

Sam's US Experience: September to December 2003

Places to Visit

Victoria, BC, Canada

Realizing that at the start of September I would have been in the USA for six months, I decided the best thing I could do to celebrate was to piss off and go to Canada again. This time it would be the west coast and to Victoria, the capital city of British Columbia, located on the picturesque Vancouver Island. My hosts for this delightful occasion were Rosa and Mike Munro. After boarding a plane for Seattle, which required monumental queuing at that work of Satan, LAX, I boarded yet another, smaller plane for Canada. Even if you do not feel like eating your apple, I would suggest eating it. I did not know there were such quarantine laws between the USA and Canada.

Mike picked me up from the airport on Friday afternoon with a friend of theirs: Shannon. We wended our way to Mike and Rosa's place via Rosa's parents to pick up a futon and Rose who had returned from a hard day at the office. The evening consisted of a pleasant meal of salmon. Rose is a fantastic cook, but completely mad. She does not even like salmon, but was happy to watch us eat it. Drinks downtown were pleasant: the Cricketers Arms actually contained quite an array of authentic cricket memorabilia. Plus a beach volleyball court on the roof. Go figure.

Saturday saw a visit to Victoria proper in the most appropriate way: brunch! What followed was a pleasant drive interspersed with seal spotting, around the city and suburbs, including the haunted golf course. The evening ended at Frank and Mary's place – Rosa's parents. Frank challenged me to a drinking contest. Two things you should not do: firstly, land war in Asia, and secondly challenge a depressed Australian to a drinking contest. A further tactic is to not, in quite a loud voice, confess to your wife that you are drunk half an hour into said competition. Still it was an education on possible excuses for the other person drinking more than you. Another lesson: do not claim the other person is double your weight when scales are but a few feet away.

The next day we went spotting killer whales – okay, Orca – in a fast, open boat. Note to self: wear socks, and go when the whales have not decided to head north for the winter or whatever they do. Another inconvenient thing was they insisted on staying under water most of the time. My notes mention fish and chips for lunch followed by steak for dinner. A gastronomic tour de force, only to be continued the next time I went to Canada. That or I need to pay more attention to what is happening around me, other than food. The following day involved eggs benedict, followed by a trip to the beach¹. A relaxing day of travelling in the car around Canadian woods². Most picturesque.

¹Apparently there were a lot of otters around Vancouver Island. They were hunted for their fur. That led to an explosion in the population of sea urchins, or stars, or something, which in turn decimated the kelp, resulting in the complete loss of sand on beaches on the west coast. I hope you brought your fur to the beach.

²I highly recommend the following clues for twenty questions: a fish hook and a footprint. I personally take this as evidence that Mike is a bastard. You can tell by the way he does not smile.

Interestingly, to me at least, Victoria is home to an endangered Marmot. They are thinking of using said Marmot – or a closely related one – as the mascot for the upcoming Vancouver Winter Olympic games. The only problem is that it could be extinct by then. Like the wolves: voluminous on Vancouver Island but nearly extinct on the “mainland”. Apparently there are no moose on Vancouver Island, but they exist in force on the “mainland”³. I believe that the wolves are preyed on by those vicious and nasty moose. You heard it here first.

Having come so far I had to go the Vancouver. Having been there before the city itself – though stunning – was not the attraction, but rather catching up with a friend from school: John. I had been there before visiting friends Glen and Tania when they lived there. So I spent a lot of the day wandering around Gas Town and the like. I also managed to get my hair cut by the gayest hairdresser ever. I highly recommend Laurent at Regis. John and I scared ourselves by working out that we had known each other for twenty years, leading to some uncomfortable shifting of zimmer frames. The evening entailed dinner looking over the water with John and Shannon, having met John's new wife Corinne earlier. On my return to Victoria I managed to completely miss the highlight of the morning paper front page: the sea plane scheduled before mine had sunk. Mike picked me up and we had a round of disc golf, went and bought some Traditional Ale and some Tim Bits -- the little bits of Tim from the middle of a Tim Horton donut⁴ -- and subsequently rang Ash who would murder people for both. We spent a good deal of time working out how we could mail them to him, and also contemplating the beach at the lake we went to earlier in the day. The beach was fake but the lake was real, and I never realised how hard it is to swim in a lake without salt. Mike let me off at the airport the next day – I think making sure I left – which ended a great trip away from those crazy Americans⁵.

Boston

One of the joys of being in the USA without any understanding of the local customs is you get surprised when something happens. It bites you back when you want to do something that everyone back home would be doing – like not having to justify why cricket can be played for five days – but it is a joy. One such occasion, a very good friend of mine who goes by the name of Goat – not that his mother knows that – invited me to visit his mum and the rest of his family for Thanksgiving. Little did I know what Boston was like, and little did I know that his family, on his mother's side, consisted of over thirty people. What can one do except sit back and accept the beverage as it is passed to you. I suffer in representing my country.

Thanksgiving dinner was an exceptional experience. My favourite part, I believe, was the deep fried turkey. Someone in the family – let us call him Family Member Number 15 – brought his deep fryer over as the oven was only big enough for one slaughtered beast. Cooks it in an hour. Fantastic! And the rest of the meal without anything appearing that was green. What a family!

