

# Lairds at large: an '09 retrospect

As the 2009 New Year rolled in the Lairds found themselves in marvellous Marrakesh – struggling with an enormous feast and eyelids that kept sliding shut with the jet lag. We had all bundled ourselves on a plane – with a small group of 43 other people – and headed off to Dubai just after Xmas. (Weenies in the back of the plane, aged couple up front) The “Islamic Art Tour” group found itself in steaming Dubai with all the wonders of hyper-development and hyper-shopping, right at the depths of the Global Financial Crisis. (GFC hereafter) Without a great appetite for shopping, we were relieved to move on after a couple of days to Morocco and on a bus down from Casablanca to Marrakesh. As the amazing green plains rolled past, so did we really begin to feel that we were beginning our Islamic Adventure.

**James**, with his bushy beard, was continually greeted as “Ali Baba”; a label apparently applied to any hirsute (assumed rich) foreigner. “Ali” and his **Mum** are enjoying some fresh dates in the main souq of Marrakech. You can see we had some rainy weather – but were generally lucky to have a very fair share of sun through our winter travels. The Atlas mountains above Marrakech were impressive albeit glimpsed through some cloud; “next time” Su and Rod plan to head into them to explore more in a more salubrious season. (And from a base of more salubrious accommodation)



From Marrakech we travelled *en masse* (along with coughing and spluttering tour members intent on sharing their viral misery) north to Fés. A magical medieval city, which would reward considerable additional time in exploration. The **medieval tannery** was one of the many vivid sights; and in the summer season no doubt is also one of the more vivid stinks. As it happens the image captured second prize in the Abercrombie and Kent travel photo competition for Rod.



Travelling further north to Tangier we passed through blue-painted mountain town of Chefchaouén (supposedly keeps away the mosquitoes; Su’s theory is however that it is a tourist “feature”). In Tangier we again enjoyed a bed previously enjoyed by others. Morocco – as we experienced it this time – was not the epitome of travel comfort and hygiene... It was with some relief that we crossed the straits to Tenerife



and then on to fabulous Granada. We were fortunate

to arrive on Twelfth Night, the occasion of the festival of the Three Magi – and an amazing street parade. One of the many colourful **angels** beckons on the right.

It was close to 0°C as we joined the throng, not a little reminiscent of «Karneval in Köln» as large floats decked with costumed revellers rolled past distributing thousands of sweets to the many children. Su made herself a little friend by clearing the way to the front of the onlookers for a “height challenged” family and ensuring the children got heaps of goodies.



Our “**Moorish Feast**” of sights and sounds continued to unfold through Cordoba and Seville and finally a rest from the continuous travel for a week in Paris. Everything has ended up documented in words and pictures in a family journal “self published” as a book”. (It’s bloody good!)



Paris was a wonderful opportunity to catch up with some friends – each of whom went to considerable lengths to rendezvous with us.

Rohowski/Piegsdas, Elliot/Browns and Mimmacks – thanks for making the effort! We had some very memorable dinners together. Of course, Paris is also a wonderful place to shop – though the GFC seemed to put a damper on things a bit. I guess we should be grateful for it keeping the crowds down. The tourist industry people in Morocco thought business was down 80%. Su and I were however not surprised to see there were still enough wealthy patrons to fill seats in expensive Paris dining establishments...

**Katja** and **James** were however not entirely thrilled by Paris. It was admittedly cold, with snow on the ground as we arrived and James was still suffering from the Bus-virus. And Katja found finding boots that she liked and could afford a bit wearisome. (as did the rest of the family who traipsed around after her...) Katja models her new boots to the delight of James on the left. As Su and Rod returned from a day in Versailles, the little ones moaned that their “free day” in Paris had been a bummer; “You can’t have fun in Paris without money!”

apparently.

Returning to normality back in Oz, it was off to begin Visual Arts at Monash University for Katja; just 10 minutes walk to the campus from home. James was also “back in the grind”; a final one-semester subject to complete his Electrical Engineering degree at Melbourne University.

**Rod**, with Su’s kind consent, headed off to Aspen with sister Skippy, brother-in-law David, nephews Robin and Simon, and friends Ken, Rosie and Jon. The snow was wonderful and the weather kind. We were able to hike up to the top of the Highland Bowl, enjoying its wonderful and legendary “steep and deep” on several occasions. On top of the skiing, we were delighted to be joined by Gretchen and Jeff Brown (and throng) for a wonderful couple of days together. The low point was unfortunately Skippy breaking her leg. Major bummer. A mad German also tried to break some of Rod’s ribs while the latter was standing innocently chatting with the rest of our group – but fortunately failed. The “precautionary check” medical bills were eye-watering; good thing there is such a thing as travel insurance.



In the meantime, “back at the ranch”, Australia was going through one of its worst heat waves ever – and the tragic fires around Melbourne that took hundreds of lives. Su struggled to keep the garden going against the blistering heat. (The image to the right is of Su’s potager garden – *after* we had some good rain later in the year). Our water recycling system helped a little but the continuing long drought meant there was no natural help from the heavens. The system has been a saga as an of itself, with much of 2008 occupied in managing its installation; 17,500l of tanks, a grey-water recycler, 4 pumps, 2 electronic flow interlock controllers, an

irrigation controller with 12 zones and hundreds of meters of ugly lilac drip irrigation pipe. This was all working as we headed off at the beginning of the year; but unfortunately the recycler literally “blew a valve” while we were away, and Rod had clumsily programmed the system to water twice as much as was needed. The result was no water reserve left by the time we came back to deal with the coming heat wave.

