A Grass Growers Diary

By Graham Finlayson

Graham Finlayson is a 2008 Nuffield Scholar from Brewarrina in NSW, Australia. He kept a web diary, or “Blog” of his Nuffield travels of May to October 2008 that makes very interesting reading. Enjoy!
Welcome to those that are interested in following my journey this year, and my apologies for the late start to my musings.

I was awarded a Nuffield Scholarship (www.nuffield.com.au) in October 2007 along with 15 other Australians, three New Zealanders, two Canadians and quite a few from the British Isles. It is an agricultural based scholarship and allows us the fantastic opportunity to study overseas for four months, which includes ten weeks in our own particular field, as well as a comprehensive six week Global Focus Tour as part of a group. Mine is sponsored by the good folks at AWB Landmark and I’m extremely grateful for their generosity.

This is my first week into the second group’s Global Focus Tour (GFT) which will see us travel to New Zealand, then Ireland (I’m currently 40,000 feet up flying there via Hong Kong and London) for a week, then to France for a few days, then to the US of A, then on to China for eleven days, then to Manila and home via Singapore.

The GFT is designed to give us a snapshot look at what issues are impacting upon agriculture throughout the world today and the challenges and opportunities that could be available going into a rapidly changing future.

I feel very fortunate and privileged to have been awarded the scholarship in the first place which is a great chance for me to further my own education but I am equally as grateful to have been able to take the opportunity due to the support of my family, friends and neighbours. Most of all to my wife Cathy, who has to shoulder the considerable workload and burden of running our business and household in my absence. No doubt she will be well justified in any future argument we may have in dismissing me as disposable and I will have to wear it!!

Also my neighbour Merv, for looking after the welfare of the 7,000 sheep and 500 head of cattle that need to be regularly moved on Bokhara Plains. His ability and commitment to detail are my only reason for having the confidence to step away from the business with out the necessity of completely de-stocking while I’m away, and I appreciate that a great deal.

This second GFT group consists of eight Aussies, two Kiwis and one very big dairy-farming Canadian. We did get to meet each other earlier in the year at the Nuffield Autumn Tour in Victoria so we weren’t complete strangers before starting and if this first week is anything to go by then we are in for a fantastic and entertaining six weeks. Our sheer diversity in enterprise, geographic home location and view on the world has driven some lively discussion already and I have no doubt that my perceptions on a range of subjects will be challenged and altered over the course of the next few weeks.

As an insight into who I’m sharing this experience with, the group consists of the following: -
- Me (obviously!) from western NSW studying the use of livestock management to regenerate the drier rangelands and improve family farm profitability.
- Lester, an oyster farmer from Coffin Bay, SA.
- Greg, a dairy farmer from Manitoba, Canada
- Annabelle from the Pilbara region of WA. (Cover of April Outback magazine)
- Jane from Tasmania, who is a cheese maker and second generation Nuffielder.
• Jason from WA, an Organic Apple grower
• Matthew, a grape grower from the Barossa. (Own label is “Mad Dog”) 
• Simon, another West Aussie and large scale wheat farmer.
• Alli, a New Zealander looking to close the urban/rural divide.
• Tim from Stanthorpe, a vege grower and token Queenslander.
• Craige, another N-Zedder, arable farmer and dairy owner.

So as you can see, there is about as much diversity as you could get for a study into one form of industry and shows some of the difficulty in uniting the issues we all face in agriculture.

However we are an extremely enthusiastic and optimistic bunch, and ready to take on the challenges of a world where agriculture will again be increasingly recognized for its importance to all of civilization, whether from a food production point of view or an environmental perspective. Personally though, I believe for that to happen then agriculture itself will have to evolve to another level that is beyond the “green revolution” and what industrial/conventional agriculture has delivered over the last fifty years. No longer can we mine our resources as though they are infinite, using practices that degrade and pollute the environment. I think a combination of public pressure and possibly much higher oil prices may be just be the catalyst for radical beneficial change.

Well, having been awarded the scholarship last October I thought I thought I would have had plenty of time for organization before the 1st of June but alas, the last week or two before leaving home were quite frantic and stressful. Not really surprising, especially to those that know me. Although we had been warned about the emotional roller coaster ride we would go through it was still hard to be prepared. Four months is a long time to be able to step completely away from your business, and in the end I realized that there just was no easy way to do it, so I quickly packed a bag and got out of there!