³I use the term as a Tasmanian.

⁴Tim Horton was a famous ice hockey player who went on to market a chain of family restaurants that serve coffee, soup, sandwiches, cakes and donuts. A feature is the small donut balls that are affectionately labelled Tim Bits. I think it says volumes about Canadian resilience that they kept the name Tim Bits after Mr Horton was crushed to death in a nasty car accident. Pity Americans cannot understand the subtle irony and hence distinction between themselves and cannucks. Instead they ask them to say “about”.

⁵Do not, I repeat, do not mention to Canadians that they are actually Americans. It is an unappreciated fact given the overloading of the term to include your Hawaiian-shirted tourist with a room temperature IQ.

Goat also took me to an evening in Boston with Candle Pin Bowling. This is apparently a sport limited to the New England area and slightly different from standard ten-pin bowling. Firstly, the ball is smaller, without holes and slightly larger than a baseball. Secondly you get three deliveries rather than two: a strike is all pins down in one delivery, a spare two deliveries and only ten if done in three deliveries. Finally, the pins are cylinders with slightly rounded edges, and the ten pins are lined up in columns rather than the staggered pattern used for ten-pin. And it is a lot bloody harder than it looks. Still, I did get some funky shoes with velcro fasteners...

The Canyons

Two places that I had to visit, being in the south west of the country, are the Grand Canyon and a slightly lesser known – well lesser known to me – Zion. After stopping Vegas for the typical tour, we headed up to Zion, in Utah through Arizona after leaving Nevada. Cool. People talk about the Grand Canyon as being pretty grand, but for me Zion was the best. The cliffs are simply immense: I went absolutely spastic taking photos trying vainly to get the scope of the rocks in perspective. We were too close and they were too big.

Pasadeena

I realised very early on that Pasadeena was one place more like Melbourne than any other place in LA. It probably is not even in LA, but as they say in the Valley, like, whatever. It's attraction is mainly the foliage. Unlike other areas of LA they actually have trees. And a number of shops all in a line. Amazing. Apart from the shopping and feeling that you are somewhere quaint, there is a feeling of calmness to the place.

Pasadeena is quite an old area, that has become more popular as the urban sprawl of LA creeps out. Two of the main institutions in the area are Cal Tech and the Jet Propulsion Laboratories, leading to a highly educated population and a number of walking zombies whenever there is a Mars mission on. They have a tendency to lock themselves in rooms, keep Martian time including having special watches made, and, I imagine, occasionally come outside blinking and wondering what is with all this green stuff⁶.

So let us talk about green stuff. The Ritz Carlton supposedly has magnificent gardens set on a large number of acres. When I went there for an overnight stay and associated dinner, I did not manage to get up in time to see them. I can say that Huntington Gardens are truly magnificent. I can highly suggest spending the money to go there and simply walk around the cactus exhibit. The Gardens are huge and an extremely pleasant change from the LA scenery. There is a Japanese garden, Rose garden, herb garden and even an Australian garden for those feeling homesick. Huntington is probably better known for it's library: a large collection of rare books, and quite a definitive collection of the time. Nice set of Bibles! There is also a large art collection, with quite a few ..., most notably Blue Boy. Personally I do not appreciate the style, but I did appreciate the odd ... laying about.

⁶It never ceases to amaze me how blinkered some views in the USA are. W recently announced his plans for manned missions to Mars. Fantastic! I am sure a lot of technical developments will result from this, in the same way integrated circuits developed from investment in the Moon program. However, I wonder whether just as much technology would be developed by spending the money on finding out what happens on this planet and how not to consume it all. Let alone social welfare, but then I am one of those pinko commie types, most likely with a CIA file.

James Brown and the Hollywood Bowl

One bright sunny morning an email came around inquiring whether anyone was interested in a couple of tickets to James Brown's Seven Decades of Funk tour, being staged at the Hollywood Bowl. Why would you not want to go? So I responded quickly and snatched up the tickets. Apparently there was some chick called Macy Gray doing the support. Sounded good to me. You would be amazed how difficult it is to get someone to go with you to a James Brown concert.

Cirque du Soleil

I have mentioned this Goat character before. He has a disarming tendency to phone me up and ask what I am doing on a particular evening. So far I have only rejected the trip to the Magic Castle. I managed to accept his invitation to Cirque du Soleil. One of those Quebecian circus things involving fit young things and young men who are absolutely RIPPED. It was almost enough to make a man turn. I am, of course, joking. Nevertheless these shows are worth seeing. A combination of athletic prowess along with the usual French flair for the sublimely ridiculous. The costumes were a cross of a Wiggles concert, a lufer, a thorny devil and liberal usage of some hallucinagen. Hence, very French. The manoueurs were a cross between ballet and the Rack. How limbs were not removed I do not know. See one some time.

Planes and Famous People

Just north of LA is Edwards Air Force Base where, every year, they hold one of the largest airshows on the planet. This year I was hung over and did not go. Likewise Santa Monica has a large museum of flight, being located at the Santa Monica Airport. Do not believe the signs: it is shut. And I thought I would also mention my experiences of seeing famous people in this land of Hollywood...

