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A longer letter than usual, but with reason: a lot has happened this year: Oliver and Evelyn have each been to 9 countries, and I have notched up 17 – or was it 19? So if all you want is your season's greetings, I suggest you skip to the end.

January

LIÈGE, BELGIUM – Belgian motorways are not the most inspiring part of Europe, so Evelyn and I happily agreed when Oliver insisted on driving back from our New Year's visit to the UK. He sped us back home. "Sped" being the appropriate word: several months later, I got a speeding ticket in the mail. Not guilty: the only driving I did was to move the car to a parking space at a petrol station – when I certainly didn't hit 134 kph. Now all Oliver has to do is to earn some money so he can pay the fine.

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – Our balcony is home to several pairs of smelly sports shoes: Oliver puts them there to dry out after wearing them. Evelyn's attempts to change this habit have now received help from an unexpected quarter. Oliver discovered a cache of dry leaves and seeds inside one of his shoes: despite the odour, a mouse had made it its home. A Pyrrhic victory for Evelyn: the shoes – minus mice – now adorn a corner of our living room.

March

LIMURU, KENYA – I'm always struck by how empty Africa is. There's a lot of talk of population growth, famine, and unsustainable pressure on resources – but the fact remains that most African countries are big and have relatively small populations compared to crowded Europe. Even here in the rainy highlands, there's plenty of space. It all goes to show that development involves a lot more than just growing more food (though that is obviously vital). Equally important is education – building the capacity of people to innovate, create jobs and increase their income by producing things that other people want to buy.

BELLAGIO, ITALY – Ever been to paradise? Evelyn and I went there to help run a conference on intellectual property rights. Paradise, I can report, is a sixteenth-century villa owned by the Rockefeller Foundation, set in idyllic gardens on a promontory in Lake Como. Our room was in a lakeside tower with mountain and lake views in all four directions. Such a shame we had to work. And even more of a pity, heaven did not last: not only did we have to leave after just a week, but they will only let us back once in the next 10 years.

April

BIVIO, SWITZERLAND – I have only ever skied twice before, and the bunny slope was closed for lunch, so Evelyn and I went over to the main slope and got on the ski lift. I lost count of how many times I fell over on my first attempt to make it down what seemed like a near-vertical slope. Evelyn fell over and had to be rescued by a snowboarder – though I suspect she gave up trying to get up by herself when she saw how good-looking he was. We failed to make it to the top a third time – we fell off the ski lift not once, but twice, and by the time we had extricated ourselves from the deep snow, the lift had closed for the evening. So much fun, we're definitely going back for more.

JINJA, UGANDA – I was relieved to find the "Nile High" bungee jump closed when I wandered over from my hotel next door. The only thing dangling from the gantry over the Nile was a large inflatable beer bottle. I did go on a boat trip on the river, though: in the spray of some spectacular rapids. The boatman fancied himself as a rapper, and entertained us with his self-composed song as he steered us across to the island in the river.



May

ST GEORGE'S, GRENADA – The course participants said I must try "sea moss" – a flavoured milkshake with aphrodisiac properties. I downed a large one, and late that night went to skinny-dip in the hotel jacuzzi. I sent an SMS to Evelyn (back in chilly Germany) to keep her apprised of events. I can report that sea moss, at least in milkshake form, is ineffective, and that Evelyn told her relatives that I was "skydiving in a jacuzzi". I think she must have been mixing it up with the bungee jumping in Jinja?

BRIDGETOWN, BARBADOS – I wonder what impression I gave the taxi driver who took me around the island. He first showed me the party hangouts in this overcrowded tourist mecca, then took me on a tour of the red-light district. Maybe he knew about the sea moss?

COLOGNE, GERMANY – I had never realized that Elves could be overweight. Pudgy elf-maidens in long, flowing dresses canoodled with pointy-eared elf-men carrying bows, arrows and beer bellies. All stuffing themselves with hamburgers and chips, and dragging on cigarettes in the interval during the performance of the Lord of the Rings Symphony – a short version of the Oscar-winning film score.