After a night in Goondiwindi with Mark and K.A. we got to Toowoomba before Harriet finished school for the weekend and we had a day and a half as a family before I flew out of Brisbane on Sunday the 1st. Sad farewell, not only because of trepidation of being separated for so long, but also because it seemed like yesterday that we had all been flying out together on our way to the States. I was still very excited about the fantastic trip I was heading off on of course, but I also felt extremely nervous about the whole thing and sick to the stomach that they couldn’t be sharing it with me.

My first flight (number one of 24 in the first journey, which is the GFT) saw me go from Brisbane to Auckland, then a connecting flight on to Christchurch where I met up with the rest of the group who were ahead of me.

We had six days in New Zealand and it was an ideal way to start our combined journey as at least the Kiwis can understand us, and it wasn’t quite as hectic as I’m sure the remaining countries will be. Craige and Alli did a terrific job of organizing our itinerary and accommodation which threw up just enough challenges to keep us on our toes and ease us into
our roles. At Christchurch we got a look at several farms, mainly with an arable (cropping) and dairying focus.

Dairy sheds are being built at a rate of knots in NZ (and elsewhere at the moment) as the escalating price of milk sees it being the flavour of the month for agriculture. Pardon the pun! To be honest it’s not my style of agriculture with its massive “one use” capital infrastructure and high input costs making it susceptible to any adverse price movements quickly killing profits.

Craige is doing his best to talk me around and the way he presented his farms to us is a credit to his management style and good business sense. Matter of fact, there is a slight bent towards high production in the group leaving me in the minority and I enjoy the “discussion” and throwing up an alternate view occasionally! All done in good spirit of course and actually a quote that dominates for us so far is: “Not necessarily a fact, just an opinion I have”.

From there we went up into some high country around the Banks Peninsular region after jumping in a jet boat like sardines and taking a fantastic (and cold) ride up the fast flowing and beautifully clear water river to another farm. Amazing views and about as different to Brewarrina as you could possibly get. We got to see quite a bit of that high country scenery over the next two days and the sun even came out a couple of times! When it comes to the cold though, I’m unashamedly a wimp!

I really enjoyed our time in NZ and will definitely be taking my girls back there one day, however I was expecting to pick up on some good “grazing management” tips from our trip and must admit I was a little disappointed. They are renowned for their intensive cell grazing but given the higher rainfall differences to us there seemed to be dominance of annual based pastures eaten too short from what I saw. “Maybe not a fact, but an opinion I hold”!

As well as dairy farms, arable farms and sheep/cattle farms we also got to see mussel and salmon operations (quite controversial in getting “consents”) a cheese factory in Akoroa, visits with various government and industry research organizations and also the FFNZ which is the Federated Farmers of NZ. Their president gave us an excellent talk and I think its good that they have one united farmers representative body and Australia could pick up a few tips from them in that regard. Although I’m not sure whether Australia might not be better off with separate enterprise organizations to represent us as there are many conflicting groups and you cannot please everyone all of the time- flood plain graziers versus irrigators for example.

A bit of contention regarding irrigation in NZ as well, but if ever there was a place that had the water availability and the cropping skill and variation of crops to continually produce sustainably, then it is New Zealand

We stayed in B and B as well as back packer accommodation for several nights, which proved to be ideal, especially for us to get to know each other better and also for the opportunity it throws up to all sit up around a fireplace late at night delving deeply into world issues and discussing any topic someone would care to bring up. In typical Nuffield style we dived straight into the deep end and attempted “the God question” early on! That was a long one and well moderated by Tim and a beer bottle, ensuring everyone equal opportunity to speak. Very interesting!
Another flight on Saturday back to Auckland, where we spent the night with some free time to ourselves, a chance to catch up with washing etc, and a chance to charge the batteries before our “long haul” leg to Dublin.

I took the chance to catch a cab to go and visit an aunty and uncle of mine who live there in Auckland and had a great evening with them and their son and grandson. I’d only ever met dad’s brother once before and that was twenty five years ago. They still live independently and are quite fit and well, considering Chico (whose real name I learned was Murdoch John!) is over 91 years old. You’re only a pup Dad!!

Just landed in London. Hell, that was a long way with not much sleep and we still have a flight to catch into Dublin and the land of good Guinness. About 32 hours by the time we get there and I’ll be looking forward to a hot shower, or any shower!

Cheers for now.

Thursday, June 12th 2008, 10:54 AM

More from a Nuffelder in Ireland

First of all, “Happy Birthday” to my fantastic wife Cathy back at home for her birthday yesterday (no I didn’t forget!) who managed to have a wonderfully relaxing time, moved all the sheep and cattle with Merv, got bogged, cleaned up after guests and also had some time left over to catch a few wild goats!! Thanks to Christine and Zac for being there when I couldn’t.

