

Anne and Dave's Christmas Letter for 2018

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Dear friends and family,

This somewhat delayed Xmas letter comes with our very best wishes for a happy 2018 Christmas Season and good health and happiness in 2019.

Our year has been interspersed with "new eyes", musical concerts in Sydney taking the train for the day, and visits to Alex and family whenever there is a call for help - times we really enjoy as we see the grandkids growing up so fast.

In March we had an excellent final celebratory dinner for Beaten Track, to which Heather and Paul Shelley and accountant Brendan O'Connell came. Later we enjoyed a Hunter Valley Escape for three days between various medical appointments – more exploration of vineyards including one on a minibus tour to keep us from breaking the law.



"End of Beaten Track" Celebration Dinner at The Cook's Garden in North Turramurra (left) and Lisa's new farm guard dog Lola (right)

In mid-March we did our by now annual trip around NSW with a Newcastle concert, visiting Port Macquarie friends, a quick stopover in Coonabarabran, then to see Derek and Lisa (and new dog Lola) on the farm near Orange, plus Canberra for business and pleasure – all keeping us entertained until just before Easter for a home recovery period!

Immediately following that trip Anne started the removal of cataracts saga which seemed to go on for ever and during which Dave was the sole driver on all shopping sorties. All went so well that Dave started the same performance in November to be completed in January 2019, giving Anne plenty of driving experience with much more confidence now that the signposts are actually legible!

We returned to Port Macquarie briefly in September, this time for our good friend David's 90th birthday anniversary – very special and enabled many other friends to be seen unexpectedly and to catch up with their exploits and wellbeing. It happened that the 20th anniversary of the Kendall National Violin Competition was taking place on the same weekend allowing Anne to reminisce on previous times and meet past

members including Goetz and Jeanell who were part of a celebratory performance of young musicians and the life blood of the whole competition together with donors of prizes. Anne has just been made a Life Member of the Kendall National Violin Competition – a very proud lady!

In August we enjoyed a repeat visit to Hamilton Island in north Queensland – a trip that was forcibly postponed previously due to the devastation of cyclone Tracey. There were still signs of damage to vegetation and some apartment buildings but most of the business premises were back in full swing. It was a relaxed visit this time, only walking to meals and an exciting expedition on an electric golf buggy at the golf course which turned out to be somewhat stressful due to the steep gradients. This was on top of an excellent meal which helped the digestive process!



Sunrise at Hamilton Island (upper left), Anne with her electric buggy on Dent Island's golf course (upper right), Dave and Anne just before returning from the Reef (lower left) and the famous Whitehaven Beach (lower right)

During the year Dave has occupied himself in the retirement village by assisting to run the Tablet Group (where seemingly all but tablets are the conversation most of the time), installing Wi-Fi in the Clubhouse, attending a Seniors Computer and Technology conference in Sydney, researching many technological ideas for TVs and security systems, acting as a sounding board for the Company web site, and on a personal level purchasing a smart new lightweight camera needing lots of experimentation. Anne continues with her more mundane occupations of Mahjong, Tai Chi and group balance & exercise classes.

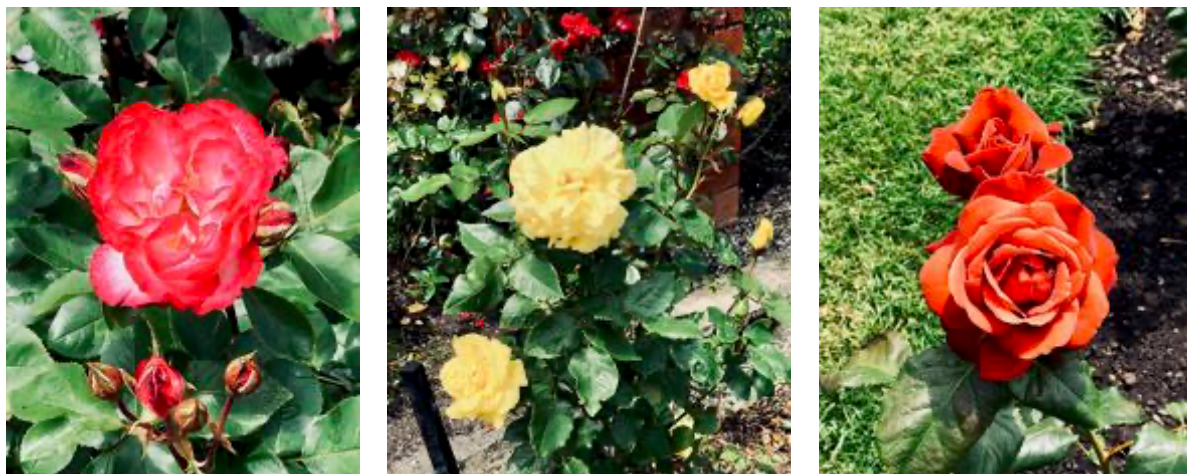
Our major trip this year has been to New Zealand from the end of November to mid-December. The object was to visit regions not yet explored and to catch up with old friends.

