

TONY AND JILL'S TENERIFE BLOG 2014



North west face of El Teide

Some people seem to like these wanders through our life, others can't stand them. We are encouraged by those who ask us to continue. These days the piece would probably be called a 'Blog.' Useless fact coming up: sometimes, wrongly, called a 'Round Robin' this is actually a newsletter available to all our correspondents at the same time. To be pedantic, a 'round robin' progresses from person-to-person, each of whom individually, adds to it. Probably need parchment and a quill pen for that.

This time it is not really about Tenerife as much as about our travels, although we are so besotted with our little dog, Scruffy, that we could fill the whole piece with stories about her. But on the home front, Tony remained President of the Palm Gardens Community of Owners [our condominium] and, to the consternation of all, in 2014 the developers fell into financial administration. A sort of Chapter 11 in US terms.

We have been told that [nearly] every community has at least one black sheep [bad apple?], who opposes everyone and everything. We agree, as we have one of those, a frustrated female non-achiever who leans very heavily on the grape. She opposes everything and is without social skills other than to call others any name she can think of, publicly but never to their face. No surprise there. But by keeping our cool and doing the right things, she has been outvoted every time, even when she started accusing us and our Administrator of absconding with Community funds. After an AGM and two subsequent EGM's, common sense prevailed, dues paid and Tony voted back into office for a further year.

Apart from the comings and goings of friends who long-term rent or have homes out here, our friend Jan from the UK stayed in June for 10 days and Tony's sister, Patricia Helen. For over fifty years she has lived in Coppet near Geneva in Switzerland for the summer months and at Bandol, on the Mediterranean, in the South of France for the rest of the year. Being exactly ten years older than Tony she is amazing and goes swimming every day, preferably in the sea. We passed many hours reminiscing and discussing her future, trying to persuade her that commuting between the two homes was giving her more stress than she needed, particularly as the Swiss property required quite a lot of maintenance work to bring it up to scratch. We were delighted to hear that on her return home she had placed the property on the market and was in the process of simplifying her life. We gather that moving from Switzerland was a three-van job with friends who hired the van and did the journey three times with her on board! I forgot to mention that she is an artist and had to move literally hundreds of paintings. We are relieved that she no longer has to travel so much.

TRAVELS

Of course, the major event for us in 2014 was the long planned visit to the USA. Much saving of pennies in the 'Little Tin Box' while the trip hurtled towards us. First it was eighteen months away, then, [overnight it seemed] six months, then; "We're off next week".

Scruffy was packed off to the 'Poochies Pet Hotel' for her holiday, then home to pack our new, super-lightweight Timberland cases. But what clothes to take? What would the weather be like in Chicago, Sacramento, Seattle, Greensboro, Fort Lauderdale and Miami? Oh well, there are shops in the USA.

We had planned the itinerary to make the journey as stress-free as possible, so instead of flying from our local airport [Tenerife South] direct to London Gatwick, we flew to London Heathrow via Madrid. This because our Chicago flight the next day was from Heathrow. This clever thinking was largely outweighed by the fact that Madrid airport is one of the new ones in which everywhere is far away from anywhere you want to get to. Plus the fact that our incoming flight was a little late and our outgoing wasn't indicated on the boards. Much rushing about until we reached the gate. The agent laughed and said no hurry as our flight was in another hour's time. So much for forward planning.

Arrived at Heathrow; took bus to Heathrow Sheraton Hotel and had an evening snack in the bar. No comment. Next morning took a bus to Terminal 5, a big barn at which check-in is when they want - not when you arrive. So we hung about and then went through for breakfast at the Giraffe Café. Busy and adequate. Then into the bowels of the new terminal [well a couple of years old by then], ride on a shuttle train and to the terminal extension which was virtually empty.

Eventually we boarded our 747-400 and turned left on entering. We had decided to try the British Airways World Traveller Plus cabin which is somewhere between cattle and business classes. The main feature from Tony's [long-legged] point of view is the seating pitch. In addition, the seats are a sort of compromise. They reminded him of the first class seats of fifty years ago - gosh, what a long time ago that was! We both found the eight-hour flight comfortable with excellent service and have no doubt that the cabin and its seating arrangement is worth the money.

