



Welcome, 2013!

We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words on them ourselves. The book is called 'Opportunity' and its first chapter is New Year's Day. - Edith Lovejoy Pierce

Dear Family & Friends,

We've procrastinated putting pen to paper for this year's greetings. With the past year being so eventful, we simply haven't known where to begin! From standing before a class of students with a hunger to learn English in Cambodia, to observing a million-dollar machine [clear American land mines in Laos](#), our life lessons and human interactions have been too rich not to share.

An Adventure Begins

Just over one year ago, we bid farewell to Heidelberg, where Trish had called home for ten years, and Shawn for one. The decision to leave Germany was difficult. However, with Trish's job eventually being downsized and Shawn having recently completed his Master's degree in International Relations, the timing seemed right for a new chapter and an adventure of a lifetime was born. We were hesitant about living out of only two bags for so long, but a year later we can say that we probably packed too much! Only the essentials were needed since just about anything can be found on the road.

Indonesia

Our travels commenced on the peaceful island of Bali, where locals devote a quarter of their income





to creating *canang sari*, or floral spiritual offerings. The Balinese-Hindus place *canang* on everything from car motors and bike seats, to their kitchen stoves. While in Bali, we had the chance to [meet the charismatic Ketut Lijer](#), the 90-something medicine man made famous by the book, *Eat, Pray, Love*. We also [taught English](#) at a local elementary school, [mingled with wild monkeys](#) at a temple perched high above the Indian Ocean, and enjoyed chats with [rice farmers](#) and locals making a living by scaling coconut palm trees and harvesting their fruit.



Malaysia

The transition to bustling Kuala Lumpur, following weeks of tranquil Balinese afternoons was initially a shock, nevertheless we found the blend of Chinese, Malaysian and Indian cultures to be fascinating. Though we missed scaling the famed [Petronas Towers](#) in Malaysia's capital city, we relished trips to cultural gems [Melaka](#) and [Penang](#), as well as a [butterfly sanctuary](#) and tropical fruit farm.

Thailand

Our overland 12-hour local bus journey from Malaysia to [Bangkok](#) was a preview of many to come throughout Southeast Asia, featuring meat packer-like temperatures, music pumping at volumes befitting discotheques and sometimes bad behavior from passengers not accustomed to an intrusion into their personal spaces. In Bangkok, we 'earned our stripes,' learning how to outsmart conniving *tuktuk*/taxi drivers. After we'd become seasoned travelers, we tried our hand at [making Pad Thai](#) and other spicy Thai delicacies, and we also [attended birthday festivities for Thailand's king](#) whose images are emblazoned on just about every flat surface available.

Cambodia

In Cambodia, we [learned the fascinating art of silk-](#)

Nothing makes the earth so spacious as to have friends at a distance; they make the latitudes and longitudes. -Henry David Thoreau



[making](#), explored extraordinary [Angkorian temples](#), and interacted with locals whose lives tragically intersected with the Khmer Rouge not long ago. We were touched by their triumphs in light of such adversity and visited Killing Fields sites to better understand this chapter of Cambodian history and remember those 1.5 million people, one-fifth of Cambodia's population, who were murdered. It was a spontaneous jaunt from lively [Phnom Penh](#) to the rural province of [Takeo](#) that provided some of our trip's most powerful experiences. There, we stayed with a family of Cambodian educators that we wish could be cloned, for they are improving the lives of youth and community members with each English class that they teach, with each library that they help fill, and with each foreigner whom they host and teach about their culture. We embraced the opportunity to learn how to [thresh rice](#) and co-teach university and high school English classes with our hosts. We also spent several evenings leading informal English language sessions with high schoolers who wake up at that crack of dawn, to ride bumpy backroads to school, then return home to study or help their parents in the rice fields. They understand the importance of education and are hungry to learn. We found ourselves touched and inspired by their desire to succeed and to improve their communities.



Vietnam

We arrived in Vietnam just weeks before the widely-celebrated Vietnamese new year, *Tet*. Vibrant red decorations hung in [markets](#) alongside overflowing baskets of fresh vegetables and live animals - all sold by female merchants donning traditional [non-la hats](#). We braved thousands of [motorbikes](#) to cross roads in Ho Chi Minh City/Saigon, climbed through subterranean tunnels at Cu Chi, visited imperial palaces and tombs via [incense-lined roads](#), and remembered fallen soldiers from both sides of the



[war in Hué](#). We strolled the streets of romantic [lantern-adorned Hoi An by night](#), learned how to make Vietnamese spring rolls, [went sand-sledding](#), and took boat rides in the Mekong Delta and Thu Bon Rivers, culminating in Trish hopping onto a traditional basket boat piloted by a [playful Vietnamese fisherman](#). And we found ourselves inspired by a young British woman named Gabby, who, despite her blindness, moved to Vietnam to establish a nonprofit organization to help people with disabilities. Navigating Vietnam’s potholed, highly-trafficked streets is challenging enough for a sighted person, and yet somehow Gabby does so with grace. As we prepared to leave Hué by bus, we caught a parting glimpse of Gabby triumphantly pounding the pavement, her cane in hand. Meeting her left us asking ourselves, “What are we doing to make the world a better place?”

