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"But we don't want to write a Christmas *book*", said Evelyn. Afraid that I would forget all the fascinating things that happened this year, I started jotting down stories in January. By the beginning of February I had already filled a page.

Don't feel you have to read it all, though. If you like, you can skip straight to the end to get your season's greetings.

January

LAKE BOGORIA, KENYA — Anywhere else in the world, and there would be a luxury hotel here, or a geothermal power plant, or maybe both. Here, there's just one hut selling soft drinks to the handful of visitors. Geysers spout into the air, forming rainbows as the hot water splashes down into the lake. A gazelle darts across the road, and pair of ostriches peer at the flamingos that line the lakeshore and are scattered across the surface of the water like rose petals. From a distance, the birds – three million of them live here – appear to form a pink rim around the blue lake. Walk over the stony beach towards them, and they take off, flapping their wings and running across the water to gain speed. There's a gap in the crowd of birds around the geysers: they don't seem to like to take a sauna. A couple of flamingo corpses have washed up on the shore: maybe they came too close, and got boiled?

KAMPALA, UGANDA — "What's that?" asked the smartly dressed young woman, leaning over and squeezing the bulge in my trousers. "My wallet", I replied, edging away. I was settling down to a late dinner in the hotel restaurant, trying to ignore the loud music being belted out by the live band. This young lady had invited herself to sit down, placed her mobile phone on my table, and had ordered herself a beer on my account. I thought of how I could get rid of her unwanted attention, but my burger had arrived, so I couldn't move tables. I pretended to be fascinated by the soccer game on television, a relegation battle between Watford and Bradford City.

Uganda has one of the highest incidences of AIDS in the world. My Ugandan colleague told me that several of her brothers and sisters had fallen victim: "People in my village were dying all over the place. They thought it was witchcraft", she said. The social fabric is torn asunder. There's a new phenomenon: child-headed households, where both parents have died and a 15-year-old is responsible for feeding and caring for his or her younger brothers and sisters. Coffin-makers line the streets. "Coffins are a cash crop", said my colleague.

Amidst the death, there is hope, though. Unlike some governments, which ignore the threat of AIDS, Uganda's is educating people, encouraging open discussion of sex and condom use, breaking down the taboos. "Protector" condoms ("so strong, so smooth") vie with soft drinks and cigarettes for billboard space. The airwaves are full of radio spots featuring children appealing to adults to be careful. Infection rates have begun to fall.

I finished my meal, paid my bill, excused myself and went up to my room, leaving the prostitute to chat with her friends. I felt sorry for her: she will probably get AIDS sometime, if she isn't infected already.

Oh yes: Watford lost 3–2. Looks like they're on their way out of the league.

NAMAWOJOLO, UGANDA — "They took away the sleeping policemen when the American president came this way last year", said the driver. They had put them back, though: we jolted over ten speed bumps in all.

We pulled over to the side of the road, and our car was immediately surrounded by at least 30 people selling refreshments. The view to the front and side was blocked by half-litre bottles of ice-cold "Rwenzori" drinking water, baskets of peeled, roast bananas, and quarter-chickens on wooden skewers. "Take mine, take mine", chorused a crowd of hopeful faces in the Luganda language. Half-a-dozen bottles of water and a fan of roast chicken were thrust through the open windows. The driver pressed a button to close the windows, trapping a couple of bottles and their attached hands inside.

We bought the water, plus three bags of bananas, and four chicken breasts. Another car slowed to a halt in front of us, and the wall of chicken and bottles thinned suddenly as the vendors sprinted towards it. We negotiated for plastic bags for our chicken, and drove off, munching bananas.

ABIDJAN, CÔTE D'IVOIRE — No notice boards, no announcements in this airport, to tell passengers how many hours the plane was delayed. We eventually boarded the flight to Nouakchott and Dakar three hours late, and were immediately told we would not be landing in Nouakchott as planned because of *harmattan*-induced dust storms. So we flew straight to Dakar, arriving only an hour late.