June

BERGISCH GLADBACH – A major milestone. Oliver has done his exams, and has finished school. He's applying to universities – after his year's community service, that is. More about that later. Meanwhile, it's time for some serious holidaying: a few days in the Netherlands, a week in the Pyrenees, and then a week in Tunisia.

July

TEHRAN, IRAN – Headscarves are *de rigueur* for women here. In fact, it's illegal not to wear one. I have seen only three women without them: one playing with her daughter in the private courtyard behind our guesthouse; one whose scarf had slipped while walking in the mountains; and the secretary, who hurriedly (and laughingly) put her cowl back on as I walked into her office unannounced.

Iranian women do what they can to express their identity despite the stifling restrictions. They dye their hair (many wear their headscarves perched stylishly far back on their heads). They wear makeup and designer clothes under their black *abayas*. And impressive numbers have had plastic surgery: nose jobs are popular, and women who have recently undergone the surgeon's knife sport a plaster on the bridge of their noses.

How to drink beer in the Islamic Republic:

1. Visit your local supermarket and purchase (a) a six-pack of non-alcoholic beer, and (b) a bottle of household cleaning fluid.
2. In a glass, mix (a) and (b) at the desired proportions. I recommend 95:5, but Iranians seem to prefer 70:30.
3. Drink.

The cleaning fluid is 98% ethyl alcohol. Buying is safer than distilling your own, because if you end up with methyl rather than ethyl alcohol, you risk going blind.

August

NIEDERLAUKEN, GERMANY – A group of men carrying rifles positioned themselves around the unharvested part of the wheat field, each ready to blast at the wild pig they knew would be hiding among the remaining stalks. The combine harvester mowed down a strip of grain, then another. On its third pass, the pig darted out – right in front of the combine’s path. The hunters could do nothing: they risked shooting either each other or the tractor. Evelyn and I cheered as the pig sprinted for safety in the line of trees nearby.

SCHLITZ, GERMANY – This beautiful old town, near the old border between West and East Germany, is dying on its feet. The local industries have closed, and many of the young people have departed, replaced by ethnic German (but non-German-speaking) immigrants from Russia. The mediaeval castle at the top of the hill is now an old people’s home. It has a nice, smooth walkway inside the castle walls, but at the gate, the walkway gives way to a rough cobbled road: impossible to roll wheelchairs over. An ingenious way of ensuring the home’s residents do not stray too far?

TEBELLONG, LESOTHO – Oliver decided that he wanted to help people rather than learning how to shoot them, so he has opted for a year’s community service in lieu of being conscripted into the German military. He’s living in a hut in this stunningly beautiful country. No electricity or running water – and he’s enjoying it tremendously. His work includes keeping lists of AIDS orphans in the village: the HIV infection rate is over 30%, and hundreds of children have lost their mothers, fathers, or both. He’s in charge of six fields of maize. He’s teaching computer skills, and he’s discovering an unsuspected talent for languages – he’s learning Sesotho.

September

COLOGNE AIRPORT, GERMANY – “There are liquids in my suitcase”, I told the man at check-in. He pointed me to a desk where I opened my case to reveal the contents: a dozen tubes of acrylic artist’s paint, bought for my mother at a sale in Germany. The clerk noted it down, and I headed through the crowded security to the departure lounge. Then I heard my name called on the public address: “Mr Mundy, please come to the check-in desk.” I went back through security. “The police want to open your bag”, they said. I was led through another security barrier and down into the bowels of the airport, to a room where a policeman was standing by my bag. “My mother’s an artist”, I explained. Satisfied that I was smuggling neither drugs nor explosives, he let me return to the lounge.

I had just started sipping my well-earned cappuccino when my name was called again: the first policeman had neglected to tell the next security check what was in the case, and they wanted to open it again. I’m glad they take security so seriously.