RAND

For those of you who do not know, RAND is a large not-for-profit government think tank. It was born after World War Two when some far seeing general decided that the scientific talent gathered at McDonald Douglas was too great a resource to let go. Through the process of creating RAND – which stands for Research and Development – someone was asked what the people at RAND would do. The reply was “we don't know.” “So why do you want them?” “In case there is something we don't know.” Thus after a few years RAND was created. Initially it was only related to Air Force work, but that component has been coalesced into the aptly named Project Air Force, and other research units have been added, such as the Army Arroyo Center, and institutes for public policy, law, education, health and so on. There are now offices in Washington, New York, Pittsburgh, England, Germany, Belgium, and Yemen. Fundamentally the Charter is the same: they only accept money that is not tied to a company, all research is independent, and the organisation is strictly non-profit.

The area that I am attached to is the original Project Air Force. How did I get here? Well, one day Graeme Murray walked into my office and asked: “Would you like to go on a long term attachment?” “Sure. Where to?” “RAND in Santa Monica.” “Where's that?” “Southern California.” “Sure.” What followed was a year and a half of frustrating administrivia before I could finally take off. What I was going to was an organisation with an extremely high reputation: equivalent to Oxford or Cambridge in terms of the field Operations Research. It is also had a huge impact on many people. For example, my father spent eighteen months on Baffin Island in Canada working on the early warning line for missiles coming from those nasty pinko commie bastards in the USSR. This line was built directly on the basis of research conducted by RAND. Pity they got it wrong: sometimes it is not sensible to rely on the Air Force

for data when they are more in an arms race with the navy rather than the Soviet Union. Believe it or not one of RAND's most popular publications was a list of random numbers. They were hard to get in the days before computers were readily available.

RAND also has an interesting history in other areas. A young researcher once, at a local bar⁷, gave a number of documents to a reporter from the New York Times. Subsequent publication, and the surrounding controversy resulted in, firstly, the end of the Vietnam War as the documents related to the Pentagon's own assessment that the war was not winnable, and secondly a sharp downturn in defense business coming the way of RAND. Funny that. Declassification of Soviet military documents also led to the discovery that RAND had its very own nuke targeted at it. I found that somewhat worrying until someone else points out "what the hell else are you going to do with 20,000 nukes?"

Numerous well known people have worked at RAND: John von Neumann, the inventor of game theory and the modern day computer, Alan Newell and Herb Simon who coined the phrase Artificial Intelligence – Herb also got the Nobel Prize for Economics – John Nash who also won the Nobel Prize for his work in game theory and was the subject of "A Brilliant Mind", and some other dude who developed the algorithms and theory behind packet switching that allows the internet to actually function. They also had a bundle of people who developed the entire US nuclear policy, leading to their send up by Peter Sellers as Dr Strangelove from the "BLAND" Corporation.

I had no idea what I would meet when I got to RAND. What I did find was an old building and a bundle of people who had their routines and were not going to change from them. I struggled at first as, apart from not knowing anyone in LA, the work was hard to get into. As an unknown in their books I was possibly going to take up time as opposed to providing value. Combine that with the end of their financial year and hence their projects, the impending spring break and the "War on Terror", I did not have a look in. Still, I got a good tan riding to and from work.

There is no doubt that the people at RAND are very, very bright. The one thing that I would suggest about the place is that it is not only a research organisation. Rather one of their skills is in marketing their products. Generally research is rapid and to the point, with no time for excursions outside the specific topic. Not that that is a bad thing. Unlike where I work you need to find coverage on projects rather than being allocated to them. If after a while you are not getting coverage, they may quietly ask you to leave. Amazing how good that is at focussing people on their work. In the end RAND has a very good reputation, and they are maintaining that with their clients. Lots of people in blue suits with lots of stripes and colored bars and awards from numerous wars, that makes them look more like Australian currency than the more understated Australian military.

Once I got to know some of the people it was easier to see how the place worked. As the organisation had been around for so long they had set ways of organising things, and that generally did not involve any more "modern" ideas of management. The person I was pointed

⁷The bar has the wonderful name Chez Jay. A local institution as one of LA's premier dive bars. Apart from its RAND history and location surrounded by RAND buildings, supposedly it has a stuffed marlin over one hundred years old, and was the birthplace of the moon peanut. Apparently one of the original astronauts picked up a peanut from the bar floor, took it to the moon via his boot, and brought it back where a "famous" actor tried to eat it. It is now in a safety deposit box now. Try verifying that one.

towards had lost a great deal of his hearing under guns on battleships, and seemed unable to hold a conversation about the process in which we worked. As someone once told me, you would not meet a more interesting bunch of people unless you worked as a psychiatric nurse⁸. I got used to the place, and it was interesting to keep track of the various inhabitants of the building. Various offices that I thought were vacant turned out to have researchers in them: they would scurry out at strange times and then return to close their doors and hide behind large stacks of paper. These people are harder to find than platypus in the Yarra, but I guess no one is going to club them for their pelts.