Well, Ireland has been great so far and at last I seem to have become acclimatized to the time zone. We finally got to Dublin at around lunch time and dropped our luggage off at the salubrious back packer accommodation that had been pre organized for us, before heading to one of the many pubs nearby for a bite to eat and a taste of the local brew- for medicinal jetlag curing purposes of course! I could have almost skipped the Irish stew and just had the Guinness as a pint is almost a meal in itself. The place had a great atmosphere with an abundance of character and populated with a few Irish larrikins as well. It didn’t take long for our group to become involved in some lively discussion with the regulars and we quickly got a taste of their great sense of humour.

Back to the accommodation. Just in case you think we are being spoiled on this trip, let me describe our home for the next two nights.

There are now thirteen in our group as we have been joined by two more scholars from the Feb tour for our time in Ireland, so we had ten men in five double bunks in one room that
realistically should have had only two bunks in it. There was not even enough room to fit all our luggage in with us, let alone swing a cat! Anyway, we were all tired enough not to be too bothered and its all part of the experience of being a “Nuffielder” and being challenged I guess. We did have our own little shower and toilet though, which we soon discovered offered its own challenges and we had to bring in a “No number 2” rule for upstairs as the air quality would have threatened our health and team dynamics.

We had a dinner on the first night with all the ex-Nuffielders at the Guinness Storehouse after we had a look through the whole thing before hand. There was quite a crowd present and the Irish Scholars had also organized some great entertainment with a family that could sing, dance and play a variety of instruments, including one I’d never even heard of. (As tired as I was, two hours sleep at the most was all I could manage that night even though we left the dinner as soon as proceedings had finished!)

Our first full day in Dublin involved joining the Ireland Nuffield Associations conference and tour, which we will be a part of for most of this week before finishing a day early and flying to Paris next Saturday. So the next two days consisted of us joining the Irish as well as a large contingent of previous scholars and their partners from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Zimbabwe and Great Britain and France. We had the choice for both days in taking a tour with dairying, cropping or a focus on sheep/beef, and as I’m about “dairied-out” after New Zealand and don’t particularly go much on cropping then I stuck with the sheep/beef for both days, which is about as different to what I do at home as another enterprise would be, anyway.

According to feedback, all the tours have been great regardless of the focus. The dairy and arable farmers, as in NZ, are in a more positive position currently with their commodity prices being historically high. Actually, nearly all of the sheep and cattle guys would be totally unprofitable without the massive subsidies for land payments they receive and the spiraling growth in the value of their land base. I could understand the justification over here for some sort of payment to farmers for “public good” to maintain a healthy ecosystem (and communities), if it was “performance based”. But from what we have seen, this way of doing it has created a comfort zone way too big and has developed a culture of inefficiency and waste of land that is incredibly un-sustainable and self-defeating to progress, profitability and agriculture itself. I found it hard to believe, coming from a semi-arid environment in western NSW, that farmers in a temperate zone, in a productive area of the world with over 30 inches of rain and prices of about 100 Euros ($180) a lamb, cannot run a profitable business! and now I realize THEY ARE ALL JUNKIES!

There is incredible addiction in many areas of the world within agriculture towards the need and reliance on inputs such as chemical and fertilizer and the insatiable appetite for having
capital tied up in single use, expensive infrastructure that limits the farmers’ thinking and binds them to management practices that have no long term future. It was quite sustainable in the short term with cheap oil, but that is no longer the case now or forever more and we must be prepared for change. (If you disagree, then do your budgets on oil at $200 a barrel- a distinct possibility). There needs to be a deep seated and fundamental shift in thinking in agriculture world wide and I’m not seeing much of it so far on this journey.

People that I follow such as Allan Nation, Joel Salatin, Kit Pharo and Allan Savory have been promoting the necessity for change for years and are proving that alternatives to the industrial agricultural model can not only be very successful, but incredibly positive and regenerative for landscapes, businesses and communities.

Had an interesting spot for a few drinks, nibbles and speeches on the second night in the Irish capital. We got to spend the evening at the 800 year old Dublin Castle which is another great opportunity I have Nuffield to thank for. Also Lester, Matthew, Jason and I had an impromptu tour of the castle on the way out and were also very privileged to get a photo of the “Organic King of Dublin” perched up on his throne.

