

Time for our annual letter. In which you will learn how to comb a goat and shear a sheep, where to sit in a ger, and how high-tech plumbing can restore vital functions when it is cold outside. You can skip to the end to get our season's greetings, but do you really want to miss these useful lifestyle tips?

January

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – “We can get help unloading if there's an old lady like me with you”, said my 81-year-old mother. So Oliver drove her and a carful of rubbish to the recycling centre. Where he engaged the staff in conversation about composting, sorting waste, and turning scrap wood into chipboard. Meanwhile, my mother unloaded the rubbish herself. I think Oliver is more interested in the theoretical rather than the practical aspects of recycling.

COLOGNE CATHEDRAL, GERMANY – A string of altar boys and priests led the way, followed by Joachim Cardinal Meissner, Archbishop of Cologne and buddy of the Pope. The good cardinal blessed the restored stained-glass window, funded by some well-to-do friends of ours. The altar boys spooned heaps of incense into the thurible and swung it mightily: His Eminence and the window disappeared into the haze. They must have burned a whole year's supply of incense. No wonder Ethiopia's incense-gum trees are dying out.

AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS – Fortunately Queen Beatrix wasn't using her toilet when I paid a visit. The Royal Loo is in the Royal Tropical Institute (logical, eh?): up the steps from our meeting room and turn right at the stone lioness in the marble foyer. A lofty antechamber decorated with century-old tiles leads to the throne rooms: the Ladies (for Her Maj?), and the Gents, presumably unused (except by me) since Prince Claus died a decade ago. I was tempted to add little crowns to the signs on the doors. The throne itself was standard issue, and the window was open to an icy draught. I recommend Queen B to wrap up tight in ermine next time she is caught short.

February

USINGEN, HESSE, GERMANY – “Your case is not an emergency,” said the officer in the police station, but promised to send a squad car anyway. Evelyn's cousin Kurt has parked his car in a schoolyard, and returned to find it stuck behind a locked barrier. The caretaker could not be found. We drove Kurt back to the school to wait for the officers to arrive. “I've already tried to open the barrier,” said Kurt, as I rattled it. I lifted it up, and it swung open. “It will be an honour to appear in your annual letter,” he said. Perhaps I should start charging people who get a mention? Or demanding a fee for **not** putting them in?

The reason we were in Usingen was actually very sad: Evelyn's cousin Claus had died suddenly. Far, far too soon. We wish his wife (also Evelyn) and family all the strength they will need.

BECHEN, KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – “Is this the queue for the cash machine?” I asked. The bank foyer was full of guardsmen in red-and-white Napoleonic-era military uniforms, sheltering from the drizzle outside. More came in, plus a bevy of dancing girls in miniskirts, and of course the carnival royalty: Prince, Farmer and Virgin, resplendent in ermine and feathers.

“*Es ist so wunder-wunderschön!*” (It's so wonder-wonderful!): they started singing a traditional carnival song – though without much conviction, and out of tune... well, it has been a long,



The weather is always like this in Shetland

cold carnival season. I counted 48 gaudily clad carnivalists filing through the door into the bank itself before I could escape.

MÜLLENBERG, KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – Evelyn didn't see the dog until it was too late. It collided with her car, turned a somersault, and then, happily, ran back to its master. Who, instead of keeping them on a leash, was driving his car with his two Alsatians running behind. Evelyn noticed the damage to our car only later: a tear in the bumper, a broken fog light, a leaking pipe. We knew who the owner was, so we went to see him. No police, he said: he was at fault and would pay for the damage. The dog was OK, but “it has learned its lesson”, he said. The dog may be wiser, but I wonder if its master is?

March

MÜLLENBERG – “You could earn money doing that!” said Evelyn as I strummed the one chord I had learned on the guitar so far. “You could go busking in the town centre, and they'd pay you to stop.” My mother was more sympathetic. “I've always wanted to play the guitar”, she said. Grateful for the hint, we ordered one for her birthday.