RAND is going to move into a new building in October 2004. This was purchased with funds from the sale half of their land, located as it is about 50 metres from Santa Monica Pier, giving them a tidy return on cheap land garnered in the fifties. The only slight administrative overhead that they have is that the number of people catered for is about 25% less than the number of people currently housed. Apparently working with Santa Monica Council is a joy. They are going to face a huge bill to move the current people out of their current abode, given initially to my estimate of five hundred kilos per office just in paper, let alone scientist. The move may possibly include trained handlers and sedatives. I hope they have also stress-tested the loading the floor can take. There seriously is a lot of paper.

The current building, though, does lead to some interesting situations. For example, one day it got to 83 degrees (29 degrees Celsius and 75% humidity) and so we get a free 16-ounce soda! A couple of weeks earlier we got a free ice cream. Cool! This, kind of, makes up for not having air-conditioning. The building is old and made up of two levels with eight courtyards and hence eight different straight corridors. This was supposedly to allow people to have chance meetings within the building and hence exchange information more readily. That works well in the computer age, especially with half the building blocked off for those with secret clearance. I manage to get in this section, and all the young people are in the other one, at least that is how it appears given the green grass principle and the fact there is a fence.

Besides having secret clearance is not particularly useful as I am not allowed to see anything classed as "NOFORN". This means "no foreign nationals" and nobody has even smirked at the other possible connotations. This means I am not even allowed into "the classified vault" unsupervised where the classified reports are kept. Anything I want to read I have to ask for and have brought out to me. If I was allowed in I would be able to satisfy Julie's curiosity and let her know who killed JFK. Instead I have to be content to being excluded from every second presentation that I want to go to. Instead I get to wander aimlessly around the corridors trying to find blonde social workers. Still, the beach is not that far away.

Cars

The joy of being in LA is that you have to own a car. As I have mentioned previously, it is almost impossible to live in the city without the ability to get long distances, which essentially requires a car given the minimal public transport. So my first concern on arriving in the country was the purchase of a car. After, of course, getting a licence number so I could buy a car, a social security number so I could get a licence and so on. Beyond the cost of the car, you also have the cost of insurance and the cost of registration. Insurance for me is around \$750 per six months. The wonders of having no insurance or credit history. Registration is also variable and depends on

⁸The more I see of the world the more I think this applies everywhere. All I know I am the only person here without an accent.

the cost of the car. One of the reason Arnie – now known as the Gropenfuerer -- got the governorship was his commitment to reduce registration costs that had just been put up threefold. People in the USA love their cars and LA is the capital of it all. At least from my perspective it is, and New York is not terribly big on cars⁹.

The variety of cars is impressive, and they are categorized by moi into three groups: normal cars, cool cars, and small dick cars. Normal cars are boring, everyday cars that boring everyday people own. Like me. A lovely little Nissan Sentra, and I never realized that I pronounced "Nissan" incorrectly. What else can you say about boring cars? Now the cool cars are really cool. As the B52s say "got a car as big as a whale, and we're about to set sail". In the fifties and sixties, the US worked out how to build cars. Large enough to land a helicopter on fore and aft. Fins on the back, curved windows and convertibles with covers for the back seats when there are only two of you travelling in comfort and style. I have even seen a more modern version with fins. Possibly my favourite was a car that I saw one day while going for lunch: fifties convertible that had been nicely covered with a bright purple valuer cloth. Just peachy.. Well, grapey. Then there are the cars with wood paneling. More modern versions of these cruiser have been produced with the same amount of style as the more modern Beetles.

A new venture in LA given the poor climatic conditions is the advent of the electric car. All over the city are charging stations, and you can see the cars zipping around the place: generally white, light and open sided. Apparently their acceleration rate is extremely rapid and far above your standard combustion engine car, due mainly to the speed of power transfer and their light weight. Another interesting design feature is that when breaking, the brakes recharge the battery. A friend of a friend chain related the story of an electric car that drove into the Santa Monica mountains. He arrived with a battery load of ten percent. Returning home, after braking all the way down the mountains, he reached the bottom with thirty percent. Very neat. A pity that they do not go far and are very expensive. You can always get a hybrid...

Small dick cars are obviously the SUVs. There is an interesting loophole in the laws regarding cars in the US: the emissions of cars have to reduce every year in an effort for the USA to meet some sort of environmental requirements. SUVs, however, are not included in the general car classification. Hence the smaller cars are getting better but there are more and more SUVs on the road. This gas guzzling monstrosities are huge. The Ford F250 for example is likely to beat your average Australian truck for horsepower. That is the major selling point.: horsepower! Nevertheless a recent survey of Hummer owners, I have been reliably informed, returned the number one complaint being the poor fuel consumption. Well what do you expect when you buy a car designed for military applications, totally encased in steel and large enough the they do not even consider squeezing the car into a "compact" car parking spot, unlike the majority of SUV owners.

SUV owners have the place, to me, slightly lower than mobile phone owners. The same attitudes seem to grab both groups: a complete belief in their ability to occupy whatever space they want, whether that be roadwise or noisewise, a complete disregard for the environment, whether that be through their manufacture or the byproducts of continual use, or the immediate return that comes from having exactly what you want regardless of the long term consequences, such as

⁹I am always impressed by a friend Eugene who has been living in LA for a couple of years and is yet to buy a car: he mainly gets around by riding his bike. Admittedly he does not have a licence having grown up in New York.

having a life that is completely on call whenever some feels the need to contact you, or the continual need to maintain a monstrous beast of a car. I think I have just alienated the majority of people I know. Still you can look at it this way: so far the only cars I have been able to fit in are SUV-like. So I will probably end up driving a car I despise.