Talking organics, there aren’t too many of us involved in this group that are fans of that type of agriculture, so I was in the minority of those present that were actually impressed with the Minister for Agriculture’s speech and I thought it was fantastic that he had the courage to openly declare that truly sustainable forms of agriculture, such as organics, should be a priority for us to deal with in the future. Most farmers think that organics equals decreased yields etc and we would never be able to “feed the world” as only increasing technology and chasing the god of production will save us! Personally my belief is that the planet is capable of feeding twice the current world population if we would only start to focus on soil health as the primary driver. My last two weeks traveling has done nothing if not totally reinforce that, as there has been no shortage of overgrazed, thistle infested pastures in landscapes that are totally under-utilized.

Somehow I expected to see that in drier regions, but not NZ and Ireland. I’m gaining in respect every day for Australian farmers and I guess we should be grateful for our climatic short comings that require us to be far more proactive and efficient. Still plenty to learn though of course!

The sheep and beef tour on the second day also had a visit to a Charolais racehorse and Belted Galloway stud owned by a very successful business man named Sir Anthony O’Reilly. I can’t say that what we witnessed was relevant in a business sense to anybody in the group’s enterprise but it was great in its novelty value. It is a magnificent rambling estate set on about 800 acres with fantastic gardens and seemingly hundreds of horse stables that were much more up market than our current accommodation back in town. At the end of our tour we were presented with some of their cattle which I must say were the absolute epitome of what Kit Pharo would describe as cows that will take you into a wreck. He would suggest that you don’t want your cows too big as there is an optimum size for maximizing profitability (which should
be the primary focus) and that size is around the 500 kg mark and you can’t breed the right size of cow out of the wrong size of bull. Well this cow (I mean “COW”) that was paraded in front of us was measured a while ago at a whopping 1,322 kg. They were almost obscene but great novelty value and of course they were prize winners extraordinaire on the show scene.

Today we had a visit to a farm that is in the top five percent of cattle breeders in Ireland and he runs about 240 cows, which is quite a lot here considering that the average number of cows in the country is fifteen; yes that’s right fifteen!! He was a fantastic guy and was incredibly committed to farming his cattle with much more emphasis on measurement of the enterprise and running the place like a business and I agreed with much he said. He was also very funny with quick one-liners, as are a lot of his countrymen. The Irish seem to have a great natural flair for humour that Aussies have affection for and appreciate. However, once again the place was a jungle of steel sheds, concrete and one-use machinery and involved the need to feed the livestock for a third of the year. In a true measure of profitability counting overheads such as depreciation, opportunity cost and a factor for your own wage it would be hopelessly unsustainable without the benefit of a farm payment subsidy.

If you think I’m harping on this topic then you understand that I believe it to be important, and it could well be the most important issue of all. The management of farmlands worldwide will be crucial to addressing the root cause of most of the planets inequities. Countries should be capable of feeding themselves, and monopolizing the world’s resources by way of the promotion of such things as GM technology will not be the way to get us there.

Ah! Conference is on tomorrow and no doubt that will be interesting fodder for me as one of the guest speakers has written a book or two denouncing Organics.

Most of the group has taken off for a night at the “dogs” tonight, but I thought I’d give it a miss to get this and a few e-mails completed.

Cheers!

Saturday, June 14th 2008, 3:46 AM
Photos!!

Still waiting at the airport in Dublin for our flight to Paris and I've just figured out how to upload photos onto the blog page. I'll add plenty more as I go. Cheers!
Although the Nuffield conference was a great day, especially for me to get an insight into European agriculture, I had an overwhelming feeling that “world agriculture” has a long way to go before any paradigm shift will occur that takes us away from being input junkies and commodity price takers.

The location was a beautiful hotel that in a previous life had been somebody’s large country manor on the outskirts of Kilkenny. With a significant crowd of farmers present from all of the Nuffield sponsoring countries and with a packed schedule of speakers, it was always going to be both challenging and interesting for our diverse group. However I did find the focus of most discussion leaning towards taking a defensive position in regards to maintaining a right to continue with current farming practices in relation to environment, sustainability (?) and the opportunities that higher commodity prices will deliver in the short term. “In my opinion!”

There was a certain level of arrogance permeating the proceedings with a heavy bias against any form of biodynamic or organic agriculture and I feel guilty and slightly regretful that I didn’t take more of a stance myself and speak up. I don’t know if I would have been heard or understood as well as many of speakers that could have been asked along (and were not) who can articulate an argument for the alternate point of view far better than me. Anyway, I had so many points of contention written down from comments I’d disagreed with that the danger was my emotional state of mind would have seen me possibly get it all muddled up, and it would surely have fallen on deaf ears anyway!

