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## January

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – Recycling is the new religion here in Germany. Every year we get a thick booklet telling us how to throw stuff away. Paper and cardboard go in a blue bin; biodegradables in a brown bin. There are separate containers for brown bottles, green bottles, clear bottles, old clothing and shoes. Packaging marked with a green spot goes into a yellow bag (logical, eh?) and is picked up once a month. Call a hotline to get old furniture picked up. Everything else goes in a grey bin.

But where to put an old toilet? Our neighbour called the hotline; they picked up her old furniture but left the toilet by the side of the road. Two days later, someone had smashed it to pieces. The neighbour called again: she could go to the town hall, pay €4 and wait to have it picked up. Or she could borrow a car, drive 10 km to the tip, pay a €2.50 fee and throw it in the dumpster herself.

Lesson? Smash your old toilet and tip it in the grey bin. Or do what many frustrated Germans do: dump your rubbish in a quiet piece of woodland. It's easier and cheaper than following the rules.

## February

BERGISCH GLADBACH – Unusually early for Carnival this year, and it was snowing as well – so I hit on an ideal costume: thermal underwear. No elastic in my long-johns, so I could pull them on over my trousers. A long-sleeved thermal vest over a white track-suit top, a bandage wrapped around my head, and I was ready to go to the parade as either the Walking Wounded or perhaps the Curse of the Mummy. Evelyn dressed as a Mexican – complete with poncho, sombrero and painted-on mustachios. Our Canadian and Filipina friends turned out as a scarecrow, nun, vampire and Indian chief – but none was as warm as me.

## March

SADRI, RAJASTHAN, INDIA – A phone call from Germany to Sadri: “Could I speak to Evelyn, please?” I was answered by a stream of what I guessed must be Hindi. I tried to speak more clearly: “E-VE-LYN”. “Ah, Short Madam!”, came the reply, and after a while, she was on the line. Yes, in Sadri she was known as “Short Madam”, to distinguish her from Ilse, or “Tall Madam”, her more stature-endowed colleague. And when it came to which camels they should ride, it was “Tall camel–Tall Madam. Short camel–Short Madam”.

Evelyn travels with a hot water bottle – even to the deserts of India. Not necessary here: the average March temperature is 32°C.

HANOI, VIETNAM – “Are you afraid of chickens?” my Vietnamese friends wanted to know. No, I'm not, but many people are avoiding eating chicken because of the avian flu outbreak. Chicken has disappeared from menus. I can't say I'm sorry – most Vietnamese food is delicious, but they have a way of cooking chicken that makes it inedible. I prefer other local delicacies: prawns, snails, eel, and of course, silkworms.

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – My mother was celebrating her 26th birthday for the 50th time, so Evelyn and I hopped on a cheap flight to Stansted, hired a car, and drove over to Herefordshire. We walked in just in time for lunch. The surprise was total. My mother wondered what to feed us – but we had arranged that – my sister was in on the ploy and had brought lunch with her.

PARIS, FRANCE – Oliver and Janina climbed the Eiffel tower, wandered round the Louvre and queued to see Mona Lisa. Cultured? *Notre fils? Mais oui* – they didn't manage to see everything in

Versailles, so went back for more the next day. I don't think they went anywhere near Disneyland either.

## April

TURNHOUT, BELGIUM – I ogled the rare Nigerian Airways and the vintage BEAs, while Evelyn shivered over a 1972 Guinness Book of World Records. Yes, we were in a freezing basement housing not only the world's biggest collection of airsickness bags, but also the largest collection of Guinness Books. After I had finished admiring the four thousand-or-so bags in the collection, the owner allowed Evelyn to try out his Space Shuttle bag: a sturdily designed plastic-and-linen combo manufactured by Boeing. Or rather, he allowed her to try it *on*: this bag comes complete with a couple of rubber bands to clip over your ears, holding the bag snugly in place to prevent zero-gravity splatter. Now we know where all those NASA billions get spent.

