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HANOI, VIETNAM – The hotel maid swept the floor, washed the dishes in my kitchenette, made the bed, dusted every horizontal surface in sight, wiped the floor again, and then took out a comb and used it to straighten the tassels of the bedside rug. Must remember to do that next time I do the vacuuming at home.

March

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – For Carnival this year, Oliver borrowed a skirt and wig and dressed up as a blonde bimbo. The disguise was so effective that neither the neighbour nor his grandmother recognized him. He got worried when men started whistling at him in the street. Next year I'm advising him to go as Saddam Hussein.

HANOI – I'm trying to learn Vietnamese. *Hồ* means 'hole'. Or 'lake'. Or perhaps 'tiger' – depending on whether the tone is rising, falling, or falling-then-rising. All this requires a musical ear as well as a musical voice. I have neither. I *can* say, '*Mot con voi trong may bay*' ('There is an elephant in the plane'). A useful phrase to chat up the stewardess on my next Vietnam Airlines flight.

April

KATHMANDU, NEPAL – On my third day in Nepal, I got a fever, headache and diarrhoea. It hadn't gone by the next day, and the 'dry, unproductive cough' I had in Hanoi seemed to be getting worse. So I put on a mask (courtesy Thai Airways) and off I went to the clinic, where I learned I was their first suspected case of SARS. I waited in the garden while the staff argued about who would examine me. A masked doctor eventually appeared. She sat several paces away while she questioned me. Made me feel like an Untouchable. She took a blood sample (no malaria), prodded my chest (no pneumonia), had a chest X-ray done (clear as a bell), and asked me for a stool sample (still waiting for results). Most likely cause is a combination of Hanoi pollution (causing the cough) and food poisoning from Kathmandu (the rest).

May

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA – One of Addis's frequent power cuts, so we ran our computers off the hotel generator – until the room filled with smoke. The voltage was too high and the overloaded extension cables were starting to burn. No wonder Addis suffers from power cuts – the electricity all goes to the glittering new airport. 'Beautiful', say my African friends with no hint of irony, as they sit in darkness and gaze at the blaze of lights on the horizon.

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Too many books, too many shelves – our flat is bursting. Our living room doubles as Evelyn's office, and trebles as our bedroom. So we found a new flat – roomy, airy and light – a couple of kilometres away. We got a floor plan and measured our furniture to make sure it would fit. We calculated the costs of moving and renting. Evelyn said she would move if Oliver agreed. Oliver said yes, as long as could have the whole upper floor to himself. We called the estate agent to accept the deal. That's when the problems began. Evelyn couldn't sleep. She tossed, she turned, she fretted, she worried. The new flat was on the third floor – too many stairs. It was a long way from the shops. The clincher: it was too far for her to walk to her karate club. We called the estate agent to cancel the deal. 'Keep us on your list', we said – but we haven't heard back from him since. I think he realizes that we're difficult clients.

June

HUE, CENTRAL VIETNAM – The pretty young mother came up as my colleague Hạng and I were sitting at a pavement restaurant. She was dressed in a beautiful white *ao dai* tunic: a hotel uniform, perhaps. Her baby was a wide-eyed seven months old. 'Is this your husband?' she asked Hạng. 'No way!' spat Hạng. The mother needed no more permission. I was given the baby to hold while she chatted. Could Baby stroke my beard? It seemed that mother wanted to do so too. Now Baby wanted to stroke the hair on my chest... and so did mother. Would I like to be the father of her next child? Er, not today, unfortunately I had to go to a meeting... I escaped up the road with Hạng's laughter in my ears.

RIVER HUONG, HUE – The exhaust pipe and back bumper of our van were firmly grounded on the steep slope down to the river. The front wheels were on the ferry ramp. The driver wedged the wheels with stones, jacked the van up on blocks, then failed to drive up the ramp as the worn tyres slithered off the smooth wood. We found more blocks and tried again. An hour's sweat later, he managed to get the van on the boat. 'When you come back, you might want to try the bridge', said the locals, pointing at the new concrete span a kilometre upriver.



Oliver's disguise fooled his grandmother – until she saw his knees

July

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Janina, Oliver’s girlfriend, wore a sexy red dress and took 2 hours to do her hair. Oliver wore the suit I had worn at my wedding (still the only one I possess) and took even longer on his hair. Evelyn and I also got dressed up in all our finery. All to attend the ball at the end of their ballroom dancing class. Oliver and Janina cha-cha-cha’d, tangoed, waltzed and foxtrotted around the room. I trod on Evelyn’s toes and collided with other couples before we decided it was safer for all to swig wine on the sidelines with the other proud parents.