The one thing that has impressed me with the cars in LA more than anything, since I saw a car in Melbourne with a blue light underneath it, is spinning hubcaps. How am I driving stickers is another thing that you notice about cars in the US. Everywhere you look there is another sticker asking "how am I driving? Let Us know at 1800 XXX YYYY." It really is obvious: you are driving in front of me, hence you should get out of the way

An interesting post note for me was a recent article published on the largest "choke-points" in the USA. A choke-point being a location where traffic barely moves, and usually located near an intersection. Of the top ten, four were in LA. Three were on the 405, and two on the 10, so obviously one of them is the intersection of the 405 and the 10. Of course the nearest freeways to me are the , you guessed it, the 405 and the 10, one or both of which I have to take to get anywhere distant from Venice and Santa Monica. This is of course discounting the 90 which basically only leads to the 405. The article went on describing how billions needs to be spent to reduce these choke-points: expensive but the savings would be huge! You would be able to cue in your car somewhere else. As opposed to spending billions on road, how about billions on public transport. That way people would be encouraged to get off my sodding road, so when I get a mobile I do not have to concentrate on driving so much.

Los Vegas

Los Vegas is a town like no other. I have been told this by numerous people, who I am fairly sure have not been to every town there is, but considering the popularity of the belief I am willing to take it on face value. My first introduction to the town was with Sue and Elissa as we went touring the Grand Canyon and Zion: both on the way there and on the way back. After driving for a large proportion of the day from Los Angeles we entered Vegas and tried to find our hotel. Fairly easy as it was the Luxor and is shaped like a pyramid. Having found it and checked in, we travelled to our rooms via the "inclinators" as all the rooms were part of the slope of the pyramid. A delightful design for a building so regardless of your height when trying to look at the view you manage to hit your head on the sloping glass. What fun! Let's just say we realised how surreal Vegas is after seeing a guy, whose main occupation was a hitman I am sure, strutting around the pool with a g-string bathing suit on, and more tattoos than I really wanted to know existed.

That evening we managed to get out and explore the town a little by walking The Strip. It is a place that you have to visit rather than describe but I will give it a try. Los Vegas is a giant theme park where you can stay. There are the old hotels, like the Flamingo and Caesars Palace, and more modern hotels with theme's, such as New York New York, The Parisian, The Venitian – complete with gondolas, one with a pirate theme, and it continued. I also remember pirate ships and volcanoes, but I was getting tired by this point. The more expensive hotels, like the Belagio, where the latest version of Ocean's Eleven was filmed – those bits not filmed in Santa Monica, are simply beyond comprehension. With it's own art collection, ball rooms, shopping complex, I was more taken with the pool out the front. Not only does it include a water display, but the size would have to be measured in acres. Ignoring the cost of the real estate, they would face a fairly large water bill simply from the evaporation. Not as bad as the Luxor, where the pinnacle of the

pyramid is lit, costing of the order of half a million dollars a year to run. Los Vegas is cheesy, but it is high quality cheese.

Fundamentally, though, Vegas is built on gambling and entertainment. Celine Dion had a purpose built 1500 seat complex provided for her show, that is due to run for a couple of years. We missed Tom Jones too. Bummer. Vegas has also cleaned up, but there is no doubt that gambling and sex are staples of the economy. There are slots machine in the airport. There are slots in the supermarkets. There are probably slot machines in the baby change rooms, though I was not that curious. Even people I would normally consider very sensible would burn one hundred dollars on the roulette tables without much thought. Vegas invades your mind. Of course, I would not ask Sue about that. I have never seen someone win on slots machines like her: quarters were running through her fingers as she tried every machine she could run passed. Amazingly the machines were spitting back a great deal more. I, on the other hand, ended up a loser for the trip: \$1.50. I should also mention the sex. Numerous places I have been there have had scantily clad attractive women girating around on a podium, or in a pool of water up to the waste for some unknown reason, while perfecting that extremely bored look that comes from exploitation and no doubt a numbing sensation of being treated as flesh only. We did not get to any lap dancing places, and I am not one to frequent some of the other services that were pushed my way every 20 metres or so. I've heard Vegas being described as a vacuum, as it tries to suck every dollar it can from you. I could also imagine it slowly removing your soul.

Still, you've got to laugh. On the way back we stayed at the Palms Hotel: apparently a very up and coming place where the celebration of 50 years of Playboy were to held. Unfortunately we missed the Fun Loving Criminals concert. We had dinner that night at the Buddha Bar restaurant, of the Buddha Bar CD fame, for those into ambient dance music stuff. Like, whatever. Afterwards we went to the Ghost Bar on thr 53rd floor, with it's window in the floor looking straight down. The place would cost \$20 to get in, but we got in as house guests. And this was a Tuesday night. Although the hangout of the rich and famous, I did not spot anyone. Possibly due to not watching any TV and hence having an idea who is famous. It seemed to be more a collection of lonely middle aged guys and bored dancers. Still, it was an entertaining evening, and I can say it was a fun place to go, for all my pontificating about it's lack of morals.

