



Greetings and good wishes to one and all -- from Sydney! Here we are, writing our annual letter, faced with whether to make it long or short. Of course it should be short as we all have too much to read and really don't have time to pour over all the details in giant missives. But posterity and a small but real audience make us want it to be long. What should we do? How about two versions? In one an "executive summary" for most of you and in another a detailed manual for those select few who have a taste for travel - sometimes joyous and sometimes difficult, but always, as Michelin Guides say, "worth the trip".

So here is a summary that will whiz by just like that wonderful play "Shakespeare in 90 seconds". It is so short it might be called the CEO summary: In 2006 we saw Athens + the Peloponnese + Syros + Myknos + Santorini + Crete + Rhodes + Kos. And then Turkey - coastal + inland + Istanbul. And then, after one of our flew airflights Thailand - Bangkok + Kanchanaburi + Phuket + Krabi + Hat Yai. And then Georgetown, Malaysia; then Sumatra, Indonesia - Medan + Bukit Lawang + Gunnung Leuser NP + Lake Toba + Bukit-tingi + Maninjau + Pekanbaru. And again Malaysia - Malacca + Kuala Lumpur + Tioman Island. Not done, we then saw Singapore and then Java - Batam + Pelni Boat + Jakarta + Jogjakarta + Borobudur + Mt Bromo and Bali - Medewi Beach + Ubud. And we ended up in Sydney, Australia, pictured above and below.



They were the best of times and at times difficult times. Hardly had we come to a place, whether we stayed two days or two weeks, than it seemed we were off again, carried away by our whirlwind lives. The whole year has just evaporated, as usual. Before you know it we'll be pressed to write our 2007 letter. Until then, our very, very, very best wishes and hopes that our paths will soon cross.

Jan and Gerry

## *The Detail Lover's Guide to Jan and Gerry's 2006*

### *Themes*

***It was the year of the suitcase.*** After spending most of 2005 living in apartments we spent nine of the twelve months of 2006 flitting from place to place. We started 2006 with a month in Athens in an apartment with a wonderful terrace for breakfasts, etc and ended it in Sydney with two months of looking out across the dining table at almost ever-blue, lightly clouded skies.

***In between it was our year of the boat,*** taking a dozen or so around the Greek Islands, one over to Turkey and another across the Sea of Marmara to Istanbul, getting from Malaysia to Sumatra and back by ferry and from Singapore to Java by luxurious Pelni boat. But we haven't yet ridden the Sydney harbor ferry.

***It was the year of the stolen computers and ruined cameras.*** In 2004 we lost both of our laptops to Ecuadorean thieves; throughout 2005 we maintained ownership; but in late May, 2006 an Istanbul hotel clerk walked away with part of the hotel safe contents and our laptops, including precious, not well-enough backed up data. Before the laptop theft Gerry lost his camera as it came crashing down after he tripped; afterwards, in Thailand, he lost the replacement as he dunked it in beautiful, blue saltwater.

***It was the year of new and renewed culinary delights.*** In Greece we got to love deep-fried squid; in Thailand there was nothing we didn't like and we pigged out at buffet breakfasts and at street and night market. In Malaysia we discovered a style of Indian cooking new to us – cheap, served on banana leaves, and eaten with the fingers, if you want – but up-market from what we'd had in genuine India back in 1978. In Singapore we fell in love with their up-market "Hawkers" stands. We couldn't get enough of these mostly, but not always air-conditioned food courts. Sadly, we mostly were not impressed by Indonesia food, but thought we might not have tried the right things after we had two wonderful banquets in Ubud, Bali. In Sydney we were very happy to get back to "real food" – that is, the stuff we grew up on and that we now cook for ourselves.

***It was the year of new holidays.*** We took part in the growing Greek celebration of New Years (undoubtedly influenced by American cultural imperialism). We attended national day celebrations in Greece (a military parade in Crete), Turkey (American style marching bands and pom-pom girls in a stadium in Iznik), and Indonesia (school kids galore marching through very small Maninjau). In Singapore we simultaneously experienced Hindu Diwali, Moslem Ramadan, and Chinese Mid-Autumn (Mooncake) Festival. In Sydney we experienced the secular holidays of Melbourne Cup Day and The Ashes (Cricket) Test Match. We've already had two outings of Carols, Aussie style, and seen off the boats for the Sydney-Hobart yacht race. This letter will be in the ether before we partake of Aussie fireworks for New Years.

***It was the year of light at the end of the tunnel for Russian and German.*** Gerry failed at his attempts to learn Greek, Turkish, Thai (though now he can read some things in what had been previously an impenetrable script), Burmese, and Indonesia's Bahasa Nationals. Jan made no attempt at these, sticking relentlessly to Russian. She can now correspond in Russian and keep our diary in it. Gerry worked on German, finished a history of Vietnam, and now almost has a full novel under his belt. Our language gulag has been complemented in Sydney by an almost daily two-hour dose of TV news (in succession), in German, Spanish, French, and Russian. Sometimes we think we understand Strine (what they speak in Oz) and sometimes we doubt it.