It started in Wellington staying for a few days with Jenny and Richard Nanson before they took off for Doubtful Sound down south. We visited the Weta Workshop (of Lord of the Rings fame) with them – a most unusual and highly exacting craft mostly executed manually by experts using reject material to produce perfect replicas of people and environments for films – a fascinating two hours.



Weta Workshop creations from Lord of the Rings

During our stay in Wellington we went to the markets for breakfast and then eventually found the cable car to take us up to the top of the Botanic Gardens. The gardens were in full bloom, very colourful and extensive and as they are situated on a steep hill like most people we took the cable car up and walked back down.



Some beautiful roses at the Wellington Botanic Gardens Rose Garden

We then joined our bus tour group who had just arrived after several days together going around the South Island – the eclectic group of Americans, Canadians, English, Irish and Australians were well bonded partly due to the virulent coughs and colds that had swept round the bus (and which we enjoyed later).

The first place to visit was Te Papa, New Zealand's National Museum situated on Wellington's waterfront, where we went through the "Gallipoli: The Scale of War"

exhibition with significant input from Sir Peter Jackson and the Weta Workshop – an excellent but gruelling experience. Have a look at <http://gallipoli.tepapa.govt.nz/> for a good idea of the fantastic larger than life-size figures and scenery.



Some figures from the "Gallipoli: The Scale of War" exhibition at Te Papa

After leaving Wellington, the bus took us to Lake Taupo catching glimpses of the volcanoes through gaps in the heavy clouds and rain. We enjoyed a nice lunch and some shopping in Lake Taupo before setting off towards Rotorua with a brief stop at the Huka Falls.



Huka Falls near Lake Taupo (left), the old Bath House now the Rotorua Museum (upper right), and evening scene on Lake Rotorua with birds on near shore and steam vents on distant shore (lower right)

Our hotel in Rotorua was on the banks of Lake Rotorua near to the magnificent old bath house – a feature of Rotorua is the smelly vapours coming up from vents all around town. We enjoyed a great breakfast (except for the coffee) at the spectacular Skyline Rotorua where some took a luge ride.



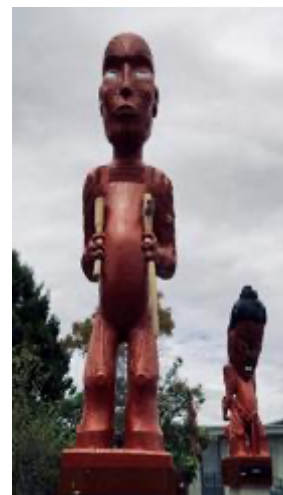
View over Rotorua from the Skyline Rotorua (left), and two of our luge riders starting their run (right),

Then we visited the Agrodome for an amusing education on all things related to sheep breeds with live demonstrations and delivered in a broad vernacular which we Australians found hard to understand – the largely Asian audience appeared to enjoy the show even if they couldn't understand what he was saying.



The sheep show at the Agrodome showing various breeds of sheep and our presenter

Later we enjoyed a most interesting visit to Te Puia, the Centre for New Zealand's Maori Culture and Geothermal Wonders. Our guide helped us around the exhibits of Maori Culture and through the Maori Arts and Crafts Centre where talented students are taught their trade under the guidance of master craftsmen.