So this brings me to my third stop in Vegas. I was thinking that the last two were so good that they could not be topped. I was wrong. I went to play Ultimate Frisbee. The organisation for this was a little harried given that the guy organising the teams had left me off his email list, and I did not know that I would be attending. Nevertheless, the week before I managed to get an expensive flight, and some accommodation, so I was off to the "Lucky Sevens" tournament. There were a number of teams from LA attending, but the main two I was associated with were "Slots of Fun" and "The Wedding Party", the latter one being the one I was playing on. More on that soon.

Friday afternoon saw me rushing around to get ready and sitting in traffic going through LA. A fantastic experience when it had not rained for more than three months to be suddenly finding myself on a wet six lane freeway, after crawling through street traffic. For this flight I was departing from Burbank on the classy South West airline (no food, one drink and find your own seat), hence the travel time from home to the hotel was of the order of four to five hours. Nicer than the seven hours others had to endure. Getting into the glitz of LV did nothing for my state of mind: I was exhausted having spent Monday to Thursday in Washington for work. However, Vegas never sleeps and it would seem that this weekend I would not either. The day of arrival of

course was Halloween, and it was compulsory to go out. Being the lame arsed foreigner that I was I had not managed to organise myself a costume. In fact I had been learning all sorts of things about this "holiday" from the locals. From the fact that people dress up their houses like a morbid Christmas, to the joy of carving pumpkins and watching very old Charlie Brown cartoons. Elissa was getting sick of my attitude to Halloween, but I claim that the attitude was borne more out of unfamiliarity and not xenophobia.

Thus the night began by being dragged off to meet others and head to the Rio hotel where there was a night club, apparently offering \$5000 for the sexiest female costume. In our group we had a cowgirl, Genghis Khan, a guy dressed as Janet Reno, another guy dressed as bull dyke, the costume involving horns and a t-shirt saying "nobody knows I am a lesbian", a doctor, a school girl who was not so much catholic but rather a "jew for Jesus", Elvis, two guys who were dressed as something but I do not know what, especially the one with the multi-coloured wig and the dress, and finally one lame arsed Australian, although one who can spell "arse". We got a van to the hotel and went to check out the night club. A popular pastime considering the number of others there. The cost of the night club was \$20 for men and \$10 for women. The cue outside was hardly moving but proved that the night would be lucrative for the hotel. The number of women not wearing very much was quite impressive¹⁰. The wait to get in was less so. We eventually decided that gambling was a better option and subsequently moved around numerous tables. I managed to drink but not gamble, in a move that seemed wiser, but probably was not. Once wallets were getting bare we decided to head home. The guys keen on the place then directed their energies into transport back to the hotels. This involved one limousine driving along The Strip, one stop at a liquor store, eleven people (Sam, Rod, Steve, Elizabeth, Amy, Elissa, Zac, Nick, Tex, Brian, and Krista), and one digital camera. We ended up at another, slightly less selubrious hotel where others were playing cards. I was impressed in that having come straight from the limo with an excess of alcohol, we walked into the Casino and proceeded to drink. Soon after we were hailed by the security guard who, rather than kicking us out, took a polaroid of the group and gave it to us, an action he repeated several more times. I think I got to my room at 5am.

The "next" day saw a slightly later than expected start. Rather than 8am, 9am on account of the weirdest clock radio ever made. Fortunately for me, we had two byes during the day: first game and last game. The day's play was fun even though we ended with a 1-3 record. The most impressive part was the number of costumes. Commandos, muslim women who should not be dancing like they were and certainly not showing as much leg, Thor the Thunder God with wings on his back that flapped when he ran, Elvis of course, a cow and more.

The Saturday evening kicked off with dinner and a wedding. As you do. Jim and Steph had decided to get married in Vegas during the tournament. As Steph is German and they are heading to Germany for a more formal celebration, the apparently was the matter of some US paperwork, and they decided to do it in style. Steph was wearing a showgirl costume, Jim was wearing an ultimate uniform, and the rbide was given away by Elvis, who gave a rousing version of Viva Los Vegas. At the "reception" afterwards, in between the bride and groom doing depth charges, another member of the party, Soma, announced that he and his girlfriend were getting married at about 1:15am. So off to the chapel we went again. The Little White Wedding Chapel to be exact. A lovely location which has seen the marriages of such luminaries as Michael Jordon, and Demi Moore and Bruce Willis, and more recently Brittany Spears in a long lasting union. Saw

¹⁰Apparently the addition of small horns means a woman wearing a small lace bra and g-string does not get arrested for indecent exposure.

the odd drive through wedding while waiting, and managed to have a few more drinks at another reception in some casino with partial board walls. The evening ended early at 3am.

Another day of unmemorable ultimate ensued: well I cannot remember it, apart from the shared disbelief of all and sundry concerning the evening before, and some bet with Disco Elvis. A flight back, and then a slow drive resulted in me getting home around 11pm on the Sunday. All in all I am quite taken with Vegas, but then I have seen enough of it for a while.

Sport and Games

There is no doubt that the US likes sports and games. Maybe not to the same level as people in Australia in terms of participation, but certainly in terms of the amount of money pushed into sports. So I thought I'd talk a little about the sports that I have encountered here that I have not previously mentioned and, more importantly, I have never seen before.