CHICAGO, OHIO

Arrived in Chicago at the same time as about five other transatlantic flights. Nothing has been changed by the US border agency to make arrival in their country anything other than a pain. A two-hour wait as the gigantic queue inched forward made us feel decidedly unwelcome. The strident female camp commandant at the head of the line, who would direct visitors to the next available border agent, spoke with a definite East European accent and did it with gusto and a singular lack of friendliness. On



The Palmer House Hotel



River cruise



Navy Pier



the other hand, the agent was charm itself and asked why we would possibly want to go to Sacramento from here in Chicago. Seemed satisfied that we were visiting Jill's cousin.

Eventually, like limp rags, we came out into the bedlam where people meet people. Eventually we found old friends Chuck Berndt and his wife Rachael who had kindly offered to meet us at the airport. We drove into downtown Chicago and they dropped us at the Palmer House Hotel. One of the oldest in Chicago [and the USA], which has recently been modernised or, better described, restored with all mod cons. Its history is fascinating and is from where the 'chocolate brownie' originated. The public areas are a treat for sore eyes and have been done beautifully. Our room was comfortable, adequate but not spacious.

At this point we will allow ourselves a social comment. After freshening up in our bedroom we walked down the main staircase into the large and very impressive reception area and noticed that every armchair and seat was occupied by people looking down and scrabbling with their personal miniature 'social' screen. Oh dear, what a waste of such magnificent surroundings.

We went out to dinner with our friends but had to admit that with the eight-hour flight, a six-hour time difference and the immigration delays, zing was not with us. We had a lovely re-union but discovered, sadly, that they could not spend any more time with us as a close friend was very ill in hospital and they would have to visit him the next day.

Next day was a glorious sunny morning so we decided to go on an architectural river boat tour. Fab-ul-ous. The city looked really splendid with the sun reflecting wonderful images in the high-rise glass buildings. Second day we decided to go for a long walk down to the re-developed Navy Pier. We felt that it was a wasted opportunity, a bit of a damp squib and needed much more pizzazz to make it attractive, although to be fair, there were several unfinished areas. As this was our first visit to the US for quite a few years, it was our first introduction to new pricing levels. Two Ben & Jerry ice-creams: \$14... ouch! Then off to a large AT&T telephone showroom to acquire a local telephone SIM card for our mobile. After nearly three hours of trying, the sales assistant gave up

the ghost and we bought a cheapo US cell-phone for \$28.50. It was raining by then so we didn't get much mooching time and walked back down Michigan Avenue without any window shopping... probably just as well.

Friday and we were off to begin our train adventure on the Amtrak 'California Zephyr' to... California. We took a cab to Chicago Union Station which is not very pre-possessing as it's underground. We learned that the train companies who owned the ground used the basement for trains so that they could then sell or let the space above for monster commercial buildings. These are called air-leases. There you are, a completely useless item of information.

Suitcases are checked just as at an airport and one waits in the lounge. We had booked sleeper tickets which is the equivalent of being in first class. Actually the lounge didn't feel very first class - as much soda as you like and packets of pretzels as snacks. Then we boarded the train; one walks along the tracks and there it is... a long and very shiny aluminium twin-decked train. We eventually found our sleeper cabin and the attendant told us that he would be with us to Sacramento. He explained that while it had a daytime armchair and settee he would set up the bunks later on in the evening and that we had full use of the dining and observation cars at any time.

We learned that Amtrak, the railway company, is in fact, a government owned enterprise and over the course of our travelling it became clear that [the curse of] government ownership is the same everywhere. Capital deficient with the status of a declining poor relation. The rolling stock is now getting on for forty years old and is tired... very. They look after it but it isn't what you expect to find in the USA. Equally, the tracks, most of which are single track, are owned by the private freight companies and Amtrak have to defer to them all the time. Some passenger trains are hours late from having to sit in sidings while two-mile-long freight lumber by.