***It was the year of not seeing old friends or family and meeting lots of new, interesting people.*** In 2005 we were in Europe and we had visitors. In 2006 we were too far away for drop-ins, but in consolation we met half a dozen very interesting couples and individuals whom we spent some time with here and there. We've just heard from two of them in the last week. Will we keep in touch or will it be like the old days of passenger liners crossing the Atlantic? Then (or so said Gerry's aunt and uncle who did it many times) after a

week together people would vow to keep in touch and then business and family would conspire to void that vow.

***It was the year of wanting some possessions and actually getting them.*** We got tired of living out of suitcases and three times trimming ourselves down even more to meet weight limitations on airplanes. In Sydney we've partially furnished a kitchen, bought a TV and bikes, and a fair dinkum of other goods. Most important has been having broadband internet access with which we've been reading real-estate ads for the US!



**Borobudur, Java, Indonesia.**

## *Chronology*

**January** found us in our fourth month in Athens continuing our lesson that winter on the Mediterranean can be pretty cold. We were treated to the sight of downtown Athens in the snow, no less, and some bitter cold offshore winds that tested our minimal cold-weather gear. We softies demanded so much heat that we used up all the oil in the tank, to the consternation of the residents of the other apartment heated from the same tank. On the brighter (warmer?) side we continued to enjoy the frequent sunshine and even ventured out onto the terrace of our small top-floor apartment for the odd lunch.

In **February** we set off to explore more of Greece. As an early celebration of Gerry's birthday, we spent five days driving, visiting magnificent Delphi, getting to know Olympia, and revisiting some sites from our 1985 trip such as Mystras and Corinth. To our surprise much of the country in the Peloponnese was covered in snow and even some of the roads. But that just added to the beauty of the area. Then it was back to Athens to catch a ferry to the islands – or so we thought. Bad weather kept ferries from running and us in Athens for another week. After a few days of hoping we settled in and enjoyed being located downtown in the heart of the old city while revisiting the Acropolis and Archeology museum and another half dozen famous places.

We finally did manage to catch a ferry and set off to wander the Greek islands. We initially thought that three days on each of three or four islands would be enough. But it wasn't to be. We were stranded on Syros for 12 days because of a ferry strike. It was nearly **March** before we got to nearby Mykonos and then it took us five days to make the further one hour journey to Delos – but it was worth the wait; ended only by Gerry's brow-beating of the ferry company to run a boat. We went to Naxos as it was the only connection to Santorini and Amorgos. On Naxos we had some lovely walks and were reluctant to go on and give up our great hosts. We experienced drenching rain on Amorgos and failed to get into the famous monastery because – in spite of what locals said – it was closed for repairs. The geology of Santorini was awesome, just as everybody had said.



Almost as awesome was getting up at 3:00 a.m. to catch a 4:30 a.m. ferry to Crete, where we spent nearly three weeks – the end of March and the first week of **April**. The early arrival allowed us to also be awed by the snow-covered peaks of Crete, seen from off-shore as we arrived. While in Crete the remaining winter chills give way to early spring sunshine; a few more hardy than we swam in the near shore. We were really impressed by the super-famous Knossos and by the lesser known sites. And we had great hikes and met a fine Aussie hiking companion. Then it was on to more beautiful days in Rhodes and a week's enjoyment of its 14<sup>th</sup> Century Venetian walled city. Our last stop in Greece was Kos, also impressive.

Finally, however, with ten days left in April we said goodbye to Greece and hopped a ferry across the straits from Kos to Bodrum. By that time we had been in Greek territory nearly seven months while Europe's visa regulations allowed Gerry only three. Fortunately the Greek border official was very laid back and said nothing more than "Goodbye" as we boarded the boat.

Even though we had covered most of the Mediterranean and Aegean coast from Antalya to Cannakale during our 2002 visit to Turkey, we found plenty of new places to see. We landed at Bodrum, which was new to us in spite of its being a British holiday favorite; we loved seeing its old fort and harbor and the remnants of Halicarnassus, which lie nearly at its heart. Our favorite "new" discovery was certainly Priene, a Greek city on a hill that is so atmospheric it ought to be bottled. We clambered over its temples, strolled its paved streets, and admired the vistas from its heights. We also visited nearby Miletus and Didyma, both lovely sites and then made a terrific return visit to Ephesus. This time, with all electronics "go" Gerry was able to take all the pictures he wanted. We stayed in Selcuk and were happily amazed when on arrival a tout for the place we wanted to stay, the Kiwi Pension, met us at the bus and twisted our arms to stay at the Kiwi. They also own an apartment, lovely and cheap, and we reluctantly turned down the chance to stay there a month.