Shuffleboard

Now this is a game that needs to make it to Australia. Better than turtle racing if you ask me. A pub game that seems much calmer than eight ball. You have a long wooden table, about 10 metres long, that is polished and covered with a fine, rounded sand or plastic beading or something. By this point of the evening my glasses are not helping my vision. The aim is to beat your opponent by alternately sliding four metal pucks down the table and getting your pucks closest to the end without falling off. Think of lawn bowls without a jack and needing to get closest to the gutter¹¹. You score more points the closer you are to the end, as long as each puck is in front of your opponents. If you are playing in teams, the other two send the pucks back, saving all that troublesome walking. Unfortunately the table is only a foot and a half wide, so it is easy to slide off the edge. What else can be said than liquid refreshment adds to the sport.

Redbull Flugtag

I am not sure whether this is a sport, but it was certainly entertaining. It is simply a glorified birdman rally for teams, held on a Saturday morning off the end of Santa Monica Pier in full view of several thousand people. Each team had a theme, dance and sound track that was utilised until they made the inevitable step and plummeted off the edge of the pier to be rescued by the surf lifesavers. Nothing particularly sticks with me about the teams other than their lack of ability in defying gravity. The team that won was "Pigs Can Fly" with a massive distance of about 50 feet.

Baseball

I have mentioned this before. I was treated to a baseball game: the American version of cricket. Oh the derision I have received from people wondering how you can play a game for five days. I wonder how they can watch a sport that has something like 160 regular season games and really care about the results. At least in cricket one day affects play on the next, and like Aussie football you know where the team is going to be from one season to the next, but then each to their own. The Dodgers, for example, were a team from another city that once had trams that had to be dodged, before they were bought and moved to LA, quite a few years ago, which has no trams. This seems indicative of American sports: the teams are owned and can be moved. At one time LA had two football teams. It now has none. Bummer for that guy I saw with the tattoos of his team. Imagine trying to move Carlton FC. Actually, there's a thought.

¹¹Well, guess who watched too much Jack High on ABC on a Saturday afternoon?

I had an adventure to Dodger Stadium, and I was going to enjoy it whether I wanted to or not. Let's face it, though, the baseball is not about baseball. It is about being there, and we were there! The beer was adequate and priced as you would expect. The Super Dog I had a few days before, made the Dodger Dog seem fabulous. I ate half a pack of peanuts and scattered the shells. There were beach balls flying around everywhere though mostly down given the gradient of the stadium. People were talking, watching others and mostly ignoring the game. It was fun. I especially like the tradition of everyone standing and singing a traditional song at the end of the sixth innings. Somehow as an Australian I enjoyed watching and listening to several thousand people singing "root, root, root for you ball team."

When the post-season comes though, watch out. You will soon discover who is a fan of what team. The Cubs were shattered when they almost made the playoffs. At one key point of game seven of the third final series, somewhere near the third warble as the ever-impressive Dave Sorrenson had the gromit... Ignore that last bit. Basically a fan tried to catch a ball almost going for a home run, thus blocking his a Cubs player from catching it. He is a Cubs fan. Cubs fans are not a fan of his. Not so much witness protection assports rage protection was needed. The single play stopped them getting through. Similar tales of woe were experienced by Red Socks fans

Football

It's football Jim, but not as we know it. During the time that I last wrote, the American Football Season has begun in earnest. What a joy of a game this is. As you well know – unlike Americans and their knowledge of Australian football – the game involves large men in tights running as fast as they can at each other.

Ice Hockey

Ice hockey is a beautiful thing. Check it out sometime, but only if you are not faint of stomach. As Wayne Gretzky once said "I was in a fight the other day and a game of ice hockey broke out". I had the opportunity to see this magnificent game up close and personal when someone at RAND was selling their tickets to the Toronto Mapleleaves game. Toronto had not played in LA for eight years, so you could spot the cannucks in town by the way they were foaming at the mouth.

So I was delighted to be going to see a game being played between the LA Kings and the Toronto Maple Leaves.

Further Thoughts on the USA

The USA One thing that has been interesting me for a while is the way the US culture works. This is particularly important to me in the line of business I am in: the rhetoric you receive about the what is right and what is wrong in the US is often without justification, and I am left wondering how that assumption came about. Indeed the media seems to bend over backwards to ensure that they are not presenting any biased opinion. I am not quite sure how this works as any description is going to be inherently biased, and it would be nice if someone would just point out to the spin doctors that black is not actually white. These attitudes flow on to the writings and comments on the war on terror. Now don't get me wrong: I am no expert in this area, and I cannot even claim to be an expert on the US. Hell, I don't even watch television in this country¹². Also there are many alternate views in the US: I am yet to meet someone who supports Dubbya,

¹²Too loud, too expensive, too much, too happy, too fake.

although there must be quite a few somewhere in the country. What follows, then, is a commentary on my brief observations of the USA, its people and culture. What I am going to focus on are four things: religion, politics, money and communication, which should be enough to ensure I don't get invited to another dinner party.