Three chords are all you need for “Happy Birthday”, so Evelyn and I sang it to my mother over the phone on the morning of the big day. “If you can learn, so can I,” she said, saying she would go out to buy herself a guitar that day. Panic at our end – our present had not yet arrived. But the music shop is a long way away, and our present arrived before she had had a chance to buy one. We keenly await her first international phone concert.

SUKHANBAATAR SQUARE, ULAANBAATAR, MONGOLIA – A Chinese lantern is an upended paper bag, with a wire frame underneath holding a block of camphor. Light the camphor, and the flame heats the air in the bag, causing it to glow as it rises gloriously into space, to the delight of all below. Easy, right?

Wrong. First, the camphor can be hard to light. The flame may set fire to the bag: spectacular but un-aerial. The lantern may tip in the breeze,



Not the recycling type

spilling burning camphor onto the spectators' heads. Or it may fail to gain height and drift away through the crowd, threatening to torch their hair. Cue a desperate chase by the bag owners, and shrieks as the crowd downwind scatters.

What would Chinggis Khaan (as Genghis is transliterated here) think of such Earth Day celebrations? A huge bronze statue of him broods over the square. He doesn't look like the type to rush home from a hard day's pillaging to sort garbage and turn off surplus domestic appliances. And he might even be amused if a wayward lantern set fire to some of his subjects' hair.

April

SONGHIN, ULAANBAATAR – The high-tech toilet in my hotel room has a bewildering array of buttons. But the instructions are in Korean – one of the many languages I have not mastered. So it's a question of trial and error. Push one button, and the toilet seat warms up. Another controls the seat temperature. A third causes a jet of warm water to squirt into places where the sun never shines. All very nice, but how to stop it? After some frantic button-pressing I discover that the button that looks like a "no parking" sign stops the toilet from doing whatever it is doing. Another button replaces the jet of water with a blast of warm air. Very handy if it's chilly outside and you need to restore the functioning of your vital bits in a hurry.

NORTH OF KHUSTAIN NURUU NATIONAL PARK, MONGOLIA – Don't lean on the posts that support a ger – the round, white yurt that nomadic Mongolians call home. And don't sit between the posts either – it brings bad luck. Instead, sit on the sofa on the left side, facing the stove in the middle. You will be served with milky tea, stone-hard dried curd, and, if you are lucky, mutton-filled dumplings. The stove is fed with dried dung – there are neat piles of it outside, and the smoke goes up the chimney through the roof. Water comes from melted snow, and power from solar panels fixed high on a pole, safe from blundering cows. No high-tech Korean toilets, though. Take your toilet roll outside and find a secluded spot, and admire the stars while you do your business.

A car rolled up while we were saddling the horses. Out piled a family, and a sheep was pulled out of the flock. Destined for the pot? Not this sheep – ever. A red ribbon was tied around its neck, and the animal was released. "We Mongolians kill a lot of animals", explained my guide. "So every now and then we buy an animal and set it free. That sheep will live to be very old – unless it gets eaten by wolves first."

They do the same for trees – which are rare in this bit of the country. We passed several scrubby trees with blue ribbons tied around the trunks: a sign not to chop them down for firewood.

Four things you need to know when riding a Mongolian horse: pull on the left rein, and the horse will turn left. Pull on the right



Small enough not to get hurt if you fall off

rein, and it will turn right. Pull on both, and it will slow down. Say "choo", and it will go faster. There is no word for "stop".

My horse recognized I was a rank beginner, and knew what to do. Two flocks of sheep – ours and those from across the valley, were about to mix, and we had to separate them. We drove our flock down to the river, while the neighbour herded his away on his motorbike. I'm obviously a natural talent at horseback shepherding, but before I apply for the job, I have to find a horse with a softer back.