KAREN, KENYA – Marabous are large, ugly birds that like pecking at carcasses. So I was worried when one landed next to the hotel pool where I was swimming. Another landed next to it, then another. I swam towards the far side of the pool, trying to look like a crocodile. Fortunately they decided they had had enough to drink, and flew off in search of richer pickings. I was glad they did not discover my glasses and trousers on the deckchair behind them.

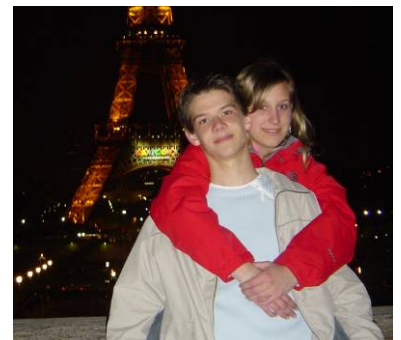
## May

ROME, ITALY – Papa Ratz (the German nickname for the new Pope, Josef Ratzinger) wasn't in when I eventually made it to the Vatican. So I went to see Garibaldi instead. A statue of the Italian liberation hero, sitting sedately on a horse, stands at the top of the Gianicolo hill overlooking Rome, his back turned demonstratively to the Vatican. I preferred the nearby statue of Anita, his wife. She sits astride a rearing charger, brandishes a pistol in one hand, and is holding a baby to her breast. Must have been a formidable woman.

## July

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – “We're so lucky we live so close to the tip”, said my mother. Indeed my parents are. Evelyn and I hacked hedges and trimmed trees, then stuffed the branches and leaves into sacks – 17 of them – and hauled them off to the said tip. If they lived further away, the trips would have taken longer – or maybe we would have looked for a nice quiet piece of woodland to dump in.

BOSHERTON, PEMBROKESHIRE, WALES – We heard about the special bags at the scenic Lilyponds nature reserve, so came to check for ourselves. A National Trust dispenser provides plastic dogshit bags at the entrance to the reserve. Hang onto your poo-filled bag for several hours, and you can dump it in the special container near the exit as you leave. Sadly, the bags available to the general public are



Oliver et Janina à Paris



How to throw up on the Space Shuttle

plain green, without printing – of little interest to a serious collector. Ask the warden nicely, though, and he'll give you a special bag with instructions in English and Welsh. "Stray dogs are collected by the dog warden and impounded until a release fee is paid", it says. "Clean up after your dog. Offenders will be prosecuted." Check [www.bagophily.com](http://www.bagophily.com) if you want to know what all that is in Welsh.

MORFA ISAF, LLANGRANOG, WALES – We celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary on the beach. It started to drizzle, so we decided against leaving via the slippery headland path. The other path up from the cove proved hard to find. Undaunted, Evelyn attacked the cliff. I hung back: should I try to catch her if she fell, or would it be better to dodge out of the way? Triumphant reaching the top, she turned to point out non-existent handholds in the crumbling surface. I clambered up after her, to discover a perfectly marked, wide path behind her, sloping gently down to the beach. Never again will I believe that she's scared of heights.

## August

ST PETER ORDING, SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN, GERMANY – Oliver and Janina cancelled plans to go camping in the Netherlands: no campsite will let in unaccompanied under-21s. So they booked a campsite in St Peter Ording instead, attracted by the town's reputation as a windsurfing and party paradise. They got here to find a dreary mudflat, and the party venues patronized by the local over-50s crowd. And it rained. They drove home after a few days and spent the rest of their holiday watching videos at home.

COPENHAGEN, DENMARK – A boat trip round the harbour: it was easy for Evelyn to see where the Little Mermaid must be – just look for the crowd of tourists on shore. But the Mermaid herself is hard to spot – she's quite small, and perches on an unassuming rock gazing across to Sweden. The tourists and boat passengers spent more time taking photos of each other than the object of their visit.

## September

KAMPALA, UGANDA – Walking back from the restaurant, my colleagues and I passed a group of prostitutes on a dark street corner. "Hey, you are three, we are three. Let's get together!" one of them called. We walked on. "We're hot, we're sweet, like a potato!" called another. Like a *potato*? I nearly went back to ask her to explain. Enlightenment came months later: a friend who works in Uganda says that when people there say "potato", they mean "sweet potato"; a regular potato is an "Irish".