Sculpture (left) and greenstone monument (centre) at entrance to Te Puia, and more totem sculptures within the complex (right)



Meeting houses in Te Puia, front of larger building (left) and the older small one (right)



Birdman kite (upper left), woodworking students with all their tools and master craftsman (upper right), and examples of Maori weapons made of stone and wood with student learning to carve stone (lower)

Within the complex is a wonderful geothermal valley with active geysers, geothermal hot pools and boiling mud lakes.



Te Puia Geothermal Valley – geysers (left), hot pools (upper middle), more geysers (upper right), and boiling mud lake (lower right)

On our last evening in Rotorua, we were treated to a Maori Hangi and concert at the hotel which we all enjoyed including those selected to be our chiefs. At the end of the concert our Irishman responded with a traditional Irish folk song.



Russell – The Duke of Marlborough (upper left), another restored house (upper right), the main wharf with Pahia in the distance (lower left), and view from Flagstaff Hill (lower right)

Our arrival at Paihia, on the Bay of Islands, was greeted by strong winds and heavy rain storms so some of our planned activities were somewhat curtailed. We took a leisurely ferry ride across to Russell, the first capital of New Zealand, now a sleepy tourist town with some remarkably restored buildings. We managed to see the town in only a little rain. The tiny town also hosts huge cruise ships on occasion which must completely swamp the town – they recently ran out of food during such a visit!

We then went on a special tour to view the Waitangi Treaty Grounds where a treaty was drawn up and signed in 1840 between the British crown representatives and over 500 Maori tribal chiefs. Our fascinating guide managed to keep up an interesting monologue throughout the tour while walking backwards! Arguments about the Treaty are still ongoing but at least it did happen and it underpins much of the complex story of New Zealand. The museum and grounds are well worth a visit and include three enormous ceremonial war canoes which have their own museum.



Waitangi Treaty Grounds – war canoes (upper left), flagpole (upper right), meeting house (lower left), and view from Treaty Grounds (lower right)

The return trip to Auckland was uneventful except for a brief coffee stop at Whangarei (which looked to be quite a nice place) and a side trip to the Kauri Museum at Matakohē on the west coast. That night we enjoyed a celebratory dinner at our hotel and said goodbyes to our fellow coach travellers.



Some of our crowd at the Farewell Dinner at Rydges in Auckland

Before leaving Auckland, we managed to catch up with John and Rona Lomas for two days – they now live in a very smart new retirement apartment with care facilities available when needed. The complex has excellent facilities and activities from restaurant to gym and Rona is well established with a number of new friends.

They drove us around Auckland to give us an idea of the central area after we had taken the Sky Tower lift up the many stories to see distant islands and the Auckland spread – almost obscured in the clouds and rain. On our second day in Auckland we all went out to a winery in the south west and ended up in a railway-car restaurant at a nursery for lunch, before the wet journey back to their home where Rona cooked an excellent dinner for us. It was a brief but most rewarding visit.

From Auckland we flew down to Nelson (on the north coast of the South Island), collected a car and drove direct to Collingwood on the northwest tip. We had booked a four-wheel drive minibus tour to the very end of Farewell Spit, a long tongue of sand jutting out eastwards into the Cook Strait between the north and south islands.

There was a howling wind blowing the sand horizontally at about 40 kms per hour (timed by someone's flying hat) so the whole trip was surreal and quite exciting! The minibus took us right up to the end of Farewell Spit east of the old lighthouse which was a welcome spot for lunch. The driver had an amazing knowledge of the birds in the area, plus a great ability to avoid tidal pools and quick sands in the often very poor visibility.



Birds of Golden Bay on the eastern side of Farewell Spit



Cape Farewell at western end of Farewell Spit (left)
and bird flying on ocean beach with wild waves and wind-blown sands (right)



New Zealand Fur Seals on the rocks of Fossil Point near Cape Farewell



View of Farewell Spit Lighthouse through the wind-blown sand (upper left), our driver checking out the route through the sand dunes (upper right), and a lighthouse keepers' cottage with our bus, driver and a couple of our group (lower)



Cape Farewell through the wind-blown sand on our return trip with view of split in rocky headland

After our second night at Collingwood we drove via Nelson to the eastern end of the South Island to spend 3 nights in Picton, a delightful small town which is the terminal for the inter-island ferries. On this trip we were blessed with fine weather going over Takaka Hill but the weather deteriorated after passing through Nelson.



