

The Skinny

SELF-INDULGENT TRAVELOGUE EDITION

(contains all 11 essential herbs and spices!)

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

March 11, 2018

from the desk of **Peter Kauffmann**

Hello again! Long time no see!

Yes, as you probably noticed I didn't get a newsletter out last year. Sorry about that. There have been a lot of Big Life Changes going on, and with all the other things going on I never quite got the time to sit down and write this thing out. Good thing I worked the word "intermittent" into the name, I guess. I'm not finishing the writeup until March either, so the "delayed" part is integral as usual as well. However, this edition covers both 2016 AND 2017, so there's *plenty* to talk about.

Anyway, let's get on with putting some news in this newsletter! It's been a pretty action-packed 24 months since we last talked, so please forgive the length of this update. You're currently reading the self-indulgent full-length version, featuring writeups of ALL FIVE flagship trips (with TWICE the photos!) Thanks for signing up for the only-slightly-abridged version!



I promise you won't have to wait for the stars to align for the next one!

Big News: I Moved to Tennessee

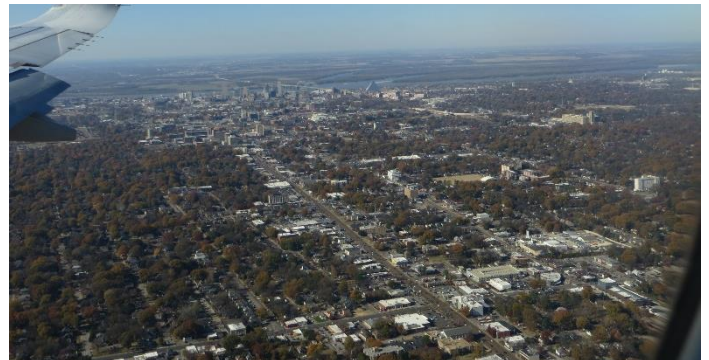
Far and away the biggest development of 2016 was that I moved to Memphis, Tennessee, to finally live in the same town as Julia after far too many years of a long-distance relationship.

In addition to having the corporate headquarters of FedEx, International Paper, and AutoZone, Memphis is also a hotbed of medical devices, so Julia's experience in orthopedics and biomechanics fits well into that. She's been working as a product development engineer here for a few years, designing ankle replacement systems.



Julia and I are pictured here in our natural habitat: on a camping trip

We're currently sharing an apartment in Midtown Memphis. Picture the funky, old neighborhood in your town with a bunch of restaurants and an arts scene and that's pretty much where we live, populated by a surprisingly large number of old hippies living in some gorgeous 1920s-era houses.



Memphis: The Bluff City, and home to an enormous pyramid

Long story short is that my "new" address is:

32 S Tucker Street, Apt 6
Memphis, TN 38104

(And note that I've been here for over a year now, so if you sent me a card at my DC address this holiday season, it probably didn't get forwarded to Tennessee. Whoops.)

If you ever find yourself in Memphis, or happen to be crossing the Mississippi on I-40, please look us up!

Walking in Memphis

Being here for a while now has given us an opportunity to hit up most of the major attractions, like Beale Street, the world's largest Bass Pro Shops (in the Pyramid, a former basketball arena), and the new Harahan Bridge ped/bike crossing of the Mississippi. We're still saving Graceland and the National Civil Rights Museum for when somebody comes to visit, though.



Eagle-eyed readers will notice this photo is of Bourbon Street. Beale Street is the same but smaller, and I don't have a good Beale photo.

As you've probably heard, Memphis is well known for music, particularly soul music. We have a number of music-themed museums to see, including ones devoted to Sun Studios, Gibson Guitars, and the Stax Record Company. All are worth a stop.

Memphis is also particularly well known for food, especially barbecue. There's a very strong culture of preparing your own barbecue, particularly at the World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest during the Memphis in May festival. Cousin Scott happened to be passing through town during the 2017 edition and got a sense of just how huge it is.

As a result, there is no particular "Memphis style" barbecue, and you can find just about any style you want here. I mentioned during the Jan 2015 newsletter that Julia took me on a barbecue tour during our first visit, and it was AMAZING. Well, now that I live here I actually don't get around to as many restaurants as I'd like, so please do come visit so that I have an excuse to eat unhealthily more often.