On arrival at London’s Stansted airport, I was almost surprised to find my case on the baggage carousel. But when I handed over the contents to my mother, we found that one tube had been squeezed and punctured – leaking black acrylic paint over her upholstery.

PEMBRIDGE, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – For a vignette of rural England, it’s hard to beat the Pembridge Art Show, where my mother had entered some paintings. They were hanging next to pictures of the Herefordshire countryside and framed dried flowers. The artists went around admiring their own paintings and making polite comments about their competitors’ work, then trooped into a side room for tea and cakes. When a painting was sold, a red sticker appeared on its frame. When we came back in the evening, my mother was pleased to find stickers on four of her seven paintings. And she’s cleared some storage

space so she can paint some more – and use up all that acrylic I had brought her.

October

CURRAL DAS FREIRAS, MADEIRA – Evelyn and I struggled over layers of hard, round eucalyptus seeds (like walking on a carpet of marbles), up the near-vertical slopes, and along what the guidebooks call “vertiginous” paths: close to the edge of a sheer drop. Curral das Freiras means “Valley of the Nuns”: the nuns had fled to this inaccessible spot to avoid the pirates that used to raid coastal (and marginally flatter) Funchal. It would be a fairly desperate pirate who would struggle over such terrain just for a little rape and pillage.

The walk took 6 hours, instead of the 4.5 it said in the guidebook. We eventually got to the romantically named “Lovers’ Pass” – to find a car park at the summit: the slope the other side was gentle enough to accommodate a road. Back at the hotel, we rechecked the book. “Don’t do this walk in reverse”, it said (as we had done), “for the stalwart and exceptionally fit only.” We were knackered – but oh, so proud.



With my parents in Madeira

LISBON, PORTUGAL – Evelyn and I wandered around the castle and found the best view over the city and the River Tagus. Then I remembered I had left my Travelling Green Bag in my luggage at the airport. So I posed for a photo holding up an imaginary bag, which I pasted into the photo later using PhotoPaint.

Green Bag? This will take some explaining. A German bag collector got his local art group to paint 20 airsickness bags green. (Why? I don’t know – it’s Art.) He distributed these 20 bags to collectors worldwide, on condition that they send him a photo of themselves with their bag. I was one of the lucky 20 collectors, so I’m taking photos of myself holding this bag in front of landmarks all over the globe. So far I’ve got the bag at Cologne Cathedral, the Azadi arch in Tehran, and the cruise ship terminal in Funchal. Want to see them? Visit www.schulz-art.com.

PARIS, FRANCE – A quick trip into Paris to take a shot of the Travelling Bag in front of the Louvre. Evelyn and I got back to the airport to discover our baggage had been lost: the clerk in Funchal had checked it in on non-existent flights from Funchal to Lisbon and from Lisbon to Paris. And our budget airline to Cologne didn’t accept luggage transfers anyway. We were amazed when our bags finally arrived at Cologne two days later.

BONN, GERMANY – Evelyn was surprised to hear her name announced as the winner of the conference poster competition. She had prepared a poster quickly beforehand: it was snappy and informative, but hardly the stuff to win prizes. She discovered that someone had rearranged the posters, and one about Mexican sheep breeds had been put up where hers was supposed to be. Yes, her conscience did get the better of her, and she in turn presented her certificate to the true winner.

BLACKMORE, ESSEX, UK – I tried to get a tableful of Catholic priests in the pub to pose with the Travelling Bag. Sadly, one of them decided

my humble barfbag was in the same category as Damien Hirst's shock artwork, which features the carcasses of decomposing animals. After that, a photo of men in dogcollars with the bag was not on the cards. So I am going to have to make do with a shot of me, a pint, and the bag propping up the bar.

