

Rita & Ian's Newsletter (Issue 1)

January 18, 2009

1 Our journey to Canada

After just 3 1/2 hours sleep on our old sofa at Erica and Will's place we got up at 3 o'clock in the morning to stomp down to the bus station with our enormously heavy rucksacks. After arriving at Bristol airport and checking in, we sat down to have a cup of tea. Suddenly we were spotted by Jon Keating, our former landlord! We guessed that he wanted to make sure that we were really leaving the country. (He was really heading to Paris to exam a Ph.D. candidate, so our paranoia was misplaced.) We had a quiet flight to Amsterdam. Our descent into Amsterdam was pretty remarkable though — as we descended, the clouds went on and on and it looked like we would be landing right in the fog. Only about 100m above the ground could we finally see something more than just grey.

In Amsterdam, we had to wait a few hours for our connection to Seattle but we were too tired to go into the city to do some sightseeing, so we had a bit of lunch (Rita commenting that the table in the restaurant was a bit dirty and it wouldn't be allowed in Austria!). Once at our gate, we had the first and worst interrogation that we would experience on our adventure. A woman from Northwest Airlines interviewed us for about 10 minutes and must have asked us at least 50 questions in that time. She even wanted to know what kind of research we were going to conduct, although when we told her, she looked a bit taken aback and, rather plaintively asked "But what does that *mean*?". Fortunately, she believed us (we *were* telling the truth!) and we were allowed to board the plane. I guess this came from the new pre-travel approval thing that has been introduced for flights to the US, and because the airline has to carry the cost for your return flight if you're refused entry to the US.

The 9 hour flight was calm, but unfortunately not very spectacular (OK, not at all spectacular until right near the end) because we had seats in the middle row and therefore could catch only glimpses of what was going on underneath us. We did see some mountains in Greenland, some patterned landscape over northern Canada and then some bits of the snow covered Rockies. This was the first time Rita had been on a long-distance flight since 2002, so it felt quite weird to her to be on a plane for such a long time.

Once on the ground, the first decisive point of our journey awaited us — *would we make it into the US?* Rita had spoken to quite a few people recently about US immigration officers and how nasty and unfriendly they can be. With all of these horrific scenarios in our minds we queued at the US immigration booths. Our immigration officer was a friendly young man who asked us only a couple of questions about the purpose of our travel and what we wanted to do in Canada. And that was it. He didn't quite know where Austria was and thought Rita might be from the Czech Republic or possibly Australia. We should have mentioned Arnold Schwarzenegger, but thought it was better to keep our mouths shut. The new US immigration procedures require you to give fingerprints. First they take fingerprints of your index to little finger and then of your thumb. The immigration officer had some problems with the word "thumb". He kept saying "index finger" when he meant thumb. When it was Rita's turn and he said index finger for the third time, we asked, "Er, do you mean thumb?". We decided afterwards that it was probably a good thing that Ian didn't ask him "Hey dude, are you stoned or something?". Anyway, the important thing was done, and **we were in the US**.

We then rented a car and drove to Blaine, right next to the US-Canada border. We had American-sized portions of Mexican food before falling into bed dead tired at 8pm.

The next day was *the* day. We would get to know if we could start our lives in Canada or if we had to return back home to the UK to the ignominy of defeat and the jeering of our friends. We arrived at the border at 7.30 am. The customs officer in the roadside booth was a slightly surly women who thought

that we wouldn't be able to apply for the necessary permits directly at their place because we had an application running in London already. She sent us inside to talk to somebody else...