In terms of more typical day-to-day activities, there's plenty of recreation to do in town. We're fortunate enough to live 3 blocks south of Overton Park, a huge forested oasis. It's home to both the Memphis Zoo and a fantastic free 3-season outdoor concert series. We also live in one of the city's arts districts, so Julia's been nice enough to let me tag along with her friends to the theater.



The whole neighborhood comes out in force for Levitt Shell concerts

The main downside to Memphis for somebody who loves hiking in the mountains is that it's really quite flat. However, there are more than a few state parks and forests nearby, and that's helped me get my fix while we plan a bigger backpacking trip to the Ozarks, 4-5 hours away.

Old Job, New Job

Moving to Memphis also meant changing jobs. I was sad to say goodbye to the crew at Gorove/Slade after five great years, but I was fortunate to find a similar posting with Barge Design Solutions, a civil engineering firm headquartered in Nashville.

Gorove/Slade: The End of an Era

I had a great 2016 with G/S. The projects remained compelling, and I got to take on still more management responsibilities, including attending fortnightly coordination meetings at DDOT for a study of on-street parking usage that eventually counted and analyzed 105,000 cars.

I could have seen myself staying there indefinitely had I not had a compelling personal reason for making the move. Fortunately, everybody there was understanding, and luckily my farewell period got to overlap with some fun end-of-

summer socials. I'm going to miss all of my friends there (and in DC more generally), but I am glad to be able to have opportunities to come back to visit.



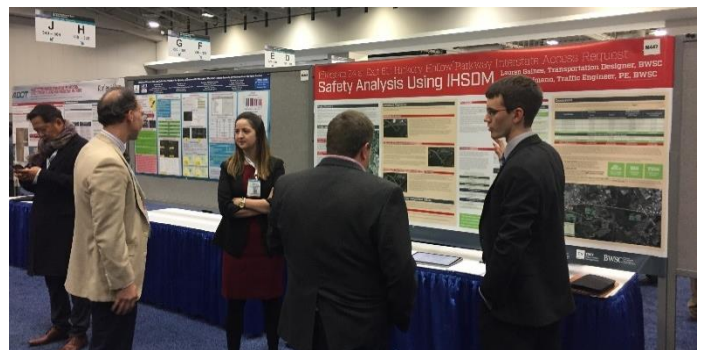
My last week coincided with summer teambuilding: go karts!

Barge Design Solutions: Same same, but different

Barge is a larger, full-service civil engineering firm, and I'm part of the 4-person Traffic group. We're split across 3 of the firm's 13 offices, so it's a diverse group. At the same time, nearly everybody else in the Memphis office is in a different business unit, meaning the days when I'm slammed everybody else leaves at 5pm and when they're really busy I feel weird leaving at... well, actually 6:15's about the earliest I usually leave anyway.

Only a small portion of the work that my group does is in Memphis, so that's given me the chance to travel to other cities in the region every couple of weeks, mainly to Nashville but I've also been to Chattanooga twice along with a trip each to Columbus OH and Columbus GA for project meetings.

The company also sent me to DC for TRB, the big annual transportation research conference, in January 2017. A big part of the reason I could go was the fact that I'm able to couch-surf with my DC contacts, so thanks to everybody who hosted me! While there, a coworker and I presented a poster about predicting future crashes along a corridor that the firm was designing. It was a great opportunity to share how we used data to advocate for safer design choices.



Lauren's and my poster from TRB 2017: <https://goo.gl/LCWLC4>

Back in the Memphis office, the dynamic is distinctly different from DC, but it's enjoyable. Getting to know more people born and bred in the south has absolutely helped to dispel whatever stereotypes I had before. I am pretty sure I'm the only person in my office who wishes they had a smaller car, though...

The company is also supportive of my extra-curricular work activities. In February 2017 I took (and passed!) the Professional Traffic Operations Engineer exam, giving me a second level of certification on top of my PE license and hopefully proving to clients that maybe I actually do know what I'm talking about. I also attended a leadership development course through the New Memphis Institute, a booster group for fostering and keeping young talent in the area.



