

Rio de Janeiro—November 22, 2011

Dear Fellow Travelers,

Sonia and I wish all of you a very meaningful Thanksgiving. Even though observation of this most American of holidays just isn't the same outside the US, I try to thank my "lucky stars" today and throughout the year, no matter where I am. I have led a most fortunate life, and this past year has been no exception.

Considering we made nine trips over the past 12 months (excluding our usual back and forth between our resident countries), I've decided to rename this our 2011 Travelog! Since last year's newsletter was sent, we first journeyed to Iguazú Falls on the Rio Paraná, which means "as big as the sea" in Tupi. After merging with the Paraguay and Uruguay rivers, it becomes el Rio de la Plata near Buenos Aires. The Paraná is the world's 8th largest river by volume, after the Amazon, Congo, Orinoco, Yangtze, Brahmaputra, Mississippi, and Yenisey (in Siberia).

The Iguazú cataracts are 1.7 miles wide and range between 200 and 270 feet high. Half of the Paraná's flow at Iguazú falls into the Devil's Throat, a long and narrow U-shaped chasm that lies on the border between Brazil and Argentina. The mist rises up to 500 feet in the Devil's Throat, named by the Guaranis. The average flow rate of 65,000 cubic feet per second is topped only by Niagara (85,000 cfs) among the world's great waterfalls. The shape of the cataracts and extensive trail and walkway system allows spectacular views from both the Brazilian and Argentine sides. Visitors are surrounded by up to 260 degree panoramas. We took a jet boat tour on which we experienced the enormous scale of the falls and had the pleasure of getting drenched under a couple of them. Our handsome hotel, downstream on the Argentine side, was surrounded by subtropical forests. We hiked several days there and in the national parks on both sides, and were also able to kayak below the hotel on the Río Iguazu, a big tributary well below the falls.



Foz do Iguazu, aerial view & detail below



I embarked on a new project in November, getting back in touch with Hun School classmates with whom I graduated in 1964. There are 41 of us left that I can reach and I was able to speak with

many of them by phone. I was amazed to find what we as a class had done with our lives, and may write about it down the road. Meanwhile, I'll be making more calls to build toward our 50th reunion.

In December, we took a half day drive from Rio de Janeiro to Tiradentes, a colonial town in Minas Gerais state, to visit our friends Arden and Fernando, who also live in Laguna Beach. They bought a farm in Tiradentes some years ago, and have been reconstructing it piece by piece. It is a gorgeous spot, with tropical forests to hike and a spring coming down off the mountain through an impressive colonial era "lion's mouth" fountain. We attended a wild early Xmas party there. With local guests giving provocative gifts to their "secret friends" and the caipirinhas flowing, this was one of the most boisterous parties I've attended in a long time. We had a white Christmas in Rio, with lots of frothy surf for Santa to ride his sleigh upon! We celebrated with the families of our close friends Mário and Sandra, and Mara and Camozzato.

On our new schedule, I flew north in the first week of January, as I will do again in 2012, and Sonia followed 3 weeks later, as she will also do again next year. Arriving first, I took the chance to fly up to Eugene to check in on the boys and grandkids. Ethan, who turned 30 while I was there, had solidified his new programming position at InterVision Media, which later in the year promoted him to project management. Wife Ami continues working on an advanced degree in psychology at the University of Oregon. Granddaughter Zara is now a 1st-grader who has skipped ahead to 2nd grade reading. Ürah is in kindergarten at a Montessori charter school and will be reading soon. Pan will soon be 3 and has begun talking up a storm over the past six months. He has already gotten a head start at Ürah's school, Far Horizons.

Son Yaakov received his undergraduate degree in Holistic Health and Phytotherapy in January and has now finished his first year towards a Master of Health Science in Herbal Medicine. This is a mixed distance and residency course in clinical herbalism offered at the University of New England in New South Wales, AU. Yak made 2 trips to Australia for his graduate studies this year. He traveled with his partner Sara, a horticulturalist and visual artist. After Yak completed his scholastic residency, they camped on Fraser Island, the world's largest sand island, and the only place in the world where a tropical rainforest grows out of the sand. He continues playing music and has become an avid gardener. Sara and Yak also traveled to Argentina and Chile this year, thus rivaling if not surpassing Sonia and me in air mileage!

Back in Laguna Beach, there was the usual work to be done cataloging and duplicating the CD collection, now playing through a new vintage stereo after replacing one I'd bought in the early 1980's. If I keep up acquisition at my current pace, I should reach a thousand recordings in each country in a year or so. I joined a masters swim group for awhile and found that, with the encouragement of my coach, I could increase both my speed and distance in the pool. I'm now swimming a mile in 40 minutes instead of a kilometer in 30.

