessible by subway.



DC-Henge

Ignoring for a moment the fact that the window at my desk faces east down Rhode Island Avenue, I don't get to see very many sunsets anymore due to the fact that most buildings in my apartment are 5+ stories tall. But just as the sun comes into alignment with the Heelstone twice a year at Stonehenge, Massachusetts Avenue gives a brilliant sunset for one fantastic evening every May and July. When the weather cooperates, it's a sight to behold.



Look, Up in the Sky!

We're more than a little bit jaded about seeing big celebrities here in DC. I mean, Joe Biden's motorcade drives by my window twice a day whenever Congress is in session. But every once in a while we get a visitor who's so noteworthy that the city all but shuts down to sneak a peek.

In April, we had just that kind of day as the city took a moment's pause to honor a very special lady: the Space Shuttle Discovery. After a slow, deliberate journey up from Florida, she humored the assembled masses by making a couple of lazy

circuits above downtown. I watched with a couple hundred other people in reverent silence from really the only appropriate vantage point: the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, which we decided to refer to as the "Kennedy (Space) Center" just for the day. The weather helped give a perfect sendoff, and while she'll never fly again we can now go visit her anytime we want at the Air and Space Museum.



Big Summer Trip: Wyoming? Why Not?

Summer may be the busiest season for the people who actually construct the projects I work on, but for us in the office it's actually the slowest time of year. Our work relies on traffic counts, and we're not allowed to collect data when school is out of session because traffic volumes are about 10% lower than normal. By August, things have really started to drag as we run out of data to process and reports to write, so it's the perfect time to take a vacation and recharge for the hectic months that follow.

But where to go? Well, when given the choice between mountains and anything else, I'll inevitably choose mountains. I guess I just have a thing for topography and geology. Fortunately, my Aunt Joyce was invited back to work at Yellowstone National Park again this summer, and I was thrilled to get an invitation to come out and stay with her and Kathy.

I wasn't the only one traveling, though: my mom, Brad, and his oldest son Tom also came along for the ride. We met up at the airport in Jackson Hole – with the majestic Grand Tetons even visible from the tarmac! – before packing up the car and immediately heading north into a land of spectacular scenery.



For four days, we toured Yellowstone, seeing all manner of thermal features...



...all the while being sure to stay on the boardwalks and obey the very dire "THIN CRUST OVER SCALDING WATER" signs.



We were also able to squeeze in some geographic tourism...



...and have races Joyce and Kathy's delightful electric scooters?



And there was plenty of wildlife there! I even saw some buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo without even leaving the car. Here are just a few of the thousands we saw.



But we also got to spend a fair amount of time in the backcountry in Yellowstone, a trend which only intensified in the second half of the trip when we spent three days touring the Grand Tetons. As somebody who's only ever lived on the east coast, I'm always amazed at how abruptly the Rockies appear. Where I'm from, our mountains have foothills, but here they sprout up fully grown straight out of the plains!

In the Tetons, I made sure we took full advantage of the amazing topography by filling our itinerary with lengthy hikes. I'm not sure that the rest of the traveling party appreciated the strain, but I certainly savored the absolutely fantastic views.



And that's really how the trip was: absolutely fantastic. I'm already eyeing a trip to Yosemite this coming summer to give me another hit of that sweet, sweet, topography.



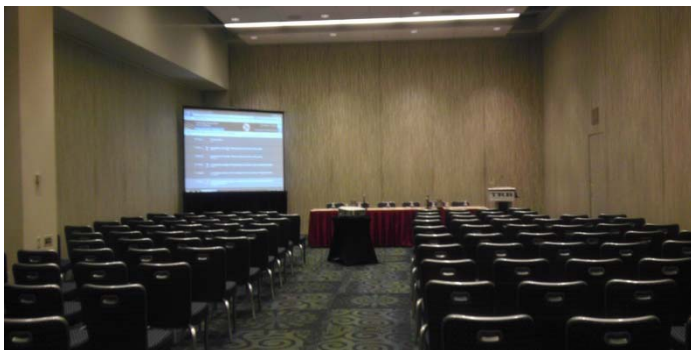
The Lightning Round

But that one big trip wasn't the only noteworthy thing to come out of this year. For instance:

I went on several outdoorsy trips, including this hike to Sky Meadows State Park with my mom back in July.



I finally managed to write a concise, informative paper about my grad school research, and it was accepted for presentation at the Transportation Research Board 2013 Annual Meeting! (Think Woodstock for transportation engineers – 11,000 people converge for 5 days at the hotel across the street from where I live). My presentation took place in this room, but I should mention that this photo is missing the ~ 15 people who showed up. But those 15 people and I had a great conversation, and hey: it was an 8am session. I can't blame people for sleeping in.



Despite the fact that we both have busy schedules, Julia and I still get a chance to meet up from time to time, for instance at a big Labor Day getaway weekend with friends in Tennessee.



Between fun gatherings like that, a seemingly endless calendar of friends' weddings, and the occasional visit to DC or Purdue, we still get to see a fair amount of each other, and that's definitely a good thing.



The Wrap-Up

Well, that about does it for inaugural edition of The Skinny. With any luck, you can look forward to seeing another issue sometime in early 2014. Happy belated holidays, thanks for listening, and I hope to see more of you in the coming year! Be sure to let me know if you're ever passing through the DC area!

Oh, and Sprocket says "Hi" too.