Despite significant rains in October and November, our dams are now at 38%, a few points above the same time last year and the second lowest ever at this time of year (in '97 they were at 75% at this time...). So another summer of water restrictions – and we will again be relying on our recycling for continuity. (Gives you a moral excuse to have a long shower, since it's all going to end up in the garden!)

The middle of the year found **James** completing his final subject and graduating as an Electrical Engineer; now a fourth generation if measured through his mother's side of the family. It will probably all end in tears – all this inbreeding... Shortly after, James' parents "invited" him to find somewhere else to live, so they could avoid being prosecuted under Occupational Health & Safety regulations based on the state of his ~~ca~~ve room. Stress levels have reduced all around as a result. James continues to do small free-lance jobs and plant tomatoes. He has also been seen with a lovely you lady by the name of Virginia (seen to



the right), who is definitely a civilising influence. With any luck 2010 will be the year he works out whether he's going to get a job or continue his studies; we watch with hopeful anticipation.

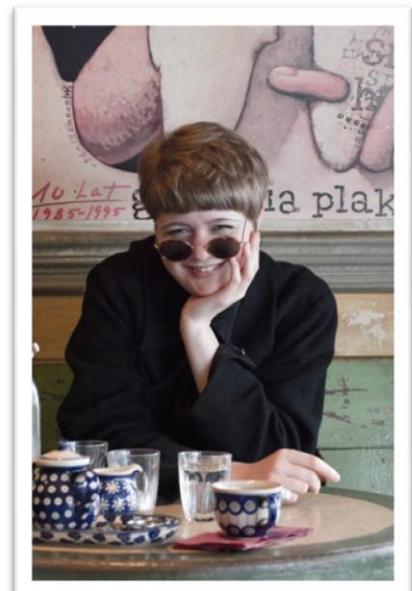
**Katja** also moved out with her friend Duncan in the middle of the year, to live 20 mins away by car in Balwyn. Sadly Katja (and James) have yet to complete their driver's licenses, so Katja's trip to University became nearly an hour by public transport. The



realities of life also interposed themselves more on the lifestyle front, as Katja found work to augment the modest parental subsidies. She has worked very hard, first at one of the Uni cafés, and more recently – and more happily – at an Enoteca and wine cellar five minutes walk away from our home. Following a year-end parting of the ways with her erstwhile beau, Katja is again back home – largely to the delight of all. (A little more help around the house would of course not go astray). With the end of the university year, she has continued to work and play hard. Indeed so hard, that she ended up literally black and blue head to foot after falling face-first of the



front of her skateboard while out with her cousin Asher. She is learning 2 hours sleep does not make for excellent body coordination. Her co-workers noted yesterday that her face had turned green; bruising does that to a girl! Somewhat quirkily, she insisted on Rod taking some photos of her for an art project she is doing on her accumulating injuries (see left). Hmm. Having been hysterically averse to having her picture taken she is now more than willing to be immortalised – and typically comes up (when not bruised) quite well don't you think?



The middle of the year for **Su** was dominated by preparation for her “Facets of Illusion” exhibition with five other friends (the group being called *sei donne ceramiste*) which was held at the Pan Gallery in September. She took on a range of incredibly technically challenging

works including the *Water World* to the left that, for example, required making ceramic spheres etched with the continents – that did not explode or crack during firing. The other exhibition theme was *facets of illusion* and this and the other ceramic *trompe l’œil* of coffee cups explore the theme in thoughtful and amusing ways.

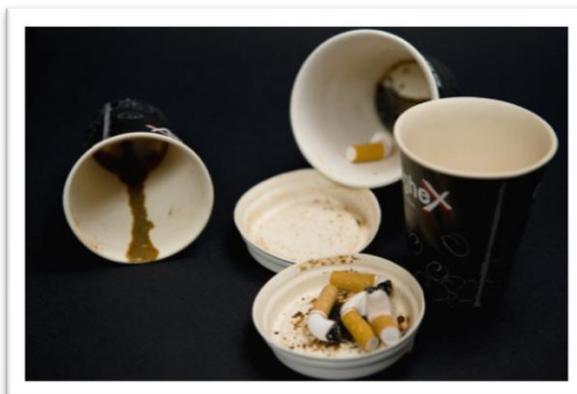
The cups link will take you to Su’s dedicated ceramics site. Su has also continued to develop marvellous sgraffito pieces and, building on motifs from the trip, exploring Islamic decorative themes. Along with other exhibition submissions, the later part of the year saw her creating inventory for sale at and preparing the garden for an opening as part of the Australian Open Garden Scheme. The open was a great success and the garden gorgeous with over 500 people coming through and earning some great money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

The end of the year has arrived in a bit of a rush, and Su is now busy implementing some of her marvellous interior decoration



ideas to make the house even more lovely and practical to live in; we’ve also got around to replacing a poorly heat-sealed skylight and putting up some exterior shades to shield the house from the worst of the summer heat. Things we should have done years ago; sigh. Hindsight is always perfect.

Rod has had a mixed client year with some intense activity early in the year, followed by “spits and spurts”. On the creative front he has enlisted the help of an “aesthetics trainer” (the cerebral alternative to the now ubiquitous “personal trainers”, to nudge is photography along a bit. Only time will tell of there is a palpable improvement in output.



Finally, the year continued largely uneventfully for **Tilly** and **Astrid**, though the latter did munch some snail bait necessitating a quick resuscitatory trip to the vets at one point. As you can see from the final image, she has suffered to lasting damage; and no, our niece Isabelle is *not* holding her head up because she can’t do it herself... (The picture link will take you to our family and friends site)

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