Merry Christmas from Don and Gwen,

now residents of Tarpon Springs, Florida!

The new house, the new view, the RV's new home, the new cat, grandson Kai, the new biz, and the Harley.

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Hi all!

It's been a huge year for us. Changes neither you nor we ever imagined us making! And it has all happened fast. We have a house in the US, a new business, and by golly we even have a cat. It's a change that had been brewing for some time, that came to a head during the protracted months of boat yard projects in Fiji last year, and that finally fell before the coup de grace delivered by the world's economic downturn.

Last year we were not in happy spirits. Don was burned out on boat projects and ready to do *anything* else; I was depressed about a life change that would extract me from our community.

But, there was our grandson Kai, growing quick and bright without us. And family of whom we simply were not seeing enough as the years passed. We'd been away a whole year this last time (ten years altogether cruising and twenty since we each took to the lifestyle), and as great as it is, there is only so much you can do on Skype. It's hard to give (and get) a hug over the Internet.

Which is not to say we did not enjoy our final season! All the boat work in Fiji did leave ***Tackless II*** in fine fettle. Freshly painted with a new bottom, her sailing performance leapt ahead, and we kept up with our zippy Kiwi cruising companions. We loved Vanuatu with its traditional communities scattered throughout a spectacular string of islands (Michener's South Pacific at last!) We climbed live volcanoes, attended "kastom" feasts, and watched many a near-naked man dance! We could easily have spent six months there rather than six weeks! New Cal (*que nous avons aimer aussi!)* brought strikingly different terrain (awesome beaches, mazes of reef, red-hued mountains), chilly weather and French baguettes. We arrived in Bundaberg, Australia the end of October after a seven-day passage.

Talk about an ambivalent arrival. It was the completion of a ten-year voyage, one that truly fulfilled all the dreams Don and I had ever had. We'd never said we were circumnavigating; we always said we were just sailing to the South Pacific. But it was hard to think about friends continuing on the next year without us (actually, only a few have!), and it was hard to think about friends behind us (including my former crewmate Judy and her husband Bryan aboard ***Ursa Minor***) still enjoying places we'd loved or (worse) squeezing in places we'd missed!

We sailed the boat south down the Queensland coast to Mooloolaba, a delightful seaside town north of Brisbane where we put ***Tackless II*** on the market. There was a lot of red tape to surmount to import the boat into "Oz", and a lot of anxiety over exchange rates. The gloom and doom of the downturn nipped in the bud our plans for campervans or motorcycles not to mention our intended eight weeks by jet back to New Zealand. Mostly we just kept working on the boat to gussy her up and walked the beach 6-8k from Mooloolaba to Maroochydore and back most every morning. (I just love every chance I can get to roll those names off my tongue!)

We were blessed with lots of friends in Australia. Cruisers in "classes" ahead of us, cruisers in our year, Aussies we'd met now back home. We even bumped into the Aussie couple that was last seen rafted up to us in the Panama Canal! Plus we made new friends on the dock and on the street over Harleys! We spent a Christmas-season week enjoying Sydney with Randy and Sheri aboard ***Procyon***, we got our first taste of the bush and first wild kangaroos over a weekend visit to the home of Jim and Paula of ***Avior***, and we celebrated Christmas day itself Aussie -style with a daybreak grilled breakfast on the beach with Peter and Sandi of ***Otama Song*** whom we'd known in Tonga.

We also hooked back up with Californians Mike and Kathleen of ***Content***, also first met in Tonga. M&K had been in Oz a year already and had a small campervan (aka Matilda). They were planning one last camping trip in March and invited us along. We bought a tent and an aged silver Camry I dubbed "the grey nomad" (after Australia's roving seniors) and followed Matilda all around the back country of New South Wales. Lots of roos, cockatoos, kookaburras, possums, and emus. We had a wonderful time.

In April, with winter coming on (Brrr!), it was time to go. We'd moved T2 south to Redcliffe, a suburb of Brisbane to make her more convenient for the broker to show. We'd sold, packed up or dumped pretty much all our "boat-ly" possessions. We had a good guy in place to look after her. It was a very tough moment for both of us to walk off that boat the last time.

But here's the thing, something I NEVER would have imagined: we have both adjusted amazingly well! Within a week of being back in Crystal River, with Florida's summer heat rolling in and our friends there migrating back north, we realized that living two hours away from Clearwater did not gibe with the desire to be in the kids' lives. Step one: we got a summer rate at an RV park in Dunedin. Step Two: we realized we could not live in an RV park and park our new mobile espresso truck (the new business) there too, so Step Three: we began to think about renting a house. It's a very quick Step Four to the realization that it is better to pay on a mortgage than to pay rent, and it was a positively miraculous Step 5 that we found a house we loved, in an ideal location, with space for the RV and no zoning against it. It was the bottom of the real estate market, interest rates were low, and we bought the house from an estate that was keen to wrap things up. In other words, for once, WE SCORED!

It's a modest 3 bedroom/2 bath at the end of a dead end street. What makes it unique is that it sits on four lots embedded in cypress forest, where its first owner put in a charming stream and fountain and boardwalks leading through the cypress out to a meditation spot! It's like having your own mini urban state park in your back yard! After Florida's protracted drought the cypress swamp was bone dry when we bought it, but June's heavy rains took care of that. So we can since say that, yes, we do have waterfront property.

With cosmic timing, ***Tackless II*** found a buyer at just the right time. The Aussie dollar had rebounded, so in the end we got a price that converted to something we were satisfied with.

In August, our brand new custom-built mobile espresso truck was delivered from California. The idea was sparked by a mobile ice-cream proprietor we'd gotten to know at the St. Pete Boatshow two years before and out of our experience in Australia where espresso bars are everywhere. We liked the idea of being our own bosses (after all, says Don, who's gonna hire a sixty year-old boat bum?), we liked (surprise) the idea of moving around, and we liked having a business where daughter Tiffany could work with us. (Actually, Tiffer is the one who knows what she's doing!) We'd done our research online from Australia, taken a barista class there, too, stopped off in California to confirm our choice over a meet with the builder (he's built over a hundred), and placed our order in April. Our artwork and website were designed by an 18-year-old we "met" online, the wrap was put on locally here, and we were in business by September. For details check out our website www.cafe-getaway.com.

This past Thanksgiving I cooked the first turkey in years bigger than a boat oven (23lbs!). My mother's silver was polished and the table was set for eleven. Don's parents were here along with the kids and several friends. And I couldn't help thinking that a year ago, I couldn't have ever imagined we would be this content. We have much to be thankful for.

Oh, and I left out the best part….well, maybe not the *best* part…but…we even have a cat. Lucy, a grey and rust stray, was abandoned in the neighborhood several years ago. One of our great neighbors had been taking care of her as an outdoor cat, but when Lucy and I set our sights on one another, we saw quickly that it was a match. She is the perfect pet for us, and we are both smitten with her. You can tell by the way Don calls her a "worthless hairball."

So, life is good. Who'd a thunk it?!?!

Now here's the most important part. We have a guest house (aka our very comfy RV) in our very lovely wooded side yard. It's just waiting for visitors. It may not be exactly like charter, but if you like coffee and trees (and nearby beaches), well, the price is right !

In closing, we hope the year has been as kind to you as it has to us. We want hear from everyone, and, that said, we wish you all a Merry Christmas and an even better new year!

-Don Wilson & Gwen Hamlin

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