November

TEBELLONG, LESOTHO – "I've got a full programme worked out for you", said Oliver. He had been here in this remote mountain village for two months, and I was fortunate enough to be able visit because I was routed through Johannesburg. The "programme" consisted of climbing mountains, watching a cow give birth, producing a booklet on farming, fetching water, loading bags of fertilizer onto boats to cross the Orange River, and washing his socks. Oh yes, and this...

How to repair the floor of your hut:

1. Fetch several kilos of fresh cow dung and the same amount of wet black earth. Mix thoroughly.
2. Take a handful of the mixture and smear it thinly on the floor with your hands. Add a little water to promote adhesion and ensure a smooth finish. Apply enough of the mixture to even out depressions caused by wear and tear. Slap on handfuls of dung to fill mouse holes.
3. Repeat as required until the floor is complete. Caution: work towards the door so you do not have to tread on your freshly plastered floor to get out of the hut.
4. Allow to dry. Keep your cat out of the house until the floor has dried to avoid muddy pawprints on your bed.

Oliver said he had the tallest maize plants in Tebellowng – they were already 30 cm high. His six fields have been planted using a technique called "conservation agriculture". That involves digging lines and lines of planting pits, instead of ploughing (which turns the soil over and accelerates soil erosion.)

Erosion is one of the scourges of Lesotho. From the hills above Tebellowng, it looks as if a giant has dragged his fingernails across the fields, leaving jagged scars several metres deep. One gully is eating its way up the slope towards the secondary school. During the week I was in Tebellowng, it had gnawed away another 30 cm of ground, and had reached the school fence.

Lesotho's other scourge is AIDS. Wednesday is Orphans Day in Tebellowng. Children from one of the nearby villages came into the church building for a lesson on how to brush their teeth and a meal of hot soup. They lined up for a gift: a toothbrush, a bar of soap, a packet of candles, all wrapped in a small towel. Some looked very thin – hunger, or the "thin disease" they have picked up from their parents? One little girl was too small to carry her packet, so her sister helped her. Think about it too much, and your heart breaks.

Here's how to give medicine to a bull:

1. Boil a mixture of herbs over a fire. Allow to cool, then strain.
2. Fill a glass beer bottle with the dark green liquid.
3. Get an accomplice to distract the bull while you reach between its back legs and grab its testicles. Pull hard. Your accomplice should take this opportunity to grasp the bull's horns and manoeuvre the animal towards the wall of the pen so it cannot thrash around.
4. Once this is done, it is safe to release the testicles.
5. Insert the neck of the bottle into the side of the animal's mouth, avoiding the teeth. Pour in the contents of the bottle, massaging the tongue to make sure the liquid is swallowed.

Time to leave. Oliver and I arrived at the Orange River with our bags: we wanted to spend a couple of days in South Africa before I caught my plane from Durban. But it had chucked down with rain all the previous day and night, and the river was high. The boatmen on the other side of the 100-metre-wide stream were too afraid to cross the chocolate brown current. We came back later in the morning; the river was much higher, and one house had already floated past on the flood.

Back at the village, one of Oliver's colleagues knew a pilot with the local air service. She called him up. Two hours later, a 6-seater plane picked us up from the village airstrip and flew us over the swollen river



Oliver in Tebellowng

to Qacha's Nek, a little town on the South African border. The shortest (7 minutes), cheapest (€) and most enjoyable flight I have ever been on. And I even got an airsickness bag to add to my collection.

PORT ST JOHNS, SOUTH AFRICA – For several dozen kilometres, there had been a strange chirping noise from the front wheel of our hire car. As we came into this small coastal town, Oliver said that the car was beginning to vibrate. We stopped, and there was a loud hiss as the tyre deflated. Then we remembered the massive pothole we had hit 60 km earlier: it had dented the wheel rim, letting air escape. Lucky us – we had made it all the way to the driveway of our hotel before it finally went flat.

The Afrikaner barlady at the hotel was charming, witty, and racist. "Avoid central Durban", she said, "it's very Black". And she would never use the same cup as a Black African. Racism cuts both ways in this country, though: many Blacks have equally negative views of Whites. Apartheid dies hard. Oliver is fortunate to be working in Lesotho, where mutual relations are much more relaxed.