View eastwards from Takaka Hill between Collingwood and Nelson (upper left), Pelorus Sound from Cullen Point near Havelock between Nelson and Picton (right), and Picton from the Havelock Road (lower left)

We enjoyed a delightful trip up the Marlborough Sound on the mail boat meeting some of the locals, who depend on the mail boat for supplies and human contact, as well as walkers from the Queen Charlotte Track (a section of which Dave had planned to do but cataracts had stopped that).



Picton waterfront – ferry terminal with inter-island ferry (upper), small boat harbour (lower left), and WW1 War Memorial (lower right)



Mail boat stops on Marlborough Sound



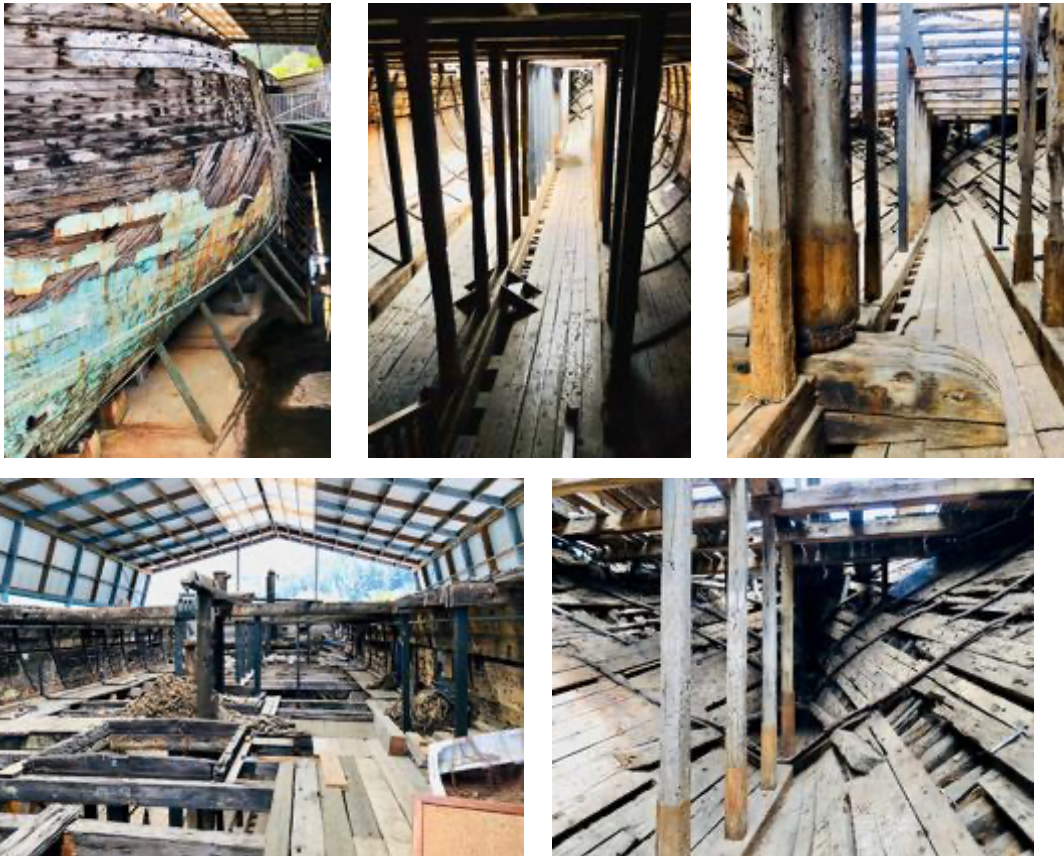
Entrance to Marlborough Sound from Cook Strait – farming property (left) and glimpse of North Island (right)



Ship Cove Marlborough Sound – our mail boat (left) and Anne enjoying a spot on dry land (right)

Back in Picton we looked around the maritime museum which houses the world's second oldest surviving merchant sailing ship and the only surviving ship that transported convicts to Australia – the Edwin Fox. It was built in India in 1858 constructed exclusively of teak and saul timber and had a varied lifetime culminating in being scrapped and sunk in the sound near Picton until the remains were

recovered and restored. It was amazing to be able to walk around the inside of the ship on the original timbers which are in great condition. The wooden hull was plated in iron which may have helped in its preservation.