All in all, the PTOE was just another frame for the wall

Travel Updates

This is normally the part where I devote 2+ columns to the year's flagship trip as a "centerfold" of sorts, but having two years between updates changes that a bit since there have been not one, not two, but FIVE weeklong trips since that time.

And since the write up for those trips has nearly doubled the usual length of the newsletter, my editor (thanks, Mom!) has wisely advised me to leave that out of the mainstream edition. But this isn't the mainstream edition, so please enjoy these excessively long, self-indulgent travelogues!

Hawaii: Kalalau Trail & the Big Island

In February 2016 Julia and I traveled to the 50th State with our college friends Brad and Elaine. In addition to being a great place to escape to during winter, Brad wanted to bring the rest of us along when he revisited the Kalalau Trail on Kauai, a gorgeous backpacking trip that is consistently rated one of the most dangerous hikes in North America.

We trekked 11 miles each way through blazing sun and pouring rain, hanging off the side of cliff faces most of the way – think the knives-edge cliffs from Jurassic Park – until we reached the Kalalau Valley, a secluded paradise complete with an astounding beach and off-the-grid hippies. It really was a spectacular trip and I'd love to see it all again, although in my "old age" I don't know that I can stomach the risk of the appallingly frightening trail.



Yes, this is the trail: 250' drop.



Cresting a ridge and seeing Kalalau Valley for the first time... no words

After three days on the trail, we returned to civilization and were ready for a bit of R&R, so we jetted over to the Big Island for some time enjoying the resort life. We checked off the standard tourist boxes: snorkeling with sea turtles, attending a luau complete with imu-baked pork, and driving 9,000' up a volcano to see the observatory.



Taking a break from early-morning whale watching

We rounded out the trip by doing an overnight loop around the island, visiting Hilo, South Point, and several waterfalls, before ending the trip in Kona, home to a fascinating airport with almost no indoor spaces to speak of aside from the washrooms. A highlight of the Big Island tour was Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, home to a number of disturbingly recent lava formations and plenty of evidence of ongoing volcanic activity. To bring this point home, I made the group get up at 4am that morning so we could see the glow from the lava in the pre-dawn light. Hawaii is terrifyingly awesome.



PS: The Floor is Lava!

Christmas in California: Death Valley & Joshua Tree NP

In December 2016, I headed to California to meet up with my mom and Brad and hopefully re-start a tradition we have of visiting big national parks on the regular. After helping celebrate their last Christmas in Tracy, CA, we loaded up and headed south to Death Valley.



The sign reads "Elevation: Sea Level". That's a new one for me.

For three days, we explored the arid valley and its unusual features, including steam craters, borax mines, and sand dunes.



A whole week of erosion gone crazy. Brad for scale.

We were lucky to have a 4WD vehicle and managed to make a few sojourns up the peaks, through feet of snow at times, to get a birds-eye view of the valley and see more historical sites.



Obligatory photos at the otherworldly and hard-to-reach Beehive Kilns

The gradual bow of the valley and the fact that it is surrounded by 10,000'+ peaks makes its scale hard to comprehend – oh, sure, those buildings over there are 10 miles away on the other valley wall! All the while, it's crazy to realize that most of the time you're either below sea level or you're 7,000' up the side of a mountain... and still somehow only 15 miles from the lowest spot in the North America.

In the back half of the week, we headed further south to Twentynine Palms and Joshua Tree NP. I'd never seen a Joshua Tree before, and they are a curious sight - almost like you plant a tree that can't make up its mind on which way to go.



Weird rocks and trees were already my jam before this trip

But the trees are only part of it – Joshua Tree is also known for its aptly named "Wonderland of Rocks". The park straddles the boundary between the lower Mojave Desert and the high plateau of the Sonoran Desert, and that variety of weathering patterns created a cornucopia of geological formations that attract climbers by the thousands. It also makes the place stunning to look at, from the rocks to the mountains to the cacti to the dilapidated yet scenic homestead ruins.



And don't forget the coyotes!