In May, we flew to New Jersey to visit my family, then returned to Laguna Beach for a few weeks before driving up to Yosemite National Park. Neither of us had ever been there. My excuse was always that I didn't want to experience the splendor of the valley in a huge crowd of disrespectful tourists. As it turned out, the cool weather and lingering snow in late May kept the crowds down, and we were able to fully enjoy the spectacular beauty of Yosemite Valley! Yosemite is, of course, internationally recognized for its spectacular granite cliffs, waterfalls, clear streams, giant Sequoia groves, and biological diversity. We stayed at the lodge at Yosemite Falls, North America's highest waterfall, and could hear the roar outside our rustic room.



Yosemite Falls

We took a tram tour of the valley floor, then got around to trailheads and attractions on foot or by the hybrid shuttle system. There were hikes we took on the valley floor apart from major attractions where we didn't see other people for a half hour at a time. Our recommendation: by all means see Yosemite Park, but don't go between June 1 and September 7.

In early June, we flew to San Francisco, rented a car, and drove to Richmond, Sonoma, and Santa Rosa to see cousins Maureen and Amy and Uncle Peder's widow, Lillian. We hadn't seen them in too long a time and really enjoyed our time with each. I also had a chance to introduce Sonia to other beauties of Sonoma County. We drove out along the Russian River, stopping to see my old property, Korbelt Vineyards, and Armstrong State Redwood Park, which was practically deserted! From the river's mouth, we drove down along the coast to Bodega Bay and Bodega, visiting the locations where Hitchcock shot "The Birds". From there we flew to Eugene for another great visit with the family.

We enjoyed the rest of our time in Laguna Beach, spending time with our many friends there. We passed some very pleasant nights in Los Angeles with Jon Chambers and also shared many a festive meal at Casa Laguna with Arlete, Brian, Arden and Fernando. Other highlights were a special birthday celebration for Gay Chambers at Santa Anita Racetrack, a visit to the Huntington Library and dinner at our friend Lilia Anonuevo's in Pasadena, lunch on the beach in Laguna with Angelenos David and Terry, and a night in Del Mar with cousin Ray Mahony.

We returned to Brazil before the 4th of July and were reminded immediately that while the winter here is considered the dry season, it still rains with some frequency at that time of year. Toward the end of the month, we flew to Cuiabá in Mato Grosso state, where we were joined by Jon C. and friend Antonio from São Paulo. We were driven by van to the Pantanal, where we stayed at a resort run by SESC, a big employee organization. The Pantanal is the world's largest wetland, 10 times the size of Florida's Everglades.



Pantanal in August, the dry season

The Pantanal is at the heart of the South American continent. Most of it lies within Brazil, but it extends into portions of Bolivia and Paraguay, sprawling over an area estimated at between 140,000 square kilometers (54,000 sq. mi.) in the dry season and 195,000 sq. km. (75,000 sq. mi.) in the wet. Much less well-known than the Amazon rain forest, the Pantanal is larger than England and harbors extraordinary wildlife, ranging from 100-kilo jaguars to giant otters that mingle in water holes packed with 9-foot caimans. Of the Pantanal's 650 bird species, the largest has a wing span of nearly 3 meters. I had never seen anywhere near the number of big fishing birds that teem in the Cuiabá River in mind-boggling profusion. The caimans too seemed to be lurking everywhere along the riverbanks. At one point our guide beached the boat, and as Sonia and I were seated at the bow end, we were face to face with a pair of big caimans giving us “the hairy eyeball”.



caiman, a crocodylian known in Brazil as jacaré

It was at this point that our guide, trying to back off the shore he had rammed us up onto, broke the engine transmission. There were other tour boats around, but nothing they could do to help us. We had to wait for an empty boat to rescue us, stranded in the jungle surrounded by legions of big birds of prey and hungry, prehistoric-looking jacarés!

The borboletário, or butterfly house, at the resort was another interesting spot, but the classic experience of our time in Pantanal was the evening boat trip.

Just a half-dozen of us motored down the Cuiabá, with our boatman stopping to shine his flashlight on jacarés, whose eyes eerily reflected the light. A few miles downstream, he cut the motor and we listened to the sounds of big fish rolling over on the surface and the insects, birds and monkeys in the jungle. The view of the stars in this electric lightless realm (and there was no moon that night) was what most amazed me. The Milky Way was brighter than I had ever seen it before. Its gas clouds were so well defined, they appeared to be clouds in our Earth atmosphere!



Milky Way in August sky (with Perseid meteor streak at bottom)

Jaguars still roam the Pantanal and endangered Hyacinth Macaws nest in its trees, but advancing farms and industries are destroying the region at an alarming rate. Brazil's exports of beef, iron and soy -- the main products from the Pantanal -- have rocketed in recent years, driven largely by

global demand. Other massive Brazilian ecosystems are equally if not more threatened. Among them are the Amazon rainforest, the great woodland savannah known as the Cerrado, and the Atlantic rainforest, of which less than 7 percent remains. A big step towards protecting these important global resources would be adequate enforcement of Brazilian environmental laws, difficult to achieve for many of the same reasons as in the US (principally the disproportionate, campaign contribution-driven political power of the logging, mining, ranching and agricultural industries).