KADOMA, ZIMBABWE – It turned out that I knew the Minister for Science and Technology, who opened our conference on adult education. She, Evelyn and I were all students at Iowa State in the 1980s. She gave a nice opening speech about the need for educating farmers. She was followed by the Swedish Ambassador, who took the opportunity of the presence of the press to criticize the Zimbabwean government's land reform and economic policies. The Minister responded with a passionate defence of land reform, highlighting her key role in it. "No regrets", she said.

Over coffee afterwards, I told her that I liked her opening speech but not her response. But she was adamant. And apparently blind to reality. Inflation is running at 3000% a year (that's 17% a week). The currency has collapsed: the official exchange rate is one-seventh of the black market (i.e., the real) rate. The most productive farmers are still being driven off the land, exports are plummeting, and there are shortages of everything from petrol to eggs – all leading to widespread hunger and massive emigration. There are 2 million Zimbabweans in South Africa, and over the last few years more have emigrated to Britain than there were ever British in Zimbabwe.

The next day, the newspaper and TV were full of the dispute between the VIPs: the Ambassador was "poorly informed", according to the Minister. But none of my Zimbabwean friends saw the headlines: the news media are seen as so biased that they ignore them.

HARARE, ZIMBABWE – The sales assistant told me she earns Zim\$ 33,000 a month, but that it costs her Zim\$ 30,000 a month just to get to work every day by public transport. I have no idea how she makes ends meet – or indeed, why she comes to work at all. People survive by wheeling and dealing, by doing multiple jobs, through corruption and the black market. But how about the unemployed, the ill, the elderly?

Air Zimbabwe has suspended its flights to London for fear its aircraft will be impounded to cover unpaid debts. The Harare water company

has to charge Zim\$ 8 per cubic metre of water, even though it costs Zim\$ 135 to supply that amount. Unsurprisingly, it cannot afford to buy treatment chemicals. Hospitals operate without disinfectant, antibiotics, electricity – even water. Despite the burgeoning AIDS rate, they are devoid of patients: people are rightly afraid of infection. They prefer to die, untreated, at home.

It looks as if things will get even worse in Zimbabwe before they get better. The government is oppressive, the opposition in disarray. Rumour says that “Uncle Bob” Mugabe has ministers frisked for weapons before Cabinet meetings – just like Saddam Hussein used to. Discontent seethes below the surface – though as one person said, “Never underestimate the capacity of Zimbabweans to suffer”.

LUBUMBASHI, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO – During the short stopover here on the way to Nairobi, I helped carry a disembarking woman passenger’s bag to the terminal building. I walked back to the plane, then realized I had left my passport and boarding pass on board. Fortunately one of the ground crew recognized me, so I was able to get back on the plane. Otherwise, who knows? I might still be here.

Hundreds of termite mounds and a handful of white United Nations aircraft and helicopters line the runway, ready to ferry troops and emergency supplies around this roadless, war-torn country. A commercial transport plane was being loaded with bicycles. No roads means that everything has to be delivered by air. A huge portrait of Laurent Kabila adorns the terminal building – reminding passengers that the east of the country is his territory. The results of the presidential election are due soon. People are holding their breath – will the loser accept defeat, or will the country return to war?

NAIROBI, KENYA – I really must get myself a new umbrella. Nothing wrong with my current one – it comes in a handy sleeve that clips onto my belt. But it looks like a truncheon, so I got more than my fair share of attention from the guards in the newspaper offices we visited.

Small wonder they’re nervous about security. Last year Kenya’s First Lady barged into the same offices in the middle of the night to object about a story in the paper. She assaulted a cameraman, then staged a sit-in for several hours, all on live TV. A media bonanza, of course, and a severe embarrassment for her husband. But at least Kenyans can laugh about their politicians. That’s more than Zimbabweans can.