Yes, the same outfits as last year...

I was happy to arrive at all. Two days later a Kenya Airways flight crashed after take-off from Abidjan. Probably the same plane as I had flown in from Nairobi to Abidjan a couple of days before...

GORÉE ISLAND, SÉNÉGAL — “We’ve found a *bin-bin*!” my friend announced, leading me towards the gift shop by the museum exit. I followed, missing several hundred years of the history of slavery on the way. In the shop, his wife was holding a handful of *bin-bins*: hundreds of tiny beads strung on a long, thin circle of elastic. Senegalese women wear them as a love-charm around their waists, next to their skin. One of the young women in the shop lifted up her T-shirt a crack to show us the five or six colourful *bin-bins* encircling her waist. Very sexy.

My friend bought his wife a brown *bin-bin*, and gave me a blue one for Evelyn. He said that to make sure it was effective, I really ought to have it blessed by a *marabout*: a Senegalese religious elder. I told him that I’d let him know if Evelyn’s worked if he kept me informed about the one he gave his wife.

LAC ROSE, SÉNÉGAL — The young men were only too happy to stop shovelling salt and come over to pull our car out of the soft sand. They knew I’d pass around a few francs in gratitude. They also knew we’d come over to the lakeside to see the salt-mining operation. A young man in sunglasses started on his standard explanation for tourists. The lake was bright pink because of the algae living in it. Out in the lake, waste-deep in the pink water, men laboured to dig salt from the lake floor and lift it into boats. On the shore were metre-high piles of salt: the newest, still-damp, piles were grey; piles a few days old were white; the oldest piles had a yellow coating from the dust storms that had blanketed Sénégal the previous week. The salt would be strewn on wintry roads in Europe. The young man reached the end of his spiel and started again, like an auto-repeating audiocassette. We thanked him and turned round to find that his friends had laid out an exhibition of local artwork for us to buy. Enterprising people, the Senegalese.

February

DÜRSCHIED, GERMANY — Evelyn suddenly brightened. Not realizing there was a speed limit here, she had been photographed by a speed camera. Why her sudden change in mood? She realized that the car was registered in my name, so I would have to pay the fine.

The bill duly arrived in the mail, together with the photo as evidence. It shows Evelyn at the wheel, clearly concentrating on the road ahead. Funny: I could have sworn she was happily chatting to our friend Barbara beside her as she sped past the camera.

March

BOGOR, INDONESIA — It’s always nice to get a compliment, especially early in the morning when you don’t look your best. This morning I wiped a glass off my bedside table, so I went bleary-eyed downstairs in my sarong to find a broom. “You look great without a shirt on”, someone said. (I should explain that most Indonesian men are bald-chested, yet Indonesian women love to run their fingers over hairy pectorals. At least that’s what I’ve heard.)

Unfortunately no female, Indonesian or otherwise, has ever told me I look great without a shirt on. The complimenter was the project’s male driver.

BOGOR — I knew the hole was there, but I fell in it anyway. Indonesian pavements (that’s “sidewalks” to our American allies) are more like obstacle courses than pedestrian thoroughfares. Sometimes you are forced to walk on the road (“pavement” to our transatlantic partners), sometimes you have to balance on the kerb (“curb” if you’re from across the Pond), sometimes you have to leap over the deep storm drains that run along between the pavement (“sidewalk”) and road (“pavement”). It’s hardest at night, when you are blinded by the headlights (“headlamps”) of oncoming cars (“autos” to our cousins), and can’t see anything in the inky blackness in front of you.

Fortunately, and unusually, the drain was damp rather than wet, and even more fortunately, no one heard me swear as I fell in. I pulled myself out (these drains are chest-deep), brushed the worst of the mud off my trousers (that’s “pants” if you’re from the Western Hemisphere), and limped home. I crept in through the door unseen, and proceeded to wash my trousers (“pants”) and pants (“underpants”).