KHUSTAIN NURUU – Grab your goat by a hind leg, and wrestle it to the ground. Ignore the bleating and push away the kid that thinks this is an ideal time for a quick drink from mummy's udder. Tie the horns to a pole. Tie the hind legs together, stretch them out and tie to another pole. Push baby away. Take your comb – a fearsome-looking implement with a dozen hooked metal tines, and start combing the cashmere (the fine, fluffy fibre) out of the coat. Ignore bleating. Push the cashmere further back on the comb to compress it, and continue combing. Push baby away again. When the comb is full, take the cashmere off and place in plastic basin. Switch to a finer comb to gather more cashmere. Turn goat over and comb other side. When finished, untie goat and release.



Avoid the nipples when combing. Failure to do so can cause bleating.

The evening conversation around the stove turned to livestock. "In Europe, how do the animals avoid getting disease if they stay in the same place all the time? Here in Mongolia we move around." I explained that our farming neighbours have to vaccinate their sheep, and they clean out the shed every so often. The manure is good for our potatoes. "Your neighbours have only 40 sheep? How can they survive? We have 800 sheep and goats, plus 80 cattle and 40 horses!" Our neighbour has a day job, I explained. Not really possible out here in the steppe, 50 km from the nearest permanent settlement. Our hosts were supporting their three children who were studying in Ulaanbaatar, and a Toyota Prius Hybrid was parked outside the ger. I wonder if the solar panel was enough to charge it?

FEUCHTWANGEN, BAVARIA, GERMANY – Franconians certainly know how to celebrate birthdays: a half-dozen of relatives, neighbours and workmates, all downing beer and dumplings. But what do you give a 60-year-old who has everything? Fortunately Mongolia is a good place for souvenirs, so Günther, Julia's father, a forester, is now proud owner of a blue-and-red hat with a pointy gold top. Should make him unmissable as he drives around the area checking on timber stands.

MÜLLENBERG, GERMANY – My mother was worried that my father would have to be exhumed. The undertaker who buried him last year has been arrested for murdering his wife: perhaps

he had disposed of her body in my father's coffin? Fortunately not: the wife disappeared only in January, long after my father's funeral. But her body has not yet been found. Take the hint: if you happen to want to murder someone, it's hard to think of a better profession than undertaker to dispose of a corpse.

June

MÜLLENBERG – We phoned my mother and played “Scarborough Fair” on the guitar. At the end of the first verse, we paused for applause. It never came. My mother had hung up. “All I heard was music”, she said later. “I thought it was one of those crank calls.”

July

HORNCHURCH, ESSEX, UK – “You're getting like your Uncle Dick”, said Evelyn. Dick collected car parts and put them in his living room. Although he was English, he liked to wear a Scottish kilt. And he liked to talk to me in German.

“I'm not like that!” I protested. “Oh yes you are”, she said. “You collect airsickness bags. There are three crates of bags in our bedroom. You wear a sarong. And you talk German.”

Dick was indeed eccentric. On the few occasions we visited his house, he never let us in. After he died, we found out why: he didn't throw stuff away. As we went into his house, I pulled a cord to turn on the light. The tassel came off in my hand. I pulled the rest of the cord, and it snapped. Still no light. I had to climb over mounds of rubbish to get into each room. The curtains were ripped and rotting. Papers were piled on the floor, on the chairs, on the tables. My grandmother's clothes were still hanging in the wardrobe – and she died in 1980. Dick's bed had not been made for years. It seems he lived in the kitchen, sleeping in a chair in the only room with a functioning light.

He led a lonely life, but turned up at family occasions dressed neatly, and consulted his doctor frequently about his various ailments, real and imagined. But he always refused our offers of help. We knew he was odd, but we did not realize he just could not cope. Could we have done anything different? Perhaps. Would it have made a difference? Somehow I think not.

ARUSHA, TANZANIA – The urinals in the Gents in my hotel were filled with ice cubes. Keeps away the flies, and makes a visit to the loo a bit more interesting: you can try to melt as many ice cubes as possible, and can amuse yourself by causing miniature avalanches. Sorry, I did not venture into the Ladies to see if there was an equivalent there.