The major challenge that I foresee for my study topic will be in being able to find a way of delivering any knowledge I gain to farmers that do not want to hear, but maybe I underestimate the level of change already occurring in many areas. Certainly my trip to the HM Conference in Albuquerque last year had a much more positive feel than this conference, and commodity prices were not even mentioned much. The focus there was much more on the issues we can affect such as soil health and enterprise selection, rather than the bigger picture items like weather and world events that we kid ourselves control our lives.

One of the well received speakers here spoke in a complete derogatory fashion towards organic and alternative views. I was amazed that someone of a supposedly educated background could speak of how we can continue to beat nature and how we can exploit more from the land. How people could sit there and lap up his rubbish was hard for me to fathom as nature will surely be around long after we are finished. If the history of Earth is broken down into twelve hours, then the time we as humans have been here represents just nine seconds- correct only nine bloody seconds, and look what we have done already! How can we be so arrogant to think that we always know best and that we have not had a detrimental effect in such a short time frame? And not just in the brittle drier environments either!

Admittedly I enjoyed the dinner event that was held at the same location that night much more than I did the day, so that was good. Actually the after dinner entertainment was once again a highlight in Ireland with a quartet of opera singers giving us a fantastic performance. Not being all that culturally liberated would be an understatement to describe my usual musical
preferences, and normally I could think of several other ideas for entertainment other than opera. However I really enjoyed it and for a “karaoke tragic” such as me it was hard to believe sounds like they displayed with their voices could be real. Another big thank you to Nuffield and the Irish lads for giving us the opportunity to experience it.

As good a night as it was for us, the Irish leg was finished and we had to catch a 6.00 am bus the next morning bound for Dublin again and then a flight to Paris and the French adventure. After a long wait around the Dublin airport, courtesy of being about two hours earlier than necessary, we had a quick and uneventful flight across to Charles de Gaul airport where we picked up two rental cars without much fuss. Getting through Paris (with an obligatory look at the Eiffel Tower) proved to be a bit more fuss though as navigating the traffic and making sense of the cryptic French signage system seemed to give us no end of challenges on the way to Chartres (Shart) which about seventy kms southwest of the capital.

The second car containing Alli, Lester, Matthew and the driver Tim had slightly less difficulty, finding our host for the trip about three hours earlier than us!! However that was probably the last time for the few days in France that they had a reason to skite. Our driver “Organic Apple Jason” did a great job of driving for us and was probably only let down by some poor navigating at times, mostly by that Kiwi in our team, Craige, who has a really handy GPS on his phone! Yeah right!

A lot of fun though driving around France as (despite the bad signage) it is a beautiful country with mainly larger (than Ireland anyway) areas of crops and not much fencing or even the sight of a lot of animals. Except for the occasional dairy farm of course! Our “big scale wheat growing unit”, Simon from W.A., was very excited about the potential of a French investment over here: “as long as he could stick a D9 into those remaining pesky woodlands and get them out of the way”!! Crops of ten tonne to the hectare and better are common, and a bad year would mean a disastrous 8.5 tonne crop in one of their savage droughts!

Our host (a French Nuffielder from 06) was a cropping farmer from Aediu, near Chartres and he was a fantastic guide for us. He also had a business growing flowers and domestic garden plants etc that actually gave him a cash flow that is three times more profitable than his farming, which itself is quite substantial for that region. About 180 Hectares in 31 different plots! Moving his machinery around in such a highly populated area is understandably one of his biggest problems.

We also visited another (obligatory) dairy, although it had a slightly different slant being fully housed, and the French still have a quota system, which is due to be replaced. With that in mind this farmer had plans to expand on his cow herd and develop a “methane gas” capturing facility for energy use.
Another visit was down the road to an intensive piggery, which housed up to 800 sows in a system that I could only describe as “factory farming” in its extremity. Genetically the pigs were probably very good quality from what I could tell, but those that have been reading this would understand that my view is that this is the sort of agriculture that is giving farming a bad name in most quarters. In my mind it just cannot be defended and to be honest, when we walked down the darkened corridors between the dozens of pens that were full of varying sizes of pigs, I could not help but imagine walking into medi-evil dungeons during the dark ages full of souls being tortured! And you know what? They were deemed acceptable back then, and history will be harsh in its judgment of us as well. If smell is any guide (which it should be) then it was an incredibly stomach churning indication that maybe not all is well, and besides it was going backwards financially every week to the tune of several thousand Euros. What makes it difficult to change for those people is quite understandable in a way. They have millions of Euros tied up in infrastructure that is built and designed for one use and that is intensive pig farming. Just way too much economic and emotional baggage to be able to think clearly about a different way forward and (of course) they were hopeful for improved pork prices to save them!!