We left Union Station dead on time at mid-day, rumbling out of Chicago through the suburbs. Not a pretty sight with graffiti everywhere. Then we were called for dinner. In all, over the two and a half days, we had two breakfasts, three lunches and two dinners on the train and given the size of the galley it was perfectly adequate. They really try hard, with the staff pleasant and helpful. Given that they have limited freezer space and cooking facilities the food was OK. The steaks were especially good. A few years ago, as a cost saving, Amtrak gave up silver service with proper crockery and cutlery and substituted good looking plastic which is chucked away after each meal. A sad saving.

The real issue with the food is that it has a sameness and pre-packed-ness to it that is a tad boring. But you can go to the observation car for snacks and drinks at any time. There is no doubt that travelling by train in the US is different. You see parts



Jill beside the California Zephyr



The tracks need attention



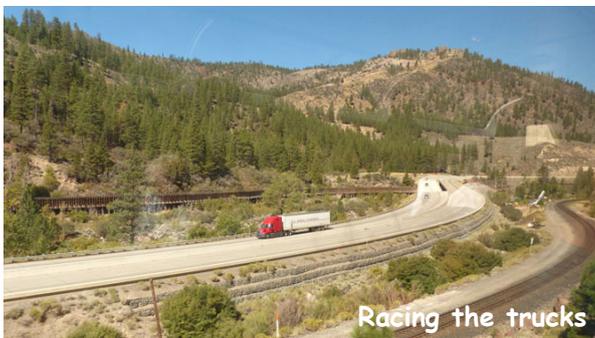
The flat plains of the mid-west



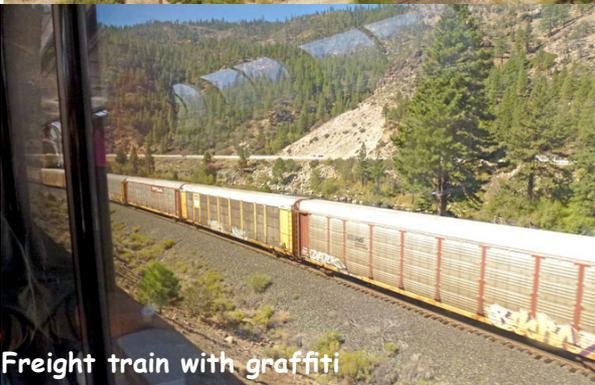
Our cabin



...and then there are the deaths....



Racing the trucks



Freight train with graffiti



that are not normally visible and trundling across the seemingly endless plains of the Midwest underlines the vastness of the continent... and you really do trundle. At one stage the conductor, who is in charge of the whole caboodle, came on the PA and said that passengers had no need to be frightened at the speed we were doing... "sure we're doing 68 miles an hour but it's quite safe on this section of track." Normally speed clocks in at 50 mph so quite different to the 200 mph high speed trains in other countries. To say that the nights are comfortable is stretching reality ever so slightly, added to which, using the 'en-suite' bathroom is quite an interesting manoeuvre, especially for Jill in the top bunk. Of course, it is all a new experience and on the first night one really wants to look out of the window but of course, there is nothing to see except large expanses of agriculture - in the dark.

The other thing one gets used to is the siren/hooter/horn/klaxon. We learned later that there are either three, four or five trumpet horns that make that lovely haunting American train sound that gives warning of its passing. The engineer, or driver, is apparently required by law to sound the horn when approaching each crossing in town or country. These crossings are marked but not gated and the whole railway is unfenced, so the idea is to tell anyone who is crossing the line that the train is approaching at 'high speed' and that they should get the hell off the lines. This means that every few yards the engineer sounds the horn, day and night, even in the middle of nowhere.

We were chatting to a steward in the saloon car and he explained why the Amtrak trains are often late... sometimes by hours. "This is due to the delays as we wait for freight trains, for breakdowns in the rolling stock, for sickness on board or adverse weather conditions" [We had to wait for over an hour the first night when a passenger had a heart attack in the mid-west, miles from town and they arranged an ambulance to collect him.] The steward continued, saying... "We are quite often de-railed and have to be put back on the track", then, as an afterthought... "of course, sometimes it's when we hit an animal or someone on a crossing. People are so used to these long trains trundling unfenced through their towns that they ignore the horns and just cross and then... bang." Gulp!