The Edwin Fox – exterior in dry dock (upper left), below decks (upper middle and right), main deck under the protective roof (lower left), and below decks (lower right)

We returned to Nelson via Blenheim (the centre of a large wine growing district), the Wairau valley and the small town of St Arnaud (with glimpses of snow on the peaks and ski fields nearby). This route was quite different to that taken to get from Nelson to Picton a few days earlier.



Anne at the excellent Wine Station at Blenheim – great coffee and wine at a railway station! (left), and the Wairau Valley with wine grapes growing below the Mt Richmond Range (right)



Glimpses of snow on the peaks near St Arnaud (upper), crossing the Wairau River (lower left), and Lake Rotoiti near St Arnaud (lower right)

Back in Nelson, we caught a boat trip up the east coast of the Abel Tasman National Park which has developed into a fun tourist and local water activity destination in addition to the long walking trails along and across the peninsula. Unfortunately, we could only allocate one day to Abel Tasman so missed out on walking on dryland however it has given us ideas for the future!



Vista II – our Abel Tasman cruise boat with retractable landing ramp (left), the cruise departure point at Kaiteriteri (middle), and Split Apple Rock near Kaiteriteri (right)

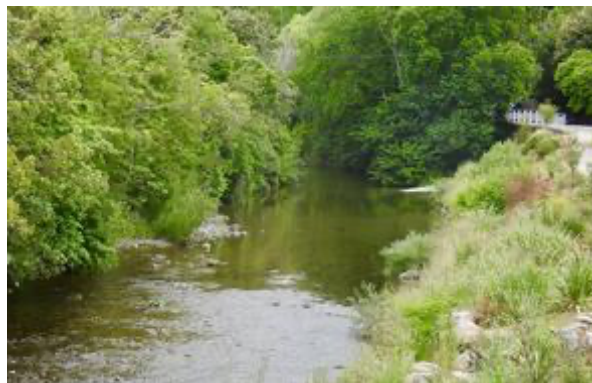


Birds on rocks near Kaiteriteri (left), entering Anchorage (middle), and the beach at Anchorage (right)



Birds and seals on the rocks at Tonga Island (above) and birds on sandbar at Awaro Bay (below)

We were able to explore in and around Nelson - a very clean town with the town centre tucked behind a hill to avoid the winds and weather. The walk up the hill to the Centre of New Zealand is well worth the effort and the views. We also discovered some excellent restaurants!



Nelson – walk along the River Maitai with flowering trees (above), and views from the Centre of New Zealand lookout (below)

The return journey to Sydney was a disaster starting with a problem plane from Nelson to Auckland which was scheduled to leave at midday - it didn't and we missed our Sydney connection eventually leaving at around 7.20 pm to arrive in Sydney to find no inter-terminal buses due to extensive road works around the airport - we eventually caught a normal bus to the domestic terminal to catch the dedicated bus to our parked car! A long series of roadworks up the M1 added to our woes and we arrived home at 1.30 am the next morning. Don't talk to Dave about the long green line walk between Auckland domestic and international terminals!

Now after three Christmas parties and various chores things are getting back to normal. Thankfully Christmas celebrations have been with Alex and family in Castle Cove this year, so apart from arriving with a bag of prawns we were free of duties. Anne caught up with sister-in-law Bev while in Sydney, while Derek and Lisa in Orange will get a hurried visit from son Sean before the New Year. Sean and Clare are now proud parents in London with the advent of son Archie in November.

Next year is shaping up to becoming an eventful overseas travel year (again), when we will both be able-bodied and sharp-eyed once more!

Hope you had a wonderful Christmas, and best wishes for the New Year and 2019.

Anne & Dave