The second morning saw us have a real early start at 4.00 am to get to the Runjis markets in Paris where we saw fruit, veggies, flowers and meat etc being traded on a grand scale. This is the biggest market in the world, covering 650 Hectares (2,000 acres), selling 1.6 million tonne of produce a year. 25,000 trucks go in and out of that place every day and 12,500 people work there. Incredible figures and it was great to have a look, even at 57 Euros each for a guided tour which did include a fantastic brunch afterwards involving produce from the markets and, in true French tradition, some good wine as well!!

We then said goodbye to Romaine, our loyal host, and thanked him for his invaluable help as it was terrific to be able to have a translator along with us. However we were now left to our own devices and set about heading to a small French village with a very strong connection to Australia going back to the First World War. Villers Bretonieux is a quaint little place a couple of hours away from Paris and we visited a museum dedicated to the Australians during
the war and also several memorials including a magnificently kept cemetery/monument just out of town.

From there we had to find our BandB accommodation in another small village by following dubious Jim Geltch (Nuffield CEO) directions and more cryptic French sign posting. It was getting quite late by the time we found it and it was a good thing as the second car people were starting to consider manslaughter as an option due to tempers and relationships being strained. Ha ha! I’ve no idea why as it was a beautiful drive through the countryside down small roadways and our car was in a great mood still as we were never in any doubt!! Anyway it was Simon’s birthday!! The BandB was a great place to stay and through some sort of charade we could communicate with the “French only” hostess and she provided us with a delicious five course meal including her son’s red wine, so it was a long day from 4.00 in the morning till we eventually got to bed that night.

The next morning we were on the road by 8.30 am and heading for Charles de Gaulle airport at Paris once again. Surprisingly we had an uneventful and very pleasant run straight through to the fourth level carport in terminal 2, dropped the cars off and headed up through the check out. Getting to be pro’s now except that we failed to fill the cars up with fuel, which could prove to be a glitch that we will find expensive sometime down the track.

The flight across to Boston went well (about 8 hours) which is a good length flight, but then our connecting flight to Washington DC was delayed for quite a while so we spent the wait in the Qantas Frequent Flyer Club, or the Admiral Club as it is with American Airlines. It was pretty miserable in there compared to most we have been in, no free food and drinks, but we at least could relax in comfort and get on the net. I finally got to call Cathy after replacing my phone charger that I’d left behind accidentally in the backpacker hostel at Kilkenny. Got stung for $40 as well for it here. ‘Phone companies are the same everywhere! Now I’m sitting in a hotel room in DC and it’s about 11.00 at night here or 5.00 in the morning in the time zone we got up in, so another long one. Had a funny trip in the taxi. Craigie was sickened by the realization that he had left his wallet and all that entails back in the Admiral Club at Boston so walking into the Hotel he was in a similar state to most New Zealanders after an All Blacks loss to the Wallabies and was not well. Little did he know (and neither did any of us in the first taxi) that Jane had picked it up and was letting him suffer!! He certainly didn’t mind being laughed at after being told. He was understandably very relieved.

I think I need some sleep, although I reckon we are possibly that jetlagged that we’ve gone a full circle and should be ok tomorrow. Hope so as we have a stack of meetings lined up and another hectic schedule planned.

Cheers again!
Back in the air again, this time en-route to the state of Oklahoma via Dallas, Texas. Pity that we don’t get more time to have a look around the lone star state, as I’m sure Slacky could have given us a few good tips on some likely country music establishments to visit. However we will have to be snappy in catching our next flight to Oky city as this morning’s flight was once again delayed by quite a bit. On this sort of extensive trip overseas you can unfortunately find yourself spending plenty of time in airports. It’s been a really great three days in DC and Maryland (or Marrilun as the locals say) as the Nuffield contacts Ron Helinski and Sarah Taylor-Rodgers did a fantastic job of organizing our stay and maximizing our experience of southern hospitality. They had a full program arranged which had a diversity of enterprise and interest that left us all blown away by the experience, and we could not have thanked them enough.