The longer I stay here the more certain I have discovered what the true US religion is. It is not Christianity, even though the majority citizens align themselves as Christians. The fact that this country still has states operating with the death penalty is a fair indication of that: there is no turning the other cheek here¹³. It isn't even one of the other major religions or the minor ones that you find in California. The major religion in the United States of America is the United States of America. There is an almost rabid self belief that the USA is the best country in the world, that they have the best democracy in the world, that they have the best opportunities in the world, and that they are the most advanced in the world. USA is #1! And in many ways these people are right, and American Individualism has been prevalent since Roosevelt was kingpin. The thing I find concerning, apart from the comments I will make below, is the total lack of critical thought that relates to such statements.

Let us take democracy. The USA is certainly the champion of democracy. At least it is now, and has claimed to be in the past. I think the US' record externally on propping up or putting in place dictatorships belies this claim. But to me the more striking factor appears in the internal political system. As I have discussed with friends over lunch, the US system requires nomination from within the two major political parties, with seats being allocated on the basis population in the house of representatives and on the basis of state in the senate, much the same as the Australian system. Where things differ, though is with only two seats per state in the senate as opposed to our seven, the chances of any minor party getting access to the political process is so close to zero as to be zero. At least in Australia the greens and democrats can have the chance of one or two seats, with the prospect of the balance of power: What really compounds things is that they have no proportional voting system.¹⁴ In the recent Californian election, with over 160 candidates, there was no vote distribution. Hence to make your vote count you had to vote for the most agreeable person you thought most likely to get in, or most likely to defeat who you did not like, rather than voting for who you really wanted. A friend confided to me that, although his views were social democrat in nature, he is a members of the Republican party as there is no point being a social democrat, and he would rather have the ability to influence the selection of candidates. I wonder whether the Governator would have been elected under a proportional system, and there is no doubt that Bush would not be president if proportional voting existed. The green vote in Florida, for example, would most likely have gone to Gore rather than the oil-selling Bush. So extremist groups tend to take more extreme action here, as they get no political representation, let alone the influence of the population size. Voluntary voting also favours the bland.

What really drives the US, though, is money. The USA accounts for a fifth of the world's GDP. You are only successful if you have money. Then you are an individual who has made "it". Money is driven into the economy by the government, and quite a deal through defence spending, although my perspective on that may be biased. Money allows you to buy anything,

¹³Boy do the natives like it when I mention that they share this distinction with such luminaries as Angola and China.

¹⁴Lance was telling me that in many progressive universities such as Berkley, they have progressive voting systems labelled "Australian voting".

including influence in political parties. This is shown in two recent cases. The first is obviously the recall of Gray Davis, which was achieved only by the financial support of a rich republican and a low voter turn out at the previous election requiring a lower than usual number of signatures to force a recall vote, and that allowed the Gropenfuierer to get the nod. Secondly, for the next round of US Presidential Elections, a number of candidates, including Pres Dubbya, have declared they will not take the governmental matching of campaign contributions up to \$50 million. The reason: once they get to \$50 million they have to stop. If they don't claim the money they can continue to fundraise well beyond that level. So democracy goes to those who can afford it. On a more fundamental level the US society is consumer driven. These people really know how to waste money on stupid stuff. But the measures of success dictates that you must obtain money for that success. And the opposite is also true: if you are not successful then you do not deserve support. Unemployment benefits are very limited. The number of beggars here is simply incredible. People who have lost their jobs and hence their family and are now on the street with no safety net. So where is the political will to change this situation? Well, unfortunately these people don't have any money and hence they have no influence. Too many backs getting scratched, often by those who require support, such as the defense industry.

Where does communication come into this? Well, as everyone knows, at least the important people with money, that cell phones are the only way to go. You personal organisers that are attached to your phone with a headset so you can drink your coffee, drive your SUV and talk at the same time. Further, busy and important people use telecommunications technology to make sure they get the right information at the right time. Hence you can watch a number of 24-7 news programs with speech, a scrolling text box on the bottom and every square inch of the screen filled with fluff. The news programs will cross to someone live on the scene -- whether they are on the scene or not -- who will introduce the recorded piece in some manner that is apparently better than the person in the studio could achieve. The recent war was differentiated from previous conflicts in that the military had news crews travelling with them. Now if you were there, what would you say other than what a wonderful job these people are doing, those who you are travelling with and you know personally and who are protecting your life. Because of that there was minimal analysis of the armed conflict and absolutely no criticism by the news media. All this information was delivered in neat sound bite form, that you could download to your PDA if you wanted through a syndicated web feed. I don't know whether this is symptomatic of the US schooling, but there appears to be a general acceptance of this form of message delivery. In Australia the newspapers are owned, here it is the cable channels. But at least both are owned by an Australian. Until he became an American.

So there you go, you get minimal information delivered in neat packages by a bought media to those who can afford it, where you find out about the latest sound bite from a political leader who has dues to pay to various money groups or companies and cannot say more because it will go beyond people's attention spans, in a place where education is expensive, and where criticism is un-American. Substitute one word there and that could describe somewhere else... Maybe Australia is slightly different. We are smaller, tend not to take ourselves as seriously, don't have as much money, have public broadcasting, and slightly funded public education. Hey don't worry! I'll send you the MPG of me waving via camera phone.