It was good to arrive early, as we were the only "customers", but we were also the ones with the most complicated case. We met another customs officer and explained our situation to him. We handed over our ring-binder with 200+ pages of documents. The officer didn't look very pleased, to say the least. He talked so slowly, it seemed that he might fall off his chair in a minute and go to sleep. He agreed to deal with our case though. We apologised for spoiling his morning and he replied, "Don't worry, I'll be going home in 20 minutes." We weren't sure if that was a good or a bad sign, but it turned out that it was a good one. He passed on our application to an immigration officer who knew what to do with our application. The officer was very friendly and after a couple of hours we were pretty sure that everything was going to work out as she made us pay the fees for our permits. As it turned out we paid only half the amount we expected to pay. First, because Rita didn't have to apply for a Temporary Resident Permit, since she's *NOT* a criminal (Ian is though, and won't be allowed to forget it for some time) and second, because Ian's work permit fee was included in his Temporary Resident Permit. We didn't complain very much about having saved \$350. The entire process was over in 2 1/2 hours and we were then the happy owners of work permits and a Temporary Resident Permit. **WE WERE ALLOWED TO GO TO CANADA!!!! YIPEE, YIPEE, YEAH!**

As it was only 10 am, we decided to head straight to Victoria. We drove to Vancouver International Airport, dropped off the car and jumped onto a bus to Victoria. The bus ride includes a ferry ride to get from the mainland to Vancouver Island. It was quite foggy, so we didn't have fantastic views, but it was still nice to see the islands, covered in forest and mossy rocks. The ferry ride took about 1 1/2 hours and afterwards we got back on the bus for another 45 minutes to drive from Swartz Bay to Victoria.

We dumped our rucksacks in the Strathcona hotel in downtown Victoria before going for a stroll on the promenade. For sure, we went to one of Victoria's vegan restaurants¹ to enjoy our first dinner in our new home town. By 8 pm, Rita was ready to go to sleep, but Ian told her she had to last until at least 9 pm. The jet lag was still deep in our bones.

2 First impressions of Victoria

On our second day in Canada, we went to our future work place, the University of Victoria (UVic), which is about 10 km away from downtown. It takes 30 minutes on one of the frequent buses. We arranged to meet people at 10 am, but arrived early, so we took a walk around the university campus, which is very green. It took only a few minutes, before we spotted the first rabbits. Rabbits are UVic's "wild" animals. There are hundreds if not thousands of them around the campus and the gardeners don't love them, but we find them very very sweet. (There are signs referring to them as "feral" rabbits, which makes me think of man-size killer rabbits with enormous teeth, but it really does just mean "wild".)

Both of our institutes are housed in completely new buildings (built specially for our arrival, of course), both of which are very nice with a lot of light. The Maths building is very stylish and has some cool architectural features, but the best one is the **Ian Ross Memorial Garden** in the center of the two wings. We had a good laugh when we saw that. Just imagine what that did to Ian's ego? (Absolutely nothing, of course — it's only proper and fitting that he should have a memorial garden. A whole building would have been a bit excessive, and a bike shed rather insulting, but a garden is just the right level of deference.)

On the way back to SEOS, the School of Earth and Ocean Sciences, which is where Rita is based, we saw the coolest thing — **a Bald Eagle**. A bald eagle on the university campus? We first thought it can't be a bald eagle because they are rare birds (Ian tried to claim it was a "White-Tailed Eagle", since it had a white tail, and that sounded like a likely sort of name for a bird, but he was just making it up), but not so in the Pacific Northwest, as we later learnt. The rabbits make good food for the eagles and I guess it's a good way to keep the rabbit population somewhat under control. The eagle we saw seemed a bit intimidated by crows sitting on the same tree top and after a few minutes the crows chased the eagle off the tree, which was a pretty strange thing to see. You'd have to think that any eagle with a grain of self-respect wouldn't take that sort of treatment from a lowly crow.

For the next few hours we met our new bosses and colleagues and were shown around the institutes. It was quite pleasing, because everybody congratulated us even though the only thing we had done was

¹Green Cuisine in Market Square, a pay-per-weight buffet, which is really really good.

to get into the country. In the afternoon, we got Social Insurance Numbers organised and acquired cell phones. One thing we noticed quite quickly was that Canadians are indeed super-friendly. From people who offer their help as soon as you stand around looking lost or looking at a map, to Governmental clerks who chat and joke with you while issuing Social Insurance Numbers. Even bus drivers are friendly and helpful in this country!!! Yes, bus drivers! In Bristol, they kick you off the bus when you don't have change and run down cyclists for sport.