August

FANGFOSS, YORKSHIRE, ENGLAND – “Did they really let you drive it?” Our neighbours were incredulous. Alas, no, but merely being a passenger in “Lily”, our friend Janet's 1936 Lagonda, was an honour. We are considering mothballing our 1996 Skoda: perhaps in 2072 people will treat it with the same reverence as Lily.

LEUCHARS, FIFE, SCOTLAND – The church services I'm used to are solemn affairs: no talking in church, please. But in the



Wait another 60 years, and our Skoda will be as revered as this

Church of Scotland, the congregation chats gaily right up until the service begins. Our friend Caroline continued with a rousing sermon about the Olympics, brandishing a torch borrowed from a parishioner who had carried it through the town. So yes, we got to hold a torch even though we saw nothing of the Olympics – we were busy interviewing sheep in Shetland.

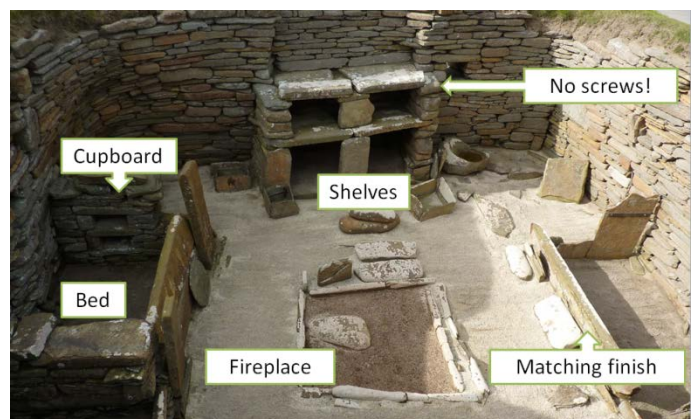


Security detail, Olympic torch, athlete and pastor

SHETLAND, SCOTLAND – Shetland sheep spend most of their lives roaming over the moors, with an occasional foray down to the beach to eat seaweed. That makes them hard to herd, unlike flocks in more pampered climes, which are used to shepherds and dogs. So to gather your sheep in for shearing, you need time, a quad bike, a good sheepdog, and lots of invective.

If a recalcitrant animal climbs down the cliffs, leave it behind. Post visitors like us at gaps in the fence to prevent the sheep from escaping, and to keep the visitors from getting in the way. Once all the sheep are in the pen, ignore the lambs: seize the first ewe, flip it on its back, check the hooves and teeth, give it a dose of dewormer, and shear off the fleece, starting with the neck and chest, and working over the sides and back. Ignore bleating. Release the naked sheep, roll up the fleece, and toss it onto the growing pile over the fence. Grab the next ewe and repeat. Total time per sheep: 53 seconds.

SKARA BRAE, ORKNEY, SCOTLAND – Our Neolithic ancestors seem to have decided that this remote group of treeless, rocky islands on the edge of the icecap was an ideal place to invent flat-pack furniture. The houses at Skara Brae date back to 3180 BC – that's older than both the Egyptian pyramids and Stonehenge. Residents had beds complete with shelving, dressers, cupboards, indoor toilets, and doors that locked – all in an attractive cream stone finish. Not a screw to be seen. But why did it take 5000 years for the idea to cross the North Sea to IKEA in Sweden?



IKEA's new Neolithic furniture range

September

MÜLLENBERG – Lost a rabbit? We found a black one shivering in our garden in the morning rain. We put it in a box and called the neighbours, but none reported an escapee. Müllenberg has only six houses and is a long way from the nearest village: someone must have dropped off their unwanted pet in the woods next to our house, in the hope it would fend for itself. Some chance: it clearly had no idea, and was lucky not to have met the neighbourhood fox. It has now enriched the menagerie of a family with small children up the road.

October

WAGENINGEN, NETHERLANDS – I had not seen our Chinese friend Lanying for 10 years, so complimented her on her continued youthful appearance. “You’ve lost a lot of hair,” she replied. Ah yes, age is creeping up on us. Attractive young women used to ask me if I was married (yes, I always told the truth). Now, they just ask me if my son is married.