It was only later that I noticed that my mobile phone (that’s “Handy” if you’re a German) had also sustained damage. It must have taken the full force of the impact when I hit the concrete. The lower half of the display was dead, and there was a large, black, Sardinia-shaped splodge on the right side. The phone itself worked fine: I just couldn’t tell what number I was calling.

I eventually got it fixed – sort of. My phone now has a new display: it chops off the tops of the numbers, but I can just about work it out. And I now carry a torch (er, “flashlight”) whenever I’m out at night. Just in case.

April

MERU NATIONAL PARK, TANZANIA — One of the richest concentrations of wildlife in the world. Evelyn took a day off from evaluating an ethnoveterinary project over Easter to visit the park. So many elephants, and so close to the car – she was relieved when they drove around a corner and there were no pachyderms.

May

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY — How do you castrate a camel? With two bricks and a pair of running shoes, goes the joke. To find out more, join the email group on traditional veterinary medicine that Evelyn helps manage. We've *nearly* finished our book on camel medicine. Order a copy from a bookseller near you.

June

NAIROBI, KENYA — The Ugandan seemed genuine enough. He had shown up at the communications workshop after the third or fourth day, said he was a consultant with the United Nations, and asked if he could attend. He made some valuable contributions, even presented a paper. But when he didn't turn up on the last day, the other participants started comparing notes—and five found that he had borrowed money from them: between \$15 and \$45 each. He had left the hotel without paying his bill. The police searched a house where he had been, but found nothing. We shrugged and prepared to leave Nairobi for home.

I was the last to check out of the hotel after the workshop. I looked round, and saw the wayward Ugandan standing next to me. A pastor—it was his house which had been searched the day before—had brought him to the hotel to sort things out. We arranged for the hotel security to take him to the police station to make a statement, and for him to repay the money the following week.

Lesson? Don't trust consultants an inch, especially if they claim to be communication specialists.

July

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY — The newspaper said it was the worst storm in 45 years. We thought we were safe, as we live on the side of a hill. But the downpour filled up the rainwater-collection basin just up the road, and it overflowed, sending a cascade into the basement flat next door. The poor student living there came home to find his flat an aquarium: a meter and a half of muddy water inside, doors torn out of their frames, his computer submerged, and his fridge upended on his stove—but his wineglasses strangely undamaged. The water flooded the basement flat on the other side, too. Our own basement was miraculously spared, and as our flat is on the second floor, our feet stayed dry. We spent the next two days helping the neighbours shovel mud and dump ruined belongings. Oliver's highlight: rescuing a frog from life imprisonment in our landlord's cellar.

MONT SAINT-MICHEL, FRANCE — We stopped to admire the famous abbey across the tidal mudflats. Oliver dashed across the car park, past an official-looking sign, and onto the mud. Leaping a narrow creek, he lost a shoe in the mud. He hopped sheepishly around on one foot while we laughed. "Stay there!", screamed Evelyn. "Come back the way you went", I ordered. Ignoring us both, he walked upstream and jumped back over to safety. Meanwhile, his shoe was sinking slowly into the sticky mire. I fetched my beach shovel and a rope from the car, tied the rope around his waist, and sent him off to dig the shoe out. It came squelching out, covered with stinking black mud.

On the way back to the car, we passed the official sign again. "Danger: quicksand", it said in four languages.

CLÉDER, FRANCE — It's been worth the aching backs and sunburned necks. Oliver and I have done some serious beach engineering, leaving permanent scars on the foreshore of this part of Brittany. Armed with shovels, and wearing gardening gloves to protect our hands from blisters, we built massive sandcastles, diverted entire rivers, and held back the incoming tide. We constructed a sand wall and double ditch from the dunes down to the high-tide mark, giving other beachgoers a choice: either fall in our ditch, or walk around it and get your feet wet in the sea. We built a wall and moat around Evelyn's beach tent, then tunnelled underneath. She didn't notice until the ground collapsed beneath her.