KARAMOJA, UGANDA – Evelyn has been inducted into the most warlike of the Karamojong clans. She donned a specially made dress, and adorned her neck and waist with beads. Her closest brush with death, though, was when she put on her shoes one morning, only to find a large, rather offended frog inside one.

People here used to be relatively peaceable until the arrival of the AK47s. Fighting between rival groups of pastoralists used to be ritualized: one group would announce an attack beforehand, then champions from each side would engage in duels which rarely ended in death. The winners would then make off with the losers’ cattle – the source of wealth in this arid part of the country.

Now the raids are more serious. Automatic weapons mean that many people die. The army tries to keep control, but sometimes pillages the villages it is supposed to be protecting. Witnesses of massacres are gunned down in the streets to prevent them from talking.

December

HYDERABAD, INDIA – “Passport, ticket, money, keys.” Every time I go on a trip, I mentally tap my pockets to make sure I have everything vital with me. Sadly, this method is not foolproof. I arrived in Hyderabad to discover that I had forgotten to pack my clothes.

I asked the taxi driver to take me to buy some shirts and trousers. He took me to an upper-class wedding outfitters. I fought off the urge to spend €1000 on an embroidered bridegroom’s tunic and matching turban. I settled instead for some shirts, and a pair of trousers which the in-house tailor swiftly shortened. My new outfit probably cost me four times what it would have done in the market across the road – though it was still cheaper than in Europe. Next time I go out of the door with my suitcase, it’ll be “passport, ticket, money, keys... clothes”.



Spot the warrior

RAJENDRANAGAR, INDIA – A knock on my door at 06:30. I tried to ignore it, but the knocking continued, until I finally crawled out of bed and opened the door to receive a cup of milky, sweet “bed tea”.

One morning I decided to stick it out. The tea-wallah eventually gave up rattling my door-handle, and I drifted back into slumberland. Until the phone rang. It was Reception: “Would you like some tea?” I replied in the negative, only to have the knocking resume two minutes later. I turned over to find the tea-man standing over my bed, beamingly proffering a cup of tea. I must have forgotten to lock the door the previous evening.

I later politely suggested to Reception that they ask guests if they would like tea in the morning, and if so, at what time. “6:30 is too early for me; I want to sleep”, I explained. “How about 7 o’clock?” the receptionist asked. “No, thank you, I don’t want tea.” Her eyes lit up in sudden understanding: “Perhaps you’d like milk instead?”

TEHRAN, IRAN – If you want to get an insight into a country, go and have a haircut. It was high time for a trim, so off I went in search of a barber’s. I followed a sign in English saying “hairdressing salon”, climbed a flight of steps, pushed aside a plastic screen, and found myself in a plush ladies’ salon. Several stylishly dressed women without headscarves (horrors!) tittered and fluttered at this Man who had dared to violate their sanctum. “Please go out” said an older woman, trying to look stern while pushing me out.

The men’s hairdresser I eventually found was a rather more Spartan affair: a poster of the AC Milan team on the counter, and wrestling on TV. The barber chatted about football. About the only things I understood from his stream of Farsi were “Manchester United” and “David Beckham”. The Premier League has done an amazing job marketing the English game to a world audience. The barber must have liked his handiwork: after brushing the loose hairs from my jacket, he pulled out an ancient Instamatic and took a photo of me. I’m going to check whether it’s in his window next time I go past.

NAIROBI, KENYA – Seven African presidents were attending the conference next door to Evelyn’s meeting in the UN building. The police outriders sprawled on the lawn waiting for the VIPs to emerge. Evelyn’s participants did not dare to step on the red carpet – they jumped over it instead.

A very happy Diwali, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Tabaski, Eid Ghorban, Idul Adha, Tet and Norooz. May your clothes accompany you on your travels, may your bed-tea arrive at the desired hour in the morning, and may your shoes remain frog- and mouse-free.

Paul, Evelyn and Oliver