As **May** began we moved inland, to the tourist trap of Pamukkale with its badly overrated terraced pools constructed from calcium deposits. There we saw what we thought was the real treasure of the place: Hierapolis, with its extensive necropolis and city remains. Unfortunately much of our visit was in the rain (nearly coatless, we were so used to warm coast weather we hadn't carried them) but it didn't dampen our enthusiasm for the place. From there we made a lovely day trip into the interior and through mountains that had snow in the passes to the wonderful Roman city of Aphrodisia. We'd planned to go but were surprised how it came about: while walking along a mini-van stopped and we were asked if we'd like to join their tour! One of the wonderful things about this city is that it was almost completely buried and unknown to moderns until about 1970.

Then it was time to head north, towards Istanbul, which we did by zig-zagging to Ucak, Kutahya, Bursa, and Iznik. Ucak had a fine museum but wasn't really worth the stop. And unfortunately, just before we arrived, at a rest stop Gerry had a fall which resulted in his Sony video camera flying through the air and landing completely kaput. Kutahya was a former capitol of the Ottomans, when their sphere of control was very small. It was a wonderful place to see old Turkish houses, admittedly somewhat decayed. We made a day trip to the remains of another impressive Roman city, Aizanoi; besides being impressed by it we marveled at the nearly untouched remains of a Turkish country village that sits beside it. Archeological laws have meant that as the more ancient has been excavated the more recent has decayed untouched.

We completed our foray into the Turkish interior by spending a week in Bursa, ancient capital of Turkey and now a busy and fairly cosmopolitan metropolis. There we found super friendly people, including a bus driver who with no prompting stopped his bus and asked Gerry if he wanted to get on. It's also where Gerry found a stand-in video-still camera and was at last in the picture-taking business again. He spent an entire day going around and getting nearly a week's worth of pictures. Our last stop was Iznik where we enjoyed reliving Christian history; here after all was where the Council of Nicosia was held. The town also had some interesting Roman ruins and a good collection of Ottoman buildings. From there we took a ferry across the Sea of Marmara to Istanbul.

We had been in Istanbul in 1975 en route for our two-year stint in Tehran but remembered so very little that we found we had to discover it anew. We thoroughly enjoyed our stay even though it was here that our laptops were stolen. The second time around we were wiser and better prepared having ensured that no personal data was stored on them. We were also relieved that the hotel whose clerk had absconded with them quickly offered compensation, extending to the loan of a laptop for the rest of our stay. Unfortunately we had no backups for nearly two weeks of photos and they were permanently lost, including those of Bursa.

Only a few days into **June** we flew – our first flight in nearly a year – to Bangkok. We'd chosen it because Gerry wanted to go overland as much as possible to Indonesia and thus continue the trip we'd made from Beijing to Bangkok in 1999-2001. Sans laptops it was easier for us to cram our luggage into the required 20 kgs each for the flight from Istanbul to Bangkok. Arriving in the old Don Muang airport was a bit like coming home. We had pre-booked a hotel in the Silom district where we spent just enough time to order Gerry a new passport and buy Jan a new laptop. Then we were off again, this time to the northwest of Bangkok to Kanchanaburi, site of the infamous death railway built for the Japanese by slave and POW labor during WWII. In between sobering visits to somewhat lugubrious war memorials we swam and ate and ate and swam, the swimming never coming close to compensating for all those extra calories consumed.

Then it was back to Bangkok and shopping for a laptop for Gerry and other miscellaneous chores, like getting health check-ups. Gerry got his new passport and so we were ready to go off and see the south of the country. By this time it was **July** and we had to renew our visas, so crossed into Burma for a day. What a contrast with laid-back and prosperous Thailand! With a new 30-day visa in hand we were free to explore Phuket and Ao-Nang where we were blessed to find wonderful hotels at great prices because they were still putting the finishing touches to post-tsunami repairs ready for the 2006-2007 high season. We swam, ate, read, and swam. Gerry gave a salt-water bath to his new camera. At least he'd gotten a partial repair of the old Sony so he could take stills though not video. Once we'd had enough of sand and sea we headed even further south, stopping briefly in Hat Yai, to get to Malaysia.

Our first goal was Penang where we celebrated Jan's 57th birthday and her eighth on this trip by sitting atop the panoramic revolving restaurant and gorging on the best of Malaysian fusion food. The fusion of course is between Malay, Chinese, and Indian cuisines. We had planned to explore the Malaysian highlands until we learned that national holidays were imminent and so changed tack and headed instead across to Sumatra and our first visit to Indonesia, which we saw in **August**. Sumatra was both very good and very bad. We loved the interior, especially the high country like that around Lake Toba; we were thrilled to see Orang Utans in the wild at Bukit Lawang, but hated the polluted, crowded, noisy, dirty cities like Medan and Pekanbaru. From Pekanbaru we set sail back across the Malacca Straits (don't names like these give you goose bumps?) to, surprise, Malacca.