Our first day was spent in the U.S. capital and it was quite a busy schedule which was made slightly easier by our ability to secure a cab for the day that was capable of fitting the eleven of us on board. This is the country of big cars remember, and for all their talk of high oil prices and expensive fuel there is still a massive culture here of the dual pickup being king. The first stop was at the New Zealand embassy where we were given a run down on some of the current issues in American agriculture and also the implications of their policies on Australia and NZ. We were also given quite a good insight into the US Farm Bill that is put to the Senate etc to be passed here every five years. Mostly we discussed the issue of ag subsidy and farm payments, although they only represent about 15% of the actual farm bill budget. It is quite a complicated political arrangement that seems to give certain parties (ie farmers) considerable advantage and policy leverage. Like most systems we have seen though, it really has more of a negative effect on farmer efficiency in the longer term. Over the next few days we encountered many farmers who had a limited ability to think beyond being able to do anything without some sort of government payment being involved somewhere along the line. We also had a talk there from a guy from Fonterra, a New Zealand based dairy co-operative that is going great guns in the US at the moment, with continuing high milk prices and an industry that seems ready to take full advantage of the boom in milk product consumption worldwide. The thought was that the massive growth is being driven in the main by China and India and that it is not going to abate anytime soon. I can’t help but think when those sort of sentiments are being thrown around that maybe it could be a good time to be looking for the “next good thing” instead.

From there we found our way to the offices of Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) and were given a talk on what
they are up to currently, and what their future direction and goals are in the short to medium term. It’s not until you get a look at some of the statistics that you realize what a small part of the US red meat industry we actually represent and why market access is so important to us. Just a small percentage gain of their market would see them easily absorb all that we could produce and much more again. It was also highlighted that our clean, green, grass fed and natural product is our number one advantage and should be promoted and protected. Certainly in western NSW we are positioned to really capture that niche, and the world protein market will only continue to grow.

From there we went to have a meeting with some quite high up political representatives who Ron Helinski had lined up for us which was a great experience for us all. They explained the Farm Bill to a certain extent and quite a few other issues, but for me personally I was left feeling a little uneasy when I queried them on the size of their budget deficit. I was wondering what was planned to address the fact that the debt has risen to over ten trillion dollars (I’m not even sure how many zero’s that is!!) and could obviously have serious ramifications, not only for farmers but the whole world economy. Well the response was quite non-committal and it was though they really didn’t have much of an idea or even want to think about it.

When we got out of there we made our way back down the street to find our “hired bus” that we had pre-arranged and paid for already. We thought it was quite cheap at $700 for three days including a driver. Well it was, but of course it wasn’t a coach you see. It was actually a school bus!! For those of you that may not have been to the States before, all of the school buses over here are those great big old yellow trucks that you see in the movies or in cartoons etc so we had some laughs and got a few strange looks over the next couple of days.

Jane commented that she felt like we were part of a South Park episode!! And “Wonda”, our trusty driver, was a real character as well,” wheeling the big ol’ tank” around where ever we wanted to go, missing a few directions and hardly ever taking her mobile phone off her ear the whole time.

Our first stop was down into the famous Chesapeake Bay area of Maryland, across the mighty Potomac and Patuxent Rivers to our home for the next three nights in the Fairfield Inn (Marriott) no less. A bit spoiled here as we all had our own rooms, which although a little expensive even with a group rate, was a well timed break from each other in the middle of our trip. Not that there are any major issues as yet and the group is still getting along surprisingly well. Had a very relaxing first night and introduction to the fantastic hospitality we would be afforded in Maryland with a backyard dinner at Sarah and Whitt Taylor-Rodgers place. It was also a “meet and greet” with those that would be showing us around etc from the local university and Southern Maryland promotional organizations etc. Our dinner was local Rock Fish along with loads of other local produce and the chef gave a talk on how there has been a major push in the region for a “buy local” campaign and the benefit that has been to the whole region to the point that supply can no longer keep up with demand. Although this region is quite diverse and can produce plenty, there is growing pressure from urbanization and their major crop (for over 380 years!!), which was tobacco, has all but disappeared due to
government buy outs and the obvious decrease in the number of people smoking I guess. As we were to find out, the transition for farmers that took up the “buyback” option to actually take up another enterprise on their farms has been fraught with difficulty, due in part to age of participants and in part to there being too large a lifestyle change. Has to be plenty of opportunities though as local zoning laws are aiming to restrict housing density to maintain the desired landscape aesthetics and the numbers of people traveling through this area and the east coast generally is mind blowing. Especially from where I come from!

The first full day there saw us have a meeting with several local leading business and organizational people such as the Farm Bureau and this gave us the opportunity to introduce ourselves and give an opinion on some of the issues and challenges that they were discussing in regards to their region. After that we headed out to a local oyster farmer’s place, much to the delight of our fellow traveler and oyster king Lester. Being back near the ocean had already put him in good spirits for this leg of the journey, and it was good for the rest of us to be able to see a little of what he has been constantly ear-bashing us about for three weeks! This area has a long history of harvesting seafood and in particular oysters, but over the last 30 years it has all but finished due to depleted stocks, disease and polluted waters from the overuse of farming fertilizers etc. After that we had a seafood lunch at a local restaurant and then headed out to an organic farmer’s vegetable and seed farm.