The handle of my Cornish shovel (see previous story) snapped as I was heaving a last spadeful on the final day. A well-spent holiday. We can't wait until next summer.

August

KATHMANDU, NEPAL — At first I was overjoyed to get the airsickness bag: a translucent pink plastic creation from Gorkha Airlines. But my joy turned to perplexity when I noticed the four round holes, neatly punched into the side of the bag. "We put it in your file until you arrived", explained the person who saved it for me. I

tried to tell him that an airsickness bag with holes is useless both for its original intention and as a collectible. Somehow, I don't think he understands.

KATHMANDU — "I think there might be some kind of religious ceremony", said the groom. His parents were due to meet the parents of his new wife for the first time. The two families gathered in the living room. A cloth was held across the centre of the room, so the groom's and bride's mother and aunts could not see each other. Gifts passed under the cloth in each direction: trays of fruit and nuts, suitcases filled with clothes. The cloth was lowered, and a scrum of women formed, dropping flowers on each others' foreheads and embracing. The mothers and aunts sat down happily together and started to get acquainted, while the men retreated to another room to drink whisky.

September

BISANKHU NARAYAN, NEPAL — The Nepalese say that if you can squeeze through the cleft between two rocks at this hilltop temple, you will get to heaven. Well, I'm on my way to paradise. I think I could only get through because I sweated off at least 3 kg walking up here.

During the dry season, the snow-capped Himalayas are clearly visible from Kathmandu. Not when I'm in the country, though. During my last three visits, I've seen the mountains for a total of 10 minutes, most of that from the plane. My Nepali colleagues are beginning to wonder. Can someone who times his visits for the rainy season really be professionally competent?

October

LONDON, ENGLAND — The Mayflower Castle ferry runs from Waterloo down the Thames to the Millennium Dome. I asked the barman for a seasickness bag because "my wife is feeling ill." He searched under the bar, and produced a large black plastic bin-bag, big enough for her to climb into. "We do have smaller bags somewhere", he said, "I'll have another look". He eventually came up with a blue plastic shopping bag. It's still pretty big. Evelyn said I shouldn't lie about her being ill, so I rocked her chair until she did start to feel queasy. Not quite enough to puke into the bag, though.

Seasickness bags? See the end of this letter.

BOGOR, INDONESIA — The light in my hotel room started swaying, and so did the walls and floor. I went outside just in case the roof collapsed. The water in the swimming pool was sloshing back and forth, and the maids were praying earnestly to Allah. The whole thing lasted perhaps 2 minutes, then the shaking and praying stopped. The newspaper next day said it was 6.3 on the Richter scale. No major damage, though, and no one killed.

Camels have very sexy eyes – maybe it's those long fluttery eyelashes. I've spent the last couple of days trying to draw a camel's eye: the last picture we need for our book on dromedaries (that's one hump, not two). We've been working on this veterinary book for the last three years, and it's *nearly* finished. Order your copy today!

November

BOGOR, INDONESIA — Internet telephony is wonderful: for the price of a local call, I can phone Evelyn in Germany. The sound quality isn't always the best, though. She complained about the loud croaking noise – interference on the line? No, it was the frogs in the pond outside my window.

Fancy killing some worms? Oliver and I are addicted to a computer game where the players control teams of worms that blast each other with a variety of weaponry – ranging from bows and arrows to bazookas and guided missiles. Oliver may be expert at the Ninja rope and grenade throwing, but I've reached Elite status and he hasn't. Ha!

December

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY — Nice to be home at last. I've been away for so long this year, and next year looks no better: six months in Indonesia, a month in Nepal, three weeks in Kenya. And Evelyn's going to India, so we won't see much of each other. Oh, for a normal job.

At least I've got a week or two to get all my new airsickness bags onto my website. You can admire them all at www.netcologne.de/~nc-mundypa/barfbags: now over 300 bags!

A very happy Christmas, Idul Fitri, Hanukkah and New Year from the three of us.

Paul, Evelyn and Oliver