Thailand: Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Ao Nang, and Phuket

Another travel opportunity fell into our laps in April 2017 when college friends Mallory and Kevin announced that they were looking for companions to travel in southeast Asia to take advantage of their last months of a work posting in Sydney. After some discussion, Thailand's combination of spectacular natural beauty and unique cultural attractions (and food!) won out.

We split the trip into four parts, beginning in Bangkok, the capital



Tiger Temple in Krabi: 1,237 stairs, covered in monkeys (obviously)

city. We visited countless temples, took a boat tour of the canals (remember the chase scene in *Man with the Golden Gun*?), and sampled a wide range of street food, before loading up on an overnight train to Chiang Mai in the mountainous north.

Our time in the north saw many spectacular day trips, in addition to our time enjoying more food and culture in the city itself. We spent a day hiking around the tallest mountain in the country and getting an up-close look at the flora and fauna with a local guide, and then the next day got to spend a few hours walking with, feeding, and even bathing (!) some rescued elephants.



Photogenic temples at Doi Inthanon, the tallest peak in Thailand



For every elephant that we cleaned, we got that much dirtier

From Chiang Mai we took a plane south to Krabi province, home to some ridiculous sheer-cliffed limestone. Our time in the south was all about beaches: on the first day, we walked to the beautiful Ao Nang beach, before catching a boat to the spectacular Railay Beach.



Mallory is unimpressed by the tranquil water and craggy cliffs

But that wasn't the end of it: we continued walking overland, and each beach we encountered was more spectacular than the last. Eventually, we arrived at the gob-smackingly gorgeous

Ao Phra Nang Beach, gawking at the limestone karst formations the whole time. It's probably the most spectacular beach I've ever seen (sorry Kalalau), and even had beachside lunch boats.

From there we made a mad dash on the back of a 3-wheeled motorcycle through standstill traffic during a street festival to catch a ferry (that story alone takes 15 minutes to tell, let me know when you've got time) west across the bay to Phuket (no, it's pronounced "poo-kit"). Our time on Phuket was almost like a reprise of the best elements of the trip, including relaxing beach time in Nai Yang, more temples, and more nature, with a day excursion to do some sea kayaking around Khao Phing Kan (aka "James Bond Island" – more *Golden Gun* references).

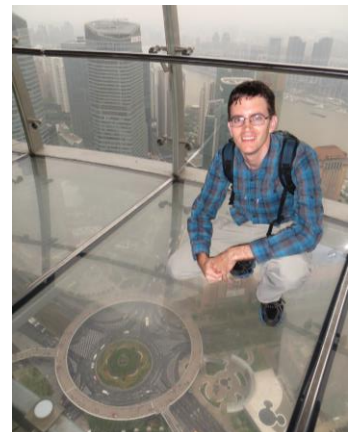


"Boss! De Plane, De Plane!" "That's Fantasy Island, you idiot!"



Our beachside hotel was a short walk to the local national park

All in all, a relaxing end to the trip. But no! That's not all – Julia and I had a 7-hour layover in Shanghai on the way home, and China is nice enough to have a tourist visa just for people with long airport layovers. We took the world's fastest train – a maglev!!! – into rainy downtown and spent a few hours wandering along the historic Bund and through the futuristic Pudong district. It was really quite fascinating to see the wild juxtaposition between old and new facing each other across the river, if only for a bit before heading back to the states.



I'm all about the roundabouts

Canada: Banff National Park, with a bit of Jasper & Yoho too

Moving forward to August 2017, I was fortunate to be invited along on a family trip with Julia, her mom, and siblings to Alberta for a week in Banff, Canada's flagship national park.

After flying in to Calgary, we spent some time in the Town of Banff proper, seeing the picturesque Fairmont resort and waterfalls, before heading north through the Bow Valley (named for its characteristic glacier-carved shape) to the Lake Louise Inn, our base camp for the trip. Even over our five days we only got a taste of what the area has to offer.

Julia and I started the trip off strong by WALKING ON A GLACIER, and not a moment too soon if we're being honest. The Athabasca Glacier (up the appropriately named Icefields Parkway in Jasper NP, the next park to the north) is enormous and humbling, but still a far cry from its former glory after having receded well over a half mile... sorry, one kilometer... in the last 50 years.