Occasionally the interstate highways run alongside the rail track and while the train would eventually outrun the trucks it was normally only when we passed through a village or town. It was quite exiting to urge the train on as the truck pulled ahead. And these are big trucks. The other fascinating observation is just what is carried by freight railways. In some areas it is seemingly endless coal trains - amazing how much coal is still freighted in the USA. Then it's timber in more endless open wagons designed for lumber and flat boards. Then, cars or should we say automobiles? They are shipped in double-deck closed wagons - one lot, made in Japan or Korea, going from the West

Coast to Middle and Eastern states and in the opposite direction, vehicles made in Europe going from East Coast to the Middle and West. Then there is oil. Lots of very grubby oil tanker wagons. Having been brought up on westerns - 'oater' films - we didn't see many cattle cars with their cargo of itinerant tramps. The tracks we rode were populated by Santa Fe and Burlington freight lines, many adorned with endless amounts of graffiti.

On the second day we arrived in Denver at an elevation of 5,000 + feet. Remember that the highest mountain in Britain is just over 3000 feet. Anyway, it is here that we were joined by Rosemary, Jill's cousin and her husband David who had flown out from California to spend the last part of the journey with us. A major motivation for the whole trip was to spend time with them as we don't see each other that often, in fact the last time was nearly ten years ago. What a pleasure as they joined us for lunch when the train started its climb into the Rockies. Luckily David is a train buff, of which more later. He was able to give us lots of information, added to which Amtrak also provided a couple of local professors who travelled with us and gave a running commentary on the terrain over the p/a system. This was the most interesting part of the train ride, both historically and scenically.

The train climbs slowly through the Rockies as the track winds up and down and round the spurs, outcrops and valleys, with some vulnerable areas protected from gale force winds by old wagons laden with ballast, lining the verges. The track continues alongside the Colorado river, with people white-water rafting [and on one occasion mooning at the train!] and fishing, with the Engineer tooting his horn frequently. It's difficult to imagine the hardship of the thousands of Chinese and Irish workmen who built the railroad in the eighteen hundreds and it's still the same railway. Of course, health and safety were hardly words in the English language in those days. Even more difficult to visualise is the bravery and skill of the original surveyors who walked and rode horses to plan the route.

We assumed that most passengers on the train were on holiday because every few miles it would stop to let people with rucksacks off at picturesque villages snuggled into valleys and creeks. One of Tony's favourite books has long been 'Men to Match My Mountains' by Irving Stone which described the effort needed to conquer America's West. For example, as one travels across the Donner Pass in air-conditioned comfort, eating lunch and having a chilled beer, it is almost impossible to imagine the hardships of the Donner wagon train which, at the wrong time of the year, ignored advice by following the wrong route, became snowbound and, it is said, the few survivors took to cannibalism. A few years ago we drove along the twin-lane freeway that crosses the pass, together with the train tracks on which we were now riding.



Cousins Jill & Rosemary



Camerman Tony



Climbing into the Rockies



Donner Pass



Alcatraz

Family fun in San Francisco, Sacramento & Rocklin



Sutters Fort

SAN FRANCISCO, SACRAMENTO & ROCKLIN CA

Eventually we arrived at Sacramento to be met by Todd, Rosemary and David's son, who was on his rest period from his day job of flying passenger jet aircraft. In the family GM Suburban [don't even go there], we drove the few miles to Scenic Drive, Rocklin, their super-comfortable home. Ten days or so with the family included visits to Pier 39 and Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco where we indulged in a gigantic ice cream at the Chocolate Factory; a drive up into the mountains to apple country; a fascinating tour of Sutter's Fort in Sacramento and a tour of David's printing plant. Driving to a restaurant one evening we had full view of the gigantic smoke pall given off by one of the largest forest fires to hit Northern California. Thousands of firemen fought the blaze over many weeks to contain it but not before many thousands of acres of forest were destroyed, apparently started by a disgruntled worker.



Earlier we mentioned that David is a railway buff. That is a modest way of putting it. His business is to print T-shirts, sweatshirts and caps etc., with railway memorabilia including many of the much loved and remembered early steam trains and diesels. His company is called 'Daylight Sales', named after a train called the 'Daylight Special' - or something - which are sold online, at railway kiosks, museums and the enormous shows held across the States each year and which are visited by like-minded railway enthusiasts. [www.daylightsales.com - there you are Dave, a free plug!].