For the next month, i.e. **September**, we got to know Malacca and Kuala Lumpur much better than on our first trip there back in 1985. We were charmed by the reconstructed past of Malacca, where once-slums had been made tourist-quaint. Kuala Lumpur had plenty of modern, which we liked, and several charming Victorian buildings. We made an outing to the new capitol which is too grandiose. These and our comfy hotel made us linger there almost two weeks. And then en route to Singapore – already at the bus station with tickets in hand – we made a last minute decision to detour to Tioman Island; we did it because we wanted to avoid the World Bank-IMF crowds; how happy we were, as we had some of the easiest and best snorkeling off the beach we have ever experienced. We liked it so much we stayed a week.

We spent half of the month in Singapore, old colonial city, now Confucianism's showplace. We guess that the kind of paternalistic authoritarianism installed by Lee Kwan Yu is a long-term goal of the Chinese Communist Party. It must be more than a tad frustrating to live under (in fact, we know so, as such was said to us by one business man we spoke to), but it makes for super safe and comfortable tourism. We stayed on the edge of Little India and gorged ourselves on Singapore's amazing food courts. No hamburger joints found here. It's the original fast food: stir fries and noodle soups, tofu and pressed duck, dumplings and turnip cake. To mix both metaphors and ethnicities it is a veritable smorgasbord! The only thing that couldn't be found was Singapore Noodles!

Finally, however, we said goodbye to first world comfort and boarded yet another ferry to head to Indonesia's Batam Island, a mere hour away. There we holed up for two days, enjoying good Ramadan fast-breaking banquets and more unlimited internet, until the departure of our Pelni boat for Jakarta. "Pelni" is the acronym for "national ferry boats of Indonesia", a fast-shrinking network of inter-island ferry services that now carries mostly freight and those passengers who can't afford a plane or who like us have time to spare. We traveled first class with all mod cons and found only three of the fifty or so other first class cabins occupied. (As we write there is news about a similar Pelni boat sinking in a storm. Perhaps 500-800 lives were lost.)

**October** was spent seeing what we could of Java. Jakarta wasn't quite as bad as predicted perhaps because we found a good hotel that was a short walk from a restaurant that served good food and even wine. Here we visited museums and the ancient Dutch port of Batavia and found and locked in our apartment in Sydney and bought airplane tickets from Bali to ensure our arrival by Nov. 5.

After a week in Jakarta, we spent a week in Jogjakarta, and then, finally, after years of waiting and wondering, we made it to Borobodur! Seeing this world-famous Buddhist temple was a key draw in our going to Java. We circumambulated every one of its terraces, admiring one after the other kilometers of bas-relief carvings telling the sacred stories of the life of the Buddha and other famous Buddhist tales. Magnificent! In spite of the overpowering heat, it was a worthy expedition. Around Jogjakarta we saw another half-dozen great temples, worthy of fame if not overshadowed by Borobodur. The most memorable was seeing the Perambanan temple of Siva Mahadev as a backdrop to the Ramayana ballet.

Leaving Java we went to that other draw, Bali, and learned a few of its secrets. We now know why people come; we sure liked it. Our first five days were at a very agreeable resort, Medewi, where we swam and ate and read as usual, seasoned with a bit of surfer-watching from our front veranda. Our next five days were in Ubud at Ketut's Place; there our room romantically hung on the side of a ravine and we had a fine multi-course traditional Bali dinner cooked by the owner's family. While most of Indonesia is Muslim most of Bali is Hindu and we enjoyed the change from Mosques, which are much less interestingly decorated than the Hindu temples, which are covered from pedestal to tower with images of their beliefs.

Finally, in early **November**, (are you as out of breath as we are?) we were off to Sydney for three months of doing not very much. While in Singapore we'd found via Craig's List (see [criagslist.org](http://criagslist.org)) a sublet and that fixed our dates for us. In our first couple of days we saw the Opera and the Harbor Bridge and were delighted with these famous icons. Since then we've walked the beaches, bought bicycles and struggled over rolling coastal roads, been to several concerts, including at the Opera House, and gotten to know Sydneysiders. Thanks to several sources of good used books and an economical TV we found our days are also filled with reading and following world events. We are enjoying it tremendously.

*[Below: South Head with view of North Head, Sydney.]*



**We keep predicting the demise of our travel adventure, but are still not sure when that will happen. We still have the rest of Australia and New Zealand on our list of must-sees, not to mention South Africa and more of South America. But we're not sure when or how we'll complete that list. Tune in next year to find out!**

Gerry and Jan