

February 2004

This actually starts on January 31st with me flying to Detroit on Saturday morning. I had a training class on Monday and Tuesday so flew in early to catch up with Jeremy. We had a quick lunch and then went out to see his Cobra which is undergoing some restoration. It took awhile to find the place but it was full of fascinating cars - a Morris Oxford, an old Jaguar various MGs and even an old Morgan. We pottered about went for a walk in the neighbourhood and then finally decided to have a movie evening. Now we talked a lot about the Cohn Brother's films so we had a Cohn Brother's fest and watched Raising Arizona and Fargo which is quite an 'out-there' film for me but I enjoyed it.

Sunday was cold and we pottered about until we went to the Detroit Institute of Art for the afternoon. Back to a fabulous fish/crab dinner in front of the Superbowl. Jeremy's girlfriend Kim came over and joined us for food and the game. The class on Monday was actually quite good - one of the other two people was an older man - you can imagine how deeply patronising he was to me - oh joy. Class Tuesday was fine and I had an uneventful flight home.

Now before the meal on Monday I took a call from my cousin Nancy whose mother has been fairly ill recently, having had a heart attack at 92 she was struggling health-wise. Sadly on Wednesday evening she lost the fight. My weekend was quiet with a couple of evenings out with friends and I made arrangements to take a flight on Sunday morning to make it up to Amy's for the funeral - a 4am start and I as thankful the weather back up north was ok and no delays - I even got in in time to have breakfast with Amy and go with them to the funeral home. There was a great turnout of family (which is all they had wanted) and Amy gave a lovely eulogy. It was very sad to have to say goodbye to Alice but she'd had a good innings. The wake was lots and lots of food and wine all round - everybody left by around 5pm and then we just chilled - I hadn't been able to face returning that night - Amy and Stephen kindly put me up despite having just had a houseful of guests at their mother's wake. Up at 5.00 am to get back in time for my flight. Needless to say I was in bed at 8pm Monday night.

Tuesday I flew to Florida, whizzed around a couple of dealers to get the info that I needed for the investigation that I was doing. It was whistle-stop but I did get what I needed. It was hot there too so I was glad to be making this a day trip - no prizes for guessing that I went to bed as soon as I got home. Rest of the week was long long days (not getting home until gone 8pm with a 7am start) at work trying to get these two reports out.

And then the wedding weekend - Friday night was Laurie's hen night and I was surprised at how tame and quiet it was - we went to a Chinese where the food was too salty and relatively tasteless and we all were done by 9pm - I was amazed. Saturday was chores and then Deb, Marla and I decided to have an anti-Valentine's Day evening - so we went to Lettice Souprise you (salad bar) for dinner and then on to a bowling alley. It was a riot - our first balls were all phenomenal (two strikes and a 9) and it went downhill from there. I was the only one who did better on the second game - which was no great achievement when my score was around 60s (average is over 100!). We had a blast though and didn't have to watch

couples snogging all around. The group of lesbians on our right were downright scary - all built like tin cans (NO curves in the vertical plane - only horizontal) and covered in tattoos, smoking like chimneys and cussing like my redneck friend of January... Deb looked worried when I whispered "I don't fancy yours much" until she realised that I was joking. Sunday was the wedding - Zach and Laurie are a really cute couple - both just 40 - her first wedding his second but they are really suited together. My problem was that it was a black tie event so I had to wear a long frock. Deb vetoed my silver frock so I wore my Sydney opera house dress - purple and gold floor-length, very girly. With my hair moussed and Deb having done my makeup I wasn't surprised when people actually said that I looked nice (although the way some people put it, it was like the whole thing was a total revelation to them - I didn't think I looked THAT bad normally, but we'll pass over that now!). It started at 5pm so we met Marla there. The wedding was very traditional - the Chuppa and the dancing and so forth. The food was great and despite feeling like a spare part at the beginning of the dancing I got into it eventually. All too soon it was all over and we were getting the car and going home. Sunday is a tough evening for a wedding as I had work on Monday. The only thing I had to contend with all week was a stressy out-of-sorts boss and too much work - and one evening at bookclub where we were reading a light book thankfully.