A half-day's drive north of Pantanal is the edge of the adjacent Brazilian ecosystem known as the Cerrado. Here we visited Chapada dos Guimarães, a region of steep cliffs at the edge of an extensive plateau. We stayed in a little city next to Chapada dos Guimarães National Park. To hike there it's necessary to hire a trained guide. Our guide Sergio's wife was due to deliver their second child at any moment, but he nevertheless took us into the backcountry, which was, as it so often is in Brazil, spectacular. One day we took the trail of seven waterfalls, where we were able to cool off in the pools below. Another day we visited networks of caves both wet and dry. One showed extensive evidence of ancient human occupation, but to my amazement, had apparently never been excavated. Another, known as Aroe Jari, is the largest sandstone cavern in Brazil. The hike to reach it led across arid flats and through tropical forests with streams crossed on hanging bridges. We saw large, ostrich-like birds called rheas, and the distinct footprints of the reclusive South American maned wolf, known in Brazil as lobo-guará. This evolutionarily unique canine doesn't form packs, preferring to hunt alone.



Bridal Veil Falls, Chapada dos Guimarães



lobo-guará

After flying home from Cuiabá, we took a well-earned rest, returning to our normal social habits in Rio, the cidade maravilhosa, where family, friends, and other friendly cariocas abound. Outside, my life here tends to center around the club where I swim, Flamengo. We boast Olympic champions in several sports and Brazil's champion basketball team. Our soccer team is one of the country's best, now featuring Ronaldinho, several times chosen the world's top player. Other soccer fans down here find it amusing that I'm such a diehard Flamenguista, given that the huge national fan base is made up primarily of less well-to-do Brazilians (people here think of all Americans as rich), but every single member of Sonia's family—by blood or marriage—roots for Flamengo, or else! We have a saying, "Flamengo até morrer", Flamengo to the death! I've taken to watching many of the games as Sonia's sister Ilma's place; I feel better not being the only one jumping to my feet screaming "gooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!" whenever we score.

In September we visited our friends Chris and Mônica in Vassouras, a small town in the Valley of Coffee a few hours drive into the interior of Rio de Janeiro state. Mônica courageously fought and recovered from leukemia over the past year, and has fully recovered her infectious humor and high energy level. They have twin 3 to 4 year-olds who kept us busy, along with rainforest hikes and discussions with Chris about details of life for Americans in Brazil. He is the author of "The Brazilian Sound: Samba, Bossa Nova & the Popular Music of Brazil", and a very entertaining sci-fi novel, "The Big God Network". I took the laptop along to work on my memoir and reached 75,000 words while we were there, which Chris told me is the number that's generally considered book length! When I get done, he can steer me in the right direction toward "virtual" publication.

Later in September, we took a special 3 week trip to the US/Canadian east coast. The highlight was niece Sandy's wedding in Stonington, Connecticut. It was held at a winery and could not have been lovelier. We stayed nearby in Mystic, an important colonial seaport. My daughter Isis and I had a chance to spend some quality time together there, which made the wedding even more meaningful. This year Isis went back to work selling medical equipment, this time to audiologists. Not finding the work entirely satisfying, she took advantage of an offer to return to her first career, and is now retraining as a flight attendant for Continental Airlines. Isis will be based out of Houston, Texas. Her husband Patrick continues as a title company software sales manager.

From Mystic, we drove up to Montreal, which neither of us had visited before. We had lots of fun there with our good friend Flávio and Judith's sister Marúcia and her husband Bento, who took a flat there for the season, and Jon Chambers, who flew in from L.A. for the party. We found great museums in Montreal; my favorite was the Buckminster Fuller designed Biosphere, billed as the only environmental museum in North America.

Sonia has continued volunteering at the state-run Hospital da Lagoa. Her "sweatshop" has been busy turning out 106 colorful stuffed birds for the hospital's Christmas tree. She has a new grandniece, Luiza, daughter of her only nephew, Leandro. She has 5 nieces who have so far produced another grandniece and 7 grandnephews. Sonia continues to work sporadically on her "romance", a fact-based novel about her family from the 1850's through the 1960's. As you already know, travel is a top priority for Sonia, as it has been for her entire adult life.

We did well in that regard this year, during which I turned 65! This is a major milestone for me, as I now am eligible for Medicare and for a free city of Rio de Janeiro bus pass! We send our love and best wishes for your continued health and happiness. We hope to see you in 2012!

*Tryg & Sonia*