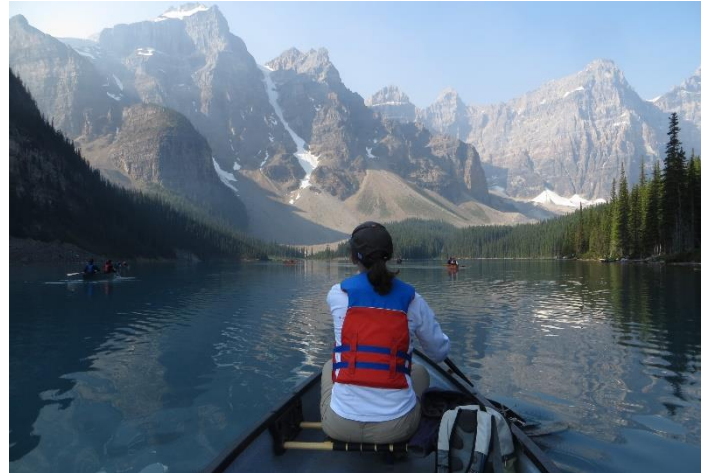
Just chillin' on a glacier. (Thanks Shannon for the photo!)

The next days were spent visiting a progression of increasingly awe-inspiring lakes, beginning with the iconic Lake Louise and a 12-mile hike up to the teahouse at the Plain of Six Glaciers and the vista at Big Beehive. What can be said about the overlook onto Lake Louise on a sunny day, except for HOW IS THAT WATER SO GREEN?



Thanks to Julia for letting me drag her up to the Big Beehive overlook

We also visited Moraine Lake and the Valley of the 10 Peaks, which at the time was the most spectacular sight I'd seen all year (more on that later). Canoeing on Moraine Lake was a definite highlight of the trip.



The reflection was almost prettier than the real thing

Other excursions took us to the base of the thunderous Takkakaw Falls (1,200' tall!) or saw us hiking around Bow Lake to reach Bow Glacier Falls, which as you might expect were incredibly scenic and tremendously cold. We also made time to relax in the hot springs that made Banff famous, and even got to see the underside of some of the gorgeous mountains on a caving trip. Thanks all for letting me come along!



Karen and Julia at the entrance. Photos in the cave itself went... poorly.

Thanksgiving in Arizona feat. the Grand Canyon

Finally, in November of 2017 I went to spend time with my mom over Thanksgiving. But as if we needed more evidence that this newsletter has been a long time coming, she'd moved to Prescott, Arizona since the last trip. I got to spend a week with her and Brad in northern Arizona, exploring hiking trails and seeing the sights around town, not the least being the view from their little house on a hill.



I promise I didn't mess with the saturation settings of my camera

In the latter half of the week, we were joined by Julia and Karl & Katrina and the trip really kicked into gear. We decided to observe Thanksgiving Day on Friday and instead used Thursday to take a long day trip to THE GRAND CANYON (!), about three hours away from their house.



Another group photo for my collection of NPS entry signs!

As with pretty much every other trip in this newsletter, Grand Canyon NP was awesome. It was Julia's first visit, and only my second after doing a rim-to-rim hike in a family trip the summer before 1st Grade.

The day itself was wall-to-wall action, starting with a hike down into the canyon itself on the South Kaibab Trail by way of the appropriately-named Ooh-Ahh Point. The 6-mile round trip only got us a quarter of the way across the canyon, but even that was enough to hammer home a sense of scale that's not apparent from the rim.

Being in the middle of it is truly a humbling experience, especially when we finally got to the Skeleton Point overlook and realized we'd gone down 2,000' and were still over a half mile higher than the river.



Julia was THIS excited

We eventually returned to Grand Canyon Village and headed west, enjoying the unending stream of overlooks until it started getting a bit too dark to tell where the edge of the canyon was.



The 3,000' drop at the "Abyss" was one of the few places with railings

The remainder of the trip certainly didn't disappoint, including day trips hiking in the technicolor red rocks of Sedona, tours of ancient Native American pueblos and petroglyphs, and a visit to the Desert Botanic Garden in Phoenix.