August

KONSTANZ, GERMANY – ‘Last chance to avoid trouble’, said Evelyn’s SMS. Just for the hell of it, I was trying to smuggle my Ethiopian friend Isaac over the border into Switzerland. We tried three different border crossings and failed, and Evelyn thought we were taking too long. We rushed back, fearful of what ‘trouble’ was in store. I’m happy to report that we still haven’t found out.

LÜNERSEE, AUSTRIA – We did make it over the Swiss border here, but only for a few minutes. We walked up to the Schweizerter, a spectacular pass over the Rhätikon range, and started down the other side into Switzerland. But that’s where Evelyn again foiled us. Daunted by a steep, treeless slope, she refused to go further, so we turned back into Austria. Isaac’s going to have to get a visa so he can get into the country legally.

WEIMAR, GERMANY – Walk round this citadel of German culture (Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche, Liszt and Bach all lived here) and you might think that Goethe was a gingko freak. His poem praising this Korean tree has given rise to an entire local gingko industry. You can visit the gingko museum, buy gingko postcards and paperweights, take home packets of gingko seeds, and use gingko medicines to protect yourself from absent-mindedness, dementia and impotence. We plan to plant some seeds as soon as we can find a suitable place.

September

HANOI – As a joke, I SMS’d Oliver, asking him if I should buy a dress for Janina. Yes, came the reply, so now I was stuck with the task of choosing evening attire for my son’s girlfriend. I chose a slinky black number, then had to guess what size would fit her. Oliver didn’t know. I found a photo of her, and the dressmaker sewed a dress together. I still haven’t been told whether it fits.

VANCOUVER ISLAND, CANADA – Two days after I got back from Vietnam, Evelyn was off to British Columbia to do a writeshop on ethnoveterinary medicine. She learned that if you work with herbalists, you get to try out their medicines. Sneezes, and you are prescribed a concoction of plants out of the garden. An itch elicits recipes for salves and ointments. The conversation revolves around what to do if you have worms, or how to treat an injured raccoon. Oh, and don’t feed the bears – unless they’re ill, when the herbalists can doubtless suggest an appropriate remedy.

October

ADDIS ABABA – At the Hilton, at the launch of our latest book... someone noticed all the beautiful young women in the next room. The Ethiopian candidates for the Miss World contest were practising shimmying down the catwalk. Interest in the book faded as we queued to peek through the crack in the door. The subject of book we were launching? Gender issues in Ethiopia.

November

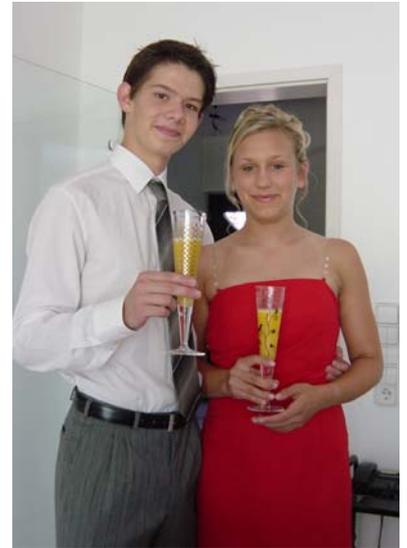
HARARE, ZIMBABWE – ‘Did you see the Blair VIP toilet?’ asked the taxi driver. Yes, I had, but not the one in Downing Street. No, this is the ‘Ventilated Improved Pit latrine’ from the Blair Research Laboratory in Zimbabwe. I was here to talk to the inventor, whose garden houses no less than eight working pit latrines of different designs. When the pit is full, he leaves the contents for a year to, er, mature, then uses the compost to grow vegetables and trees. Good news for a country where cement to build things like toilets, trees, health services and food are all in short supply.

December

BERGISCH GLADBACH – We have agreed to rent the flat downstairs to use as an office. I’m planning to install a pit latrine in the garden and plant a gingko tree in it.

A very happy Christmas, Idul Fitri, Diwali, Hanukkah and New Year. Lake, hole, tiger!

Paul, Evelyn and Oliver



Check our wedding photos, and you might recognize Oliver’s tie.



Our fourth attempt on the Swiss border