The weekend was something else though - I've been trying to get together with a friend of a friend to go hiking for what seems like forever and we'd finally made plans to go to the Smokies over the weekend, dependant on the weather he would come and pick me up in his plane. Yes indeedy - he has a small plane. So there I was on Friday all packed and ready waiting to see if the weather was good enough for him to collect me or whether I had to drive the 5 hours up to Gatlinberg. Well, a call came in at 3pm - "I'm in Atlanta when can you get here?" - It transpires that he flew in to northern Atlanta (I work in southern Atlanta) so I had to find out where the nearest (not the International which IS the nearest) airport was so he could come and pick me up - Fulton County is about 15 miles away. So he took off again and made it to the airport near and I didn't have to cross town in the rush hour - whew!

So I was off - what a hoot. We met at the airfield and then got my stuff into his plane and we took off. It was supposed to be bumpy but felt pretty good to me - the visibility wasn't great so we had to fly by instruments. Now I've been in a very small plane before but not upfront - it was fascinating and I was constantly pointing at things and asking questions (Saturday evening I was going to regret this!). We landed, got rental car and went to the hotel via pizza. Both exhausted we went to our rooms at around 9.30pm.

Up at 7.30 am, breakfast and off to the hills - now the Smokies are beautiful and we tried to get up the highest peak - St Clare - hiking along we found the going pretty tough as many parts were totally covered in ice and at one point we did a hands-and-knees crossing of one particularly treacherous part, I am glad that Dan didn't think about getting his camera out until I was way past it! The overhangs were beautiful and we had some great views of "Chimneystacks". Eventually we were foiled as we simply could not get any further without crampons so had to turn back. We came down and watched the river whilst eating lunch and then took another hike alongside a gorgeous river up to some rather nice waterfalls.



Waterfall



Dan in rock formation (ice on left)

So - after hiking pretty much all day we wended our weary way back to the airport in Nashville and flying back the 2 hours to Atlanta - well it should have been 1.5 but almost as soon as we were up at our flight altitude and the plane was trimmed he handed the controls to me (serves me right for asking all of those questions). Basically I didn't quite steer the most straight of courses - but it didn't help that he had told me to follow the horizon. Only telling me that the horizon was disappearing due to it being dusk, after about 20 minutes I was wondering why I couldn't work out why I couldn't keep the horizon in the right place and keep the correct altitude . . . it was quite stressful being at 7,000 feet with the controls in my hands while he looked out the window and looked at maps and generally didn't watch what I was doing very much at all. Anyway - once we were in Atlanta airspace he took over (thankfully, for all concerned) and we finally found the landing lights and got down safely. I was still pretty hyped about having had my first flying "lesson". It was dark and about 7.30pm and the weather was bad up in Louisville so he bailed out of going back that evening and came back with me to dinner at Doc Chey's before crashing to sleep.

Early in the morning I was up pumping the Morgan tyres (he wanted a spin in the Mog and it was a reciprocal deal based on me having flown the plane) so we could get him to the airport to get home and work - so I dropped him off at around 8am to a glorious day and I am sure a fabulous flight home. I dashed back - caught up with Andy (who I went biking with in the summer) who is over from Reno for 2 weeks doing training and then met up with Maxine, John, Jay & Brian to go hiking in the north Georgia Mountains. We did our first hike through the forest to some falls which were very pretty and very slippery, so I stayed at the bottom and watched the others go up as my knee was feeling the efforts of the previous day. Then we went to another spot and walked around a nature trail and around a large lake - the weather was beautiful and it was pretty wonderful being out and about.



Brian, Jay, Maxine, Andy and me (glamorous as ever!)