The Lightning Round

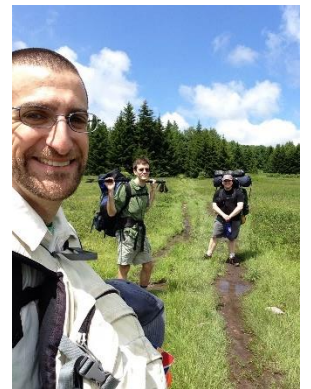
There were a lot of other happenings from the year and not enough column inches to do them justice, so here's a rundown:

- Attended a taping of two celebrity Jeopardy! episodes at Constitution Hall in DC with friends old and new(er)
- Visited the White House TWICE, once for the spring Garden Tour and once to see the [Canadian PM's arrival ceremony](#) (thanks Alex and Daniel for tickets!)



Just dropping by to visit my neighbor Barry's house.

- Only one wedding this year, in Southport, NC
- Camped overnight in Shenandoah NP with Julia and saw TWO black bears within 100', one from the car and one skirting the edge of our campsite (!)
- Returned to the [Dolly Sods in WV](#) for a long weekend camping over Father's Day with newly-minted fathers Haninah and Lee
- Wandered around the US Capitol after-hours using my ID from my role as a traffic sub-sub-subconsultant, including seeing the June 2016 Democrat "sit-in"
- Spent Thanksgiving 2016 and [Christmas 2017 in Richmond](#) with the Kauffmann clan



DAD JOKES GALORE



No witty caption; just nice to spend time with the gang.

- Visiting New Orleans with the Shapiros over Memorial Day 2017, including liberal use of the City's streetcar system and a fascinating history-based cocktail tour
- The annual fixtures of an extended **Fourth of July vacation** with Julia's mom's family in NC and Labor Day with college friends in Johnson City, TN



Spending time on the water is popular at both events.

- Several return trips to DC, including visiting the relocated Foamhenge and seeing some wild art exhibits, most notably the Kusama exhibit at the Hirshhorn and Wonder at the Renwick
- More Star Wars, including **making costumes for the premiere of Rogue One** (probably our favorite of the series?) and also Last Jedi with Julia. Saw each 4+ times... in theaters.
- Drove 7 hours round trip to Hopkinsville, KY to see the Total Eclipse of the ~~Heart~~ Sun. Totality was easily Top 3 on my Most Amazing Things I Have Ever Seen list, even with all those vacations this year. Mark your calendars for the next one on April 8, 2024; whatever it takes to get in the totality band is WORTH IT.
- I **performed in a podcast** about strange goings-on in a (fictional) Appalachian town written by my friend DJ! The full season is out now wherever fine podcasts are ~~sold~~ free and at LonesomePinePodcast.com



There is also a "stern face" photo that's more plot-appropriate.



I always knew I had a face for radio.

- I FOLLOWED THE WEINERMOBILE HOME FROM WORK
- Julia organized some awesome events for my 30th birthday; including an escape room and high-test go-karts around my actual birthday and a subsequent COMPLETE SURPRISE second weekend with college friends during an otherwise unrelated trip to Chicago
- Plus, gradually working my way into more social events in Memphis courtesy of Julia's very accepting friend group



I think this means I'm now a Memphis Grizzlies' fan?

In Memoriam: Sprocket C. Kauffmann, 2000-2016

For those of you that are wondering, Sprocket did not make the move, having passed away in August at age 15. He was a Good Kitty and a good friend during our time in DC. Fortunately for me, there is a cat shelter a few blocks away called the House of Mews (natch) where I can go to get my kitty fix without running afoul of our apartment complex's animal restrictions.



Conclusion

Thanks for sticking with me! I'm already way over my page limit and several months behind schedule on this edition, so I'll keep this brief and stick to what I've said in years past: be sure to have a great 2018 and try not to get in too much trouble!



PS: We have 7 (!!!) gerbils now. Pictured here are the 4 boys, in a pile. To answer your question: No, we wouldn't have had that many if PetSmart had actually given Julia two boys like she'd asked for.