Laos

It comes as a surprise to many that Laos is the most heavily bombed country in the world. During the Vietnam War, more bombs were dropped on Laos than in all theaters of World War II combined. Tragically, approximately 80 million of the bombs dropped on the Ho Chi Minh Trail were ‘duds’ and today they continue to be randomly detonated by rice farmers trying to grow food for their families, or children playing in their backyards, leaving citizens maimed for life or killed.



To better understand the efforts to de-mine the country and the challenges faced by land mine victims, we visited a center where prosthetic limbs are made. One day, following a chance meeting with a team of Japanese NGO workers, we observed as they tested a million-dollar machine designed to [remove the ‘bombies’](#) from the landscape. We explored the famed Plain of Jars, a mysterious archaeological site destined for UNESCO World Heritage status, and visited the so-called Bomb Village, where villagers used American bomb shells to grow onions and construct makeshift fences. One villager even took the tails of American mortars and melted them down to make spoons for profit. Seventy-five percent of Laotians live on less than \$2 per day.



Laos



Laos



Laos



Laos

We taught English to a group of young students, visited a sacred temple with a [Buddha statue sadly bearing the marks of several wars](#). On a lighter note, we spent several days in the treasured city of Luang Prabang, with its array of gorgeous [temples](#) and a night market studded with handicrafts and a smorgasbord of culinary treats. Unfortunately, we picked up our only stomach bug of the entire trip during that meal, just after making plans to ride an elephant at a respected sanctuary the next day. Despite our stomach upsets that day, we persevered - enjoying a marvelous journey atop a beautiful, gentle beast that had been rescued from the country's logging industry.

Philippines

Our trip to the Philippines developed spontaneously, but we wanted very much to visit there because of Trish's paternal grandfather's connection to the country. During World War II, he was the sole survivor of his squad. As we visited the American Military Cemetery in Manila, we found it difficult to not reflect upon how things could have been very different had his friend not saved his life. Sadly, Tricia's grandfather passed a few months after our Manila visit, but we were happy to share with him our observations about the country for which he had so much curiosity. For several days, we escaped sprawling Manila, to visit the magnificent [Batad Rice Terraces](#), which we trekked, as well as the island of Bohol, famous for its Chocolate Hills and the world's smallest primates, the adorable, Gizmo-like [tarsier](#). We also snorkeled in a photogenic marine sanctuary, providing Tricia her first glimpse of the magnificent



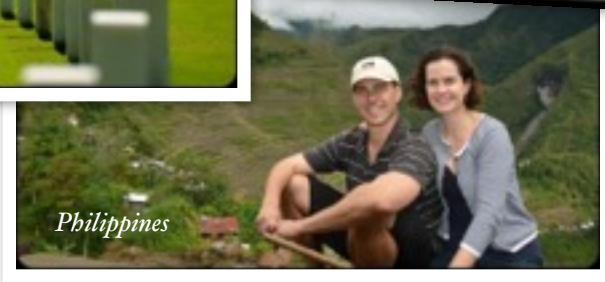
Laos



Laos



Laos



India

With the Southeast Asian leg of our trip winding to a close, and a westward trek 'home' inevitable, we decided to spend one month in India. With so much to see on the subcontinent, we set our sights on the country's south, with visits to manic Mumbai (where Trish was feasted upon by bedbugs, a problem that is rampant in American urban hotels too - beware!) and laid-back Goa, just in time for a smattering of colored powders during [Holi, the Festival of Colors](#). After the festivities, we rode in a second-class train cabin to Kerala, famed for its [placid backwaters](#). There, we spent an afternoon on a quiet covered boat, powered by men with bamboo poles. From the backwaters, we spent a week in the tea hills of Munnar, interacting with the ladies who worked so hard to harvest the leaves, as well as kind locals at the restaurant where they served us traditional delicious dishes laid out on banana leaves. During our return trip to Mumbai, we visited sacred caves on nearby [Elephanta Island](#), as well as Dharavi, one of the world's largest slums - estimated to house one million people! We were guided through the serpentine residential areas of Dharavi by a nonprofit that works extensively in the slum, and it changed the way we viewed slum-life. No one begged for money, rather the residents we saw were extremely industrious. The community produces an estimated \$1 billion in goods and services annually. Certainly, safety reform is needed, for young men smelted toxic metals wearing flip flops and no eye protection.