The rest of the week was mayhem as I was getting myself ready to go to do some testing in Northern California at the same time as trying to run the show at work as Stefan was on holiday - apart from there being snow in Atlanta causing my plane to be cancelled and the flight I was bounced onto was totally full so I was in cattle class I got out there pretty OK. The first day was testing CD changers and listening to a lot of techs whining, the second day was in San Jose listening to another set of techs whining. Interestingly enough nobody could actually demonstrate the issue that I had flown all the way out there to investigate so I was not overly sympathetic to their whines. Thankfully I had been given a dealer loaner car for my weekend out there as on Friday evening as I was driving along route 101 I finally found it. So whilst being amazed at the gorgeous seashore cliffs and scenery I was also madly testing radio stations and changing radios every 15 minutes (I found an amazing road that went from the cliff tops all the way to the shore through more wiggles and winds than I have been on in an absolute age and feeling like I was almost submerged in a huge forest. It was phenomenal despite the fact that I was still testing) - I passed the local "surfing madness" spontaneous event at Half Moon Bay on my way back up the coast to the hotel 50 dudes bouncing about in the 30ft waves crashing onto the beach at sunset - quite a sight for sure. It was so beautiful and I even found a remote derelict house on the cliff top that I want to live in (fat chance).

Saturday morning I tested all the way out to Yosemite which was around 150 miles away.... When I got there there was a huge sign about needing to carry snowchains - (of course I didn't have any) when I got to the pay booth the ranger looked down into the car (roof off) and didn't laugh when I said "yes" when she asked me about chains. Apparently 3 miles ahead they were clearing but might still ask us to stop and chain up - I took the risk and went on anyway. 3.5 miles further ahead I got stopped by another ranger - somebody had flipped their car so would I drive slowly please (yes of course) but no requirement for chains so I was thrilled. Driving through the initial part was gorgeous and I saw the moon in the sky behind the trees laden with snow - it's always eerie to see the moon during the day. In the opposite direction an older guy on a very tall tractor hauling a snow scraper behind took one look down on me as went past me in the Boxster (with the roof down) and shook his head at me like I was doing a very wrong thing - which was odd as I was grinning from ear to ear - it didn't feel bad to me. I had one section where the car was in 3rd gear (auto) with me doing about 3 mph - wheel spinning over the frozen snow but I was basically fine driving around on summer tyres.

Now Yosemite is an astonishingly beautiful place, and despite the fact that most of the trails were closed just driving around the lower valley floor was enough for me, every twist

or turn showed another breathtaking view. I HAVE to go back when the hiking is open and I'd love to get up to the top of Half Dome (and NOT the cable-car route). My favourite part was at Bridal Falls where there were about 5 people with enormous plate cameras taking pictures (a la Ansel Adams) on glass plates 10 inches square and I was snapping on my little digi-camera (I was kicking myself for not bringing my SLR but at least it was one up from a throw-away camera). I drive around basically awe-struck until I realised that the sun was going down and the temperature was dropping and I'd have to leave before it all froze again. One tree kindly dumped a bunch of snow in my lap on the way out (my punishment for driving around open-topped and having a lot of fun I guess).



Me with Half Dome in background



Bridal Falls

A long drive finally took me north of San Francisco to Napa Valley and I collapsed exhausted in the hotel room at around 8pm.

Sunday was spent meandering up and down Napa and Sonoma valleys taking in the scenery and even a petrified forest - I've done one now and know how dull it is - I'll not have to do that again now. The wine region is very pretty but I'm spoilt as I've cycled around all of the French wine regions and they are prettier. Of course I couldn't taste the wine as I was driving but it was fun visiting the Nieman-Coppola and Beringer vineyards and hopping in and out of some of the other famous ones too.



Nieman-Coppola



Beringer

Drove back along the coast that I loved and returned the car to the dealer around 5.30pm took a taxi to the airport and was relieved that I had been upgraded on my way back as I was flying overnight and needed the sleep. It was worth it though - what a wonderful place and what an amazing weekend, another one I shan't forget in a hurry for sure, and a fabulous end to a pretty amazing month.