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA – My suitcase was one of 15,000 that got stuck in Frankfurt airport because of a breakdown on the luggage belts. So I needed some clothes. The taxi driver wanted to take me to a shopping centre in the middle of town – an hour’s crawl through the clogged streets.

I spotted a promising-looking row of shops, and got out. “Nothing here”, said the salesperson, “we have only children’s clothes. You have to go to the main shopping centre.”

I found a stall right next door, with a single shirt on display. I bought it, then asked for socks. The stallholder pointed to a man sitting on the pavement outside. He sold me two pairs, then his neighbour found me some underpants. No taxi fare, no sitting in traffic jams, and no visit to a posh shop downtown required.

I’m always amazed at how retailing in Africa works. Know where to look, and you can almost always find it close by. Armies of small-time vendors make a living by keeping people supplied with necessities. Something we have lost in the West, with our bright supermarkets and glossy malls.

MÜLLENBERG – I have only three problems with guitar-playing: my sense of rhythm has hiccups, my fingers don’t obey orders from my brain, and I can’t sing. Evelyn says she is glad there is music in the house (she actually calls it “music”!). The neighbours want to know whether we have a radio.

My birthday party was going well until I pulled out the guitar. “It’s getting late,” said the guests, getting up to go. Looks as if I still need to practise a bit more.

November

MÜLLENBERG – In an effort to get rid of those annoying advertisements offering to put me in touch with thousands of attractive single women, I have updated my Facebook status to “married”. A flood of comments followed: “Congrats!!!!”, “I thought you were married”, “About time you made an honest woman of her”, etc. It didn’t work. I still get adverts for hot singles, plus ones for cut-price romantic weekends for two. Romantic? We’ve been married for 27 years, dammit!

December

BONDO, WESTERN KENYA – Oliver got us to help with his master’s research on “agrobiodiversity” – how many different types of plants someone has on their farm. I got to count the number of amaranth plants, while Evelyn got landed with *otielo*, a nondescript leafy weed that the Luo people eat when their kale and cowpea leaves run short. Oliver and his Kenyan colleague taught us how to recognize them, then we scoured the plots for anything looking remotely similar. Fortunately the local



Waiting for the wind to push the water hyacinth away

children knew what to look for, and the amaranth and *otielo* counts quickly shot into the 100s. Lots of weeds to eat, then.

NDERE ISLAND, WESTERN KENYA – It seemed hopeless: a meadow of floating water hyacinth stretched away from the beach; the nearest clear water was 100 metres away. But the wind was blowing, and the green carpet, adorned with the occasional white, snake-necked egret, was drifting off to the east. Our boatman started the outboard, and with a combination of skill, shouts from the bows to avoid the thickest patches, and stops to untangle the propeller, eventually found open water and made it across to the island.

Water hyacinth has pretty pink flowers, which is why this South American plant was introduced to Africa. But it spreads quickly, and now chokes large parts of Lake Victoria. Floating islands of weed drift across the lake surface, merging together into continents and splitting into archipelagos in a high-speed form of plate tectonics. Unlike *otielo*, this weed is inedible; it strangles fishing, depletes the water of oxygen, and harbours mosquitoes and the snails that carry bilharzia.

By the time we returned from the island, the wind had pushed the floating mass away, and there was open water almost the whole way to the jetty. What was a minor inconvenience to us is life-threatening to local people: imagine trying to make a living from fishing if your sailing boat is trapped on the beach by an impenetrable mass of weed.



Next year? Oliver will be writing up his thesis; his girlfriend Julia will be in Toulouse doing hers. Evelyn and I need to finish that book on Shetland sheep. We want to include some sheep jokes. Know any clean ones?

A very happy Diwali, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Tabaski, Eid Ghorban, Idul Adha, Tsagaan sar, Têt and Norooz. May your toilet seat always be warm, and may your Facebook status be up to date. And do try to avoid combing the nipples.

Paul and Evelyn