The real surprise is in the basement of the house which undoubtedly provided strong motivation for the original purchase. There is a large room, some fifty feet long and twenty wide in which there is a model railway to end all model railways. It is complete with sidings, valleys, mountains, towns and shunting yards, all full of scale-model rolling stock that belches steam, hoots like real trains and runs to computer-controlled precision. It can only be described as FAN-TAS-TIC. David has several friends who turn up at weekends to operate the railway. Rosemary advised us not to describe the activity as 'playing trains' as this would likely have us back at the airport PDQ. I had great fun photographing the wholly realistic layout. I mean, miniature trains that look and sound like the real thing coming round the mountain, across bridges with headlights blazing, then through towns, tunnels, sidings and farms. The investment brings a tear to the eye and as for moving to a new home at some time in the future - oh yeah, dream on!

They live in a gated community of just over eight hundred houses. The 'Clubhouse' would do credit to any high-end golf course and comes complete with library, swimming pool, bar and restaurant.

It is peaceful sitting on their balcony watching a deer with antlers graze just below us, listening to a train whistle echoing in the distance while the sun sets in the west - it makes for one of the calming moments of life, although a pesky squirrel has to be shooed away as it has taken a fancy to Rosemary's geraniums and is munching its way through each pot. In the sitting room Rosemary has a complex TV station all to herself and to our amazement sits watching Downton Abbey, Foyle's War and other British TV shows, [just like us] while knitting, ironing or just relaxing.

PORTLAND & SEATTLE

All good things come to an end and it was time to go back to the Sacramento Amtrak depot to catch the 'Starlight Express' to Portland, Oregon. The station was in the process of being re-built and waiting for the nearly two-hour delayed train was not comfortable. Did I say that we are gluttons for punishment? The train was another double-decker



Dave & Rosemary



Home at Rocklin



Sacramento station



Portland



Seattle



and we had our sleeper cabin. Next morning we had breakfast and watched a seemingly endless forest scene slide by with just a hint of autumn colour from some of the trees - so different from the arid rocky mountain range we had travelled ten days before. The track here is much better and we reached undreamed of speeds - probably 60 mph! That is until we came to the outskirts of Portland where the train crew had to get out and operate the track points because there was no-one on duty to do it for them. We never did understand the two-hour delay.

We stopped off in Portland for a couple of days on Dave and Rosemary's recommendation and they were right. We loved the place and would have happily stayed for longer. Everything from Washington Park rose gardens with its magnificent view over the city, to the street fair, the river walk, old town and restaurants. But, onwards, ever onwards, to the Amtrak yard to pick-up the Seattle 'Cascades Express'. This was a relatively new single-deck train that could have done the Paris to Lyon run. We had booked business class and it was a comfortable four-hour journey.

Our two days in Seattle were also a pleasure despite rain after our first day. We had booked into the Mayflower Park Hotel, one of the oldies, which was well run with cheerful staff. We went on a ferry trip across the sound to one of the islands, in the rain, and had a super evening down on the city docks with a fine meal at Ivars on the waterfront. It is unlikely that we will do it again but we would happily go back to Seattle for a longer period. It is one of the few corners of the USA that previous business and holiday visits had left out.

This US trip highlighted that there are two different Americas. On our first morning in Seattle we opened the curtains to see that there were over forty people sleeping rough under cardboard and newspapers opposite us, sheltered by the awning of the Macy's block-sized downtown departmental store. Travelling by train underlined that the comfortable middle-class life we had always enjoyed in the 'States' was not necessarily enjoyed by all the population - a sad observation and quite a surprise, especially in such a lovely city setting.





'Bookends' owned by the late Jackie Collins



adjoining railway lines degenerates, but crossing the country by train certainly gives one the opportunity to grasp this essential fact and confirmed our observations that life is not kind to those people living alongside them. Endless slums and unkempt trailer parks lined both sides of the track as we trundled south from the Carolinas, through Georgia and into Florida.