ARUSHA, TANZANIA – Karamojong pastoralists normally carry submachine guns around as they herd their animals in the arid plains of eastern Uganda. Evelyn's colleague did not have one with him, but he still appeared dressed in full traditional gear for his presentation at the biotech conference in the UN centre. The metal ornaments in his garb set off the metal detectors. Used to besuited diplomats, the guards were suspicious. Evelyn (who was not dressed in tribal gear) had to vouch for him before he was allowed in.

SHASHAMENE, ETHIOPIA – Ethiopian police normally take the Meskel holiday off, so the roadblock was unexpected. The passengers had to get out of the minibus, unload their sacks of vegetables and *tef*, weigh them, then pay "tax". Evelyn wanted to take a photo, but the police didn't like the idea – they hustled her back into the minibus. They must have been trying to earn money for the holiday.

PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC – Oliver says that the centre of Prague is "old", but the party scene is wild. Cultured, *notre fils*?

## October

HUE, VIETNAM – A difficult workshop, where our ministry counterparts did nothing but criticize and complain. We fled to a nightclub afterwards to recuperate. As our eyes got accustomed to the dark, we realized there were only four other guests, all on the dance floor. After a round of drinks we got up to leave. The lights came on, and barkeepers and guards headed for the door. They

zoomed past on motorbikes as we waited for a taxi. So did the dancers – they had been staff members too.

ROME, ITALY – Evelyn sat down for a rest in a quiet spot in the Forum, and was immediately surrounded by Japanese tourists. Her "quiet spot" was the *Miliarium Aureum*, the point from which distances in ancient Rome were measured – the very centre of the Roman world.



Evelyn in a ruin

In the evenings after work, Evelyn and I walked around historic Rome (yes, we had managed to coordinate our trips, and were actually in the same place at the same time). We dodged a downpour in the Coliseum and skipped puddles on the Palatine Hill. Biggest regret: not being able to persuade Evelyn to have our photo taken with a centurion holding a plastic sword.

MOSHI, TANZANIA – Perhaps the most picturesque place I've ever held a workshop: in a coffee estate on the slopes of Kilimanjaro. There's a lot less snow on the summit than in the postcards. Evidence of global warming?

## November

MONTPELLIER, FRANCE – They were digging up the roads in town, so the bus had to take another route through the narrow alleyways. It could not get round one corner, so Evelyn and the other passengers sought refuge in a nearby restaurant while the driver looked for the owners of the parked cars blocking the way. The bus hadn't budged a couple of hours later when the passengers emerged after a leisurely meal of *moules frites* – so they walked back to their hotel.

LEWISHAM, UK – Email from a photographer in the UK: could I come over with a suitcase full of airsickness bags and have my photo taken? All expenses paid. I didn't need asking twice: I packed all my spare bags, threw in a few choice special items, and got a flight to Stansted. At the studio, we hung hundreds of bags on washing lines, then made a cape of cardboard and tape, and festooned it with bags. I put the bag-laden cape over my shoulders and posed for photos in front of the washing lines. You can admire the result in the *Daily Mail* sometime in December or January.



Well worth a trip to London

## December

CHENNAI, INDIA – Something about floods in the last few months. Rain in Rome, a hurricane in Hue, and then a cyclone in Chennai. People waded through waist-deep water to rescue their belongings. We drove along the coast road to the temple town of Mahabalipura, past camps for tsunami victims. The squalid camps had been erected on low-lying ground: the refugees had been flooded out for the second time in a year.

My hotel in Chennai was unaffected by the floods. But it proved impossible to turn the air-conditioning off, or to open the windows in my room. I lay in bed and froze. Next time I'll bring along a hot water bottle. Maybe I'll get one for Christmas?

A very happy Diwali, Idul Fitri, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year and Tet.

Paul, Evelyn and Oliver