It was a great visit as he was particularly good at expressing an intelligent and articulated view on why industrial agriculture and the big companies driving the GM debate are ripping farmers off. He has had some really good results from conventional breeding that far outweigh any benefits that Monsanto et-al have been able to come up with yet, despite all of their propaganda. He also had a bit of a win with a few of my chemical dependant traveling mates and me by shouting us a few beers while we did our farm tour.

Simply filled a bucket up that he had lying around the shed and we took that with us, which you wouldn’t be game to do on any Roundup-laced place!! It wasn’t the tidiest looking little farm if you’re inclined to be a weed chasing freak but he certainly had plenty of smart things to say. For one, in regards to “economic sustainability” he suggested that you don’t really qualify for that position unless you are setting your own price for your produce. Not too many farmers can honestly put there hand up for that I’d say, and it’s a fair point.

That evening we were in for another treat as we were all invited to go aboard a Skipjack (which is sail boat for those as ignorant as I was) to have a few drinks and a Maryland chicken, the original KFC and also fresh crabs, which although messy were very tasty and went well with the little tiny bottles of red wine we had. I can’t claim to have ever been on a sail boat before, so doing so on a nice peaceful evening and having heard a great
oral history from one of the local legends as well made it a memorable first time. It all looked quite perfect from my perspective but as our host explained the actual water condition was very bad and still had considerable pollution problems. When he was young you could see and catch oysters right off the bottom of the bay in 20 feet of water, but now visibility was down to less than a metre (and there was very few oysters left).

That was a great day and as it turned out the next was just as good. We started with a visit to the local markets run by the regions Mennonite and Amish communities and my only regret was that we were asked not to take any photos of the people themselves as it was surely like looking straight back into time itself. Incredible that a community like they are could be surviving alongside and coexisting with a general population that is basically the exact opposite in values and consumptive practices. The produce they displayed and are quite successful in selling looked fantastic in quality and was very well presented. The men, women and children are extraordinary in appearance, particularly the Amish with their mo-less beards and straw hats. All the men were thin, fit looking and wore braces and all the girls had long plain dresses and one and all had stern faces! Some of the little tiny boys look like miniature versions of old men except they were bare footed!!... I’d love to be able to spend some time with a community like that and get inside their heads. I think modern civilisation could learn a thing or two and wouldn’t it be great if every child spent some time like that for a decent perspective on life and a view into a world that isn’t dominated by the latest I-pod or fashion?

The rest of the day was filled up by a visit to a small (but extremely tidy) grape farm to give Matty Munzberg (our fourth generation Barossa valley grape grower) a bit of a fix, another visit to a farm that has taken the tobacco payout and developed a very successful tourism enterprise and nursery, and another farm run by three brothers that also had a cropping operation and extensive nursery. I could fill up plenty more space going into more detail but I’m running out of battery.

That night we had another fantastic dinner just out of the city at a big old manor converted to a B and B. The well landscaped garden went right down to the banks of the large St. Mary’s river, which is another massive tributary for the Chesapeake Bay estuary. We ate outside as the weather was perfect, as it has thankfully been for most of our trip so far. It can and is usually quite hot in these parts by now.

Oklahoma may be a tad warmer for us and cheers till then.
Oklahoma is warm all righty. It was late in the afternoon by the time we touched base at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Oklahoma City and met up with our very well organized host for the week. Craige and I had become the designated drivers of the hire cars for the week this time and although a little nervous, I was soon comfortable again and was thankful of my previous experience over here with Cathy and Harriet last year. Hope Pjesky arranged for us to meet in the foyer as soon as we checked in and then gave us an extremely detailed plan of attack for what was ahead of the group in the forthcoming week in the state of Oklahoma. We thought we had had a relatively busy first week in the U.S. but apparently it was about to get a whole lot busier, including right away taking a walk down to one of the local stadiums to watch a game of Indoor Football featuring the local side, the Oklahoma “Dawgs”! What a mad circus it was to be, with a half sized field it was somehow like a game of 20/20 cricket with the actual football being almost a side line to all of the other entertainment going on. Crazy stuff and the Dawgs finally went down in a close one 60 to 51. Also, I don’t think there was much drug testing involved and some of the competitors were of mammoth proportion!

Sunday morning saw Hope lead us out to the Western