Germany

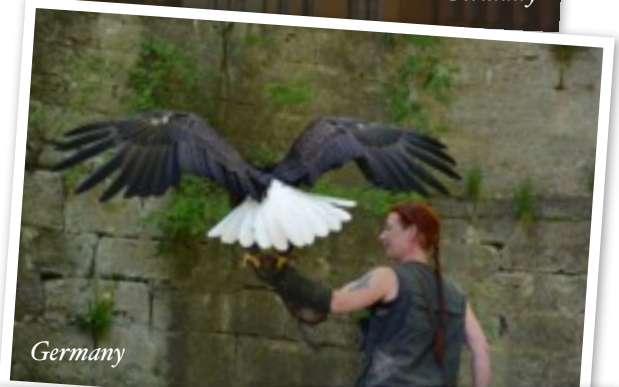
When we returned to Europe, we were delighted to have consistent hot water and Wifi service. We enjoyed Easter and Mother's Day festivities with Trish's parents, and took in an exciting bird of prey show with her cousin at the Schillingsfuerst Castle, while also visiting Bamberg, Rothenberg, and catching up with special friends in Heidelberg and Wuerzburg.

The United States & Canada

In the summer months, we returned to North America to visit our families and friends. We started our ambitious road trip in [St. Louis](#), with wonderful stops in Wisconsin, Chicago and Canada to visit Trish's family. Shawn was also able to visit his old stomping grounds in his native [Toronto](#) before heading east to experience [Ottawa](#), Québec City and Montréal. We then returned to Trish's hometown of Rock Island, where we visited with special friends. and from there, the trek westward began. With limited time before our European temporary car registration expired, we made quick stops in Nebraska, Colorado, [Route 66](#), sensational Santa Fe, the glorious [Grand Canyon](#), and [Las Vegas](#), finally reaching Shawn's parents' home in [Reno](#), Nevada. We caught up with Shawn's family friends and high school classmates there in the high desert, while filling weekends with the Virginia City Ostrich and Camel Races, [Reno Hot Air Balloon Dawn Patrol](#), a Lake Tahoe visit, and wild horse sightings. We also took a brief camping trip to the Pacific Northwest, where we slept among California's magnificent [Coastal Redwoods](#), visited Trish's friend along the scenic Oregon Coast and her cousin in lovely Seattle, and a quick stop in quirky, but fun, Portland. Along with Shawn's parents, we explored Napa Valley for a weekend full of wine-tasting and bocce ball, and finally, we took a short jaunt to San Francisco to greet the famed [sea lions](#) and renew our passports.

And Now...

In November, we returned to Germany, where Trish's parents have





Nevada



Arizona



Ottawa



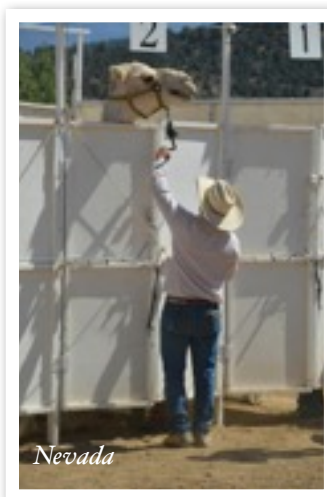
Arizona

retired to quaint Oberammergau. We're continuing to do freelance work with our fledgling communications business, and are currently plotting our next move. If you are curious to find ways to get involved with some of the noble nonprofits we've observed during our travels, check out the Participate tab of Tricia's [blog](#).

Finally, to those of you who graciously showed us your home country during our travels, and to our family and friends who generously hosted us this year, we say thank you for the wonderful times together! While we've tried to explore the world in an aggressive fashion this year, we regret that we couldn't see all our special friends and family. Here's hoping our paths will cross in 2013!

Until then, we wish you health, happiness and the time to pursue what you love.

All the best,
Tricia & Shawn



Nevada



Nevada



Seattle

Resolve to make at least one person happy every day, and then in ten years you may have made three thousand, six hundred and fifty persons happy, or brightened a small town by your contribution to the fund of general enjoyment. -Sydney Smith



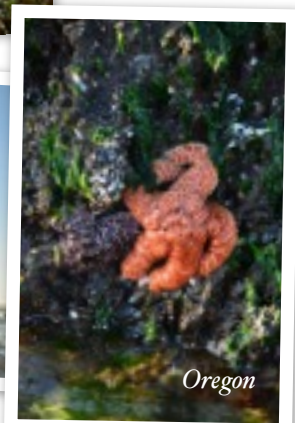
Oregon



Nevada



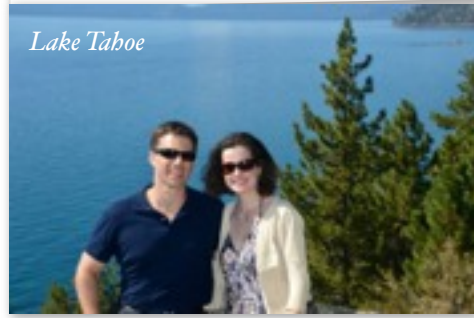
Oregon



Oregon



California



Lake Tahoe