It was this leg of the journey that suggested to us that we would probably not travel on Amtrak in future although, without exception, the various crews had been courteous and helpful and that it had been a wonderfully worthwhile experience.

At the Fort Lauderdale Amtrak depot our friends Allan and Lee waited, smiling broadly as they watched the 'super liner' train glide in. They are very good friends and had a year earlier re-located to Florida from San Francisco. We have known each other for many years as we used to meet frequently at conferences. In those days we chuckled at the strange fact that we met more often than most people who live in the same country. They have a lovely house on the river, complete with swimming pool and dock. The dock isn't much use as the water level is only a few foot deep and the bridges give no headroom. Maybe a canoe!

They had researched a full program for us and we thoroughly enjoyed a day's outing on the 'hop-on, hop-off' water taxis, listening to the commentaries of the voluble and gossipy captains as we passed by the mansions and yachts of the rich, famous and infamous. A highlight was a visit to a new riverside Tea Room that an English couple have set up. A full, old-fashioned delight of elegant sandwiches, cream cakes and a choice of some forty varieties of tea, served in a wonderful collection of bone china cups and matching teapots. It was a special treat. Once again, good food and company made this a particularly happy part of our six-week progress through the USA, particularly as a whole bunch of their relatives were visiting from the West Coast and the patio lunch was terrific fun.

MIAMI - COCONUT GROVE

Then we were off to Miami, some thirty miles down the road, for a six-day cool-off after our rather frantic few weeks. We had booked our only hire car of the trip for this leg of the journey and had reserved a Toyota Rav 4 so we could sit high and watch the

scenery. But the best laid plans, etc., and Six-T didn't have one when we went to their office. They had set aside a Mini Cooper Countryman which was a new model at the time and looked like an ordinary mini, on steroids. Much bigger than the original minis and in the US called a BMW Mini, but fun to drive.

We were booked into the Mutiny Hotel at Coconut Grove, which is an Aparthotel in that one has a small apartment complete with kitchen and sitting room. It was very good with a terrific view. We did our own breakfast catering at the local 'Fresh Market', had lunch out during drives down the Florida Keys and walked the short distance to a good choice of evening restaurants - a French one was particularly good on our last night.

We decided that this was our first and last visit to Miami. Nothing wrong with it and people who like it, love it, but as we live on a tropical island anyway, the beaches held no delight for us and generally it wasn't our kind of town. So, off to Miami airport [badly signposted from Coconut Grove] and the overnight red-eye flight back to London in the comfort of BA's World Travellers Plus cabin. And that was the six-week American visit done and dusted.

HOME

We made the mistake of travelling by rail [metro/underground] from Heathrow to Victoria Station needing two changes of tube train. Not something to be recommended after an overnight flight with two suitcases and cabin baggage on a busy Saturday morning. Eventually we checked into the Grosvenor Hotel at Victoria Station. It used to be a good, comfortable place to stay. Now, apparently foreign owned, its management skills are well below the standard we expected for the price. Breakfast, always a box to tick in any hotel, was a definite no-tick process.

Our reason to stay there was to be close to the station for the train to Gatwick airport for our flight back to Tenerife on the Monday, after we had spent some time with Toby, Jill's son and Ruth our daughter-in-law. That was fine, as were the meals we had with them.

Finally, home again and re-united with Scruffy. What's the old line; "It's oh so nice to go trav'lin but it's oh, oh, oh so nice to come home." Or something!

Jill, being a greater glutton for punishment than Tony, returned to London before Christmas and spent time with long-time friend Jan in Petersfield and went up to London to see Toby and Ruth. She had planned to drive down to Bristol to see Jonathan, Jess and grandchildren Grace, Benji and Oscar, but when she arrived at the Car Hire desk at Gatwick she found that she had left her driving license on the dining room table at home, so ended up exploring even more rail journeys in an effort to keep to her visiting schedule. I think she was quite pleased to get home again and won't be making that mistake again!

For once we had Christmas on our own and almost dozed through the New Year's Eve countdown for 2015. So, that was the year that was. Onwards to 2015.



View from our apartment



Wild iguana



Victoria Station