Thursday was an early night again, although a very disturbed one, as some young Canadians who stayed in the same hotel as us thought it was very cool to talk very loudly in front of our hotel room door at 3 am and slam lots of doors and laugh lots. That didn't exactly help our jet lag.

3 Settling in

Friday was the day for moving into our new flat. Our flat is a studio on the first floor of a huge house that contains six flats in total. Four of the flats are occupied by family members stretching over three generations. The house is in a typical suburban area with lots of trees and little traffic. It's a 15 minute walk to UVic and half an hour on the bus to the centre of town. Shops are at least 15 minutes walking distance as the entire city of Greater Victoria is spread out over a big area with wide roads, big houses and large gardens. There is lots of space here and Canadians take advantage of that. It seems as though everything is big, even the fridge and the washing machine. In fact, we almost don't need the flat at all, as we could both easily fit into our fridge!

The house our flat is in is truly enormous and slightly eccentric. It was (apparently) built in the 1960s by an Italian construction magnate, who obviously had a job lot of granite lying around in his yard, since the whole of the outside of the house is coated in granite blocks — the whole house looks like it's been dry stone walled. It's quite a pleasing effect, but would have cost an absolute fortune to do without the free supply of materials. It seems as though the original owners, who also built the house next door in the same sort of style, lived here as an extended family. They moved out about 20 years ago though, and since then the place has been used as university accommodation, something like a fraternity house.

The current owners, Kevin and Cindy, bought the place only a little while ago, and only moved in a month or so ago. They've done a lot of renovation and are still doing more to make the place habitable for themselves, their parents, their son and a friend of his, their niece and a friend of hers, us and another couple who are moving into the unit downstairs from us later this week. Yes, it really is quite a big place! Our flat is a decent-sized studio, quite long and narrow, with windows out onto the street at the front and onto the back garden at the back, with a big balcony all the way round that we can use for storing bikes, sitting in deckchairs to enjoy the sun (as we did today), and for growing herbs and vegetables in raised beds at the back.

When we arrived, Kevin and Cindy were out at work, so Kevin's parents, John and Alice, let us into the place and showed us around a little. As with everyone we've met here so far, they were incredibly friendly, and we felt very welcome right away.

After dropping our bags and having a little explore, we headed off to do some errands in town.

In the evening, Kevin came by for a chat and to show us around properly. It's almost impossible to express how welcome he made us feel, and what a positive impression we had of him and what he's planning to do with this place. Kevin is a school administrator who works on a range of special programmes in the local school system and seems to have more or less infinite reserves of energy and enthusiasm. Until recently, he and Cindy had been living on a bigger property on the edge of the city, where they were able to grow a lot of their own food. Now though, they wanted to find a place where Kevin's parents could move in with them in case they need help or support in the future, without compromising anyone's privacy. Hence the choice of this enormous and unique place, which was already divided into six separate suites and is pretty ideal for their purposes. Kevin and Cindy have a large suite on the ground floor, next door to us, while in the basement, Kevin's parents have a large three-bedroom suite, next to which is a smaller place that will be rented out to another couple, moving in this week. Higher up in the house live Kevin and Cindy's son with a friend of his in one suite, and their niece with a friend in another. We have some shared storage space in the attic, a shared laundry, and a big garden at the back. Kevin has a lot of plans for growing vegetables in the garden, which will be a good opportunity for us to learn — knowledge in return for labour perhaps! For this, we're paying \$850/month, which

includes all utilities except for telephone. Although we've been really lucky with renting in Bristol in the past, this place is an amazing find! (Actually, we didn't "find" it all — our friend Jonty put us in touch with Kevin and Cindy via an old friend of his here, for which we're very grateful!)

Kevin showed us around the place, we talked a bit about what he was planning to do, and how he'd like the place to work (sounds really great: all very friendly and informal and based on people being nice to one another), and then he took us on a quick drive around the neighbourhood to see where the local shops were.

We're super-positive about living here. We feel as though we couldn't have found a better place. The combination of the location (15 minute walk from the UVic campus), the flat itself (very nice) and the people is really outstanding. We think we're going to be very happy here.

Greetings from Vancouver Island,

Ian & Rita