



Christmas 2011



Some mothers do 'ave 'em! Meet the family ... hugs and kisses all round! The Hà Nội branch of the family

Here Be Dragons – Over the years, the New Year has begun for me in many strange places (ditches at the side of the road, dubious nightclubs, ...) and unusual ways (many of which are still subject to suppression orders). But the first day of 2011 began in the most magical of places and in the most unlikely of ways ever. At 7am on New Year's Day, I was doing T'ai chi on the deck of a luxury junk in Hạ Long Bay in northern Vietnam! Nam and I, along with my mother, Joan, and sister, Judith, were on a Vietnam adventure. We had arrived a couple of days before in Hà Nội, and we spent overnight on New Year's Eve sailing around the karsts of Hạ Long Bay to the east of Hà Nội. On our return to Hà Nội, we spent a morning with Nam's brother and two daughters. We then moved to central Vietnam, staying in Hội An and then Đà Nẵng, with side trips to the old Imperial Capital of Huế and the ruins at Mỹ Sơn, the Religious Capital of the ancient Chăm culture. From there we travelled to Nam's home city, Cần Thơ, in the Mê Kông River Delta. We spent two evenings with Nam's mother, sisters, their husbands and children – a considerable cultural learning experience for both families, especially with only a few of the group being bilingual. As we were leaving for our hotel on the first evening, Joan went up to Nam's mother to give her a good old-fashioned Aussie hug and kiss. Nam had to explain why my mother had suddenly attacked his mother, the hugging and kissing being foreign to their culture. By the end of our visit to Cần Thơ though, everyone was hugging and kissing with enthusiasm! We had brought Australian gifts such as opal jewellery, and we received gifts of silk and a complete Vietnamese dinner service! From Cần Thơ we went north to Hồ Chí Minh City, the former Sài Gòn, before returning home (somehow getting the entire dinner service safely home in the hand luggage).



The inaugural meal with the Vietnamese dinner service



Alan "sings" solo the "Pilgrims' Chorus" from Wagner's Tannhäuser



With the Clissold cousins

The Cần Thơ Flash – Nam has become keen on things sporting. In March he competed in the swim leg of a triathlon and in September he ran in the City – Bay Run (I am reluctant to even drive that far). All very commendable, you may say, but these events take place at an obscenely early hour on a Sunday morning. "Of course, I am keen to be up really early on Sunday to go with you and cheer you on," Alan lied, not very convincingly. I still manage to drag myself to the gym twice a week, and Nam now has also joined. I am convinced that I have found a flaw in the conventional laws of Physics: as each year goes by, 30 kilograms gets heavier and heavier.

Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here – In April, Neil Teague, a friend since University days, abandoned the bachelor life and married Kerry Marshall, whom Neil had known in school but had only reconnected with in recent times. I was delighted to be invited to be the Master of Ceremonies, and I donned dinner suit, top hat and white gloves, and, with cane in hand, performed as only I can. Some of the guests who had not previously met me presumed that I was a professional MC that they had hired for the occasion. I'm ever the performer – as my students say, "The subject is boring, but the lecturer is good entertainment value!"



That's not a wand, Harry Potter. THIS is a wand!



We're here for the children ...



The Mandarin meets Chairman Mao

No Leaves on the Pope's Staff for Alan – The highlights of Adelaide's social calendar are the twice yearly musical afternoons hosted by Mary Kolusniewski, at which funds are raised for Oxfam. Mary marshals an army of musicians and helpers to put on an extravaganza. Opera was the theme for April's concert, and Mary asked me to sing the "Pilgrims' Chorus" from Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. I tried my best with this sublime piece of music-drama, but as an opera singer I make a good University lecturer! I am surprised that I have not been expelled from The Richard Wagner Society. In the story of the opera, the knight Tannhäuser is at first a willing captive of Venus and partakes of the orgiastic delights of the Venusberg. Even though he leaves Venus and repents his behaviour, it is declared that he has no more chance of being forgiven than the Pope's staff has of sprouting leaves. The opera ends with the announcement that the Pope's staff has indeed sprouted young leaves, a sign that Tannhäuser has obtained God's forgiveness. Alas, for my musical sins, the Pope's staff remains barren. As usual, I was a regular patron of Opera in 2011 (performances by people who were actually talented), both the State Opera season and also four operas in Melbourne.

Alan gets the Third Degree – In April, I was raised to the Third Degree in Freemasonry, the Master Mason, and in October I was installed as Junior Deacon of the Prince Alfred Collegians' Lodge. I also became a Joining Member of Saint Andrews Lodge, and visited many other Lodges during the year. Freemasonry is a fraternity that not only promotes community service and charity, but also places a great deal of emphasis on the continuing self-development of the individual. Freemasons' Lodge meetings are deeply infused with centuries-old ritual and ceremony, highly allegorical and filled with wisdom, and brethren are encouraged to reflect on the deeper meanings behind them. There is a rise of interest in Freemasonry among younger men in general, and this has infused the Craft with youthful enthusiasm and initiatives. Not only do I enjoy the collegiality of the Lodge, but I also find that the meetings allow me to indulge in meditative reflection away from the maelstrom of the normal day. There are still many more aspects of Freemasonry that I will have the opportunity to experience as I continue in my Masonic life. Alas, I remain unable to tempt Nam into joining: it has been suggested that, after having prepared dinner, he is reluctant to take off the kitchen apron only to put on another apron for an evening out! ☺



**Best wishes
for 2012,
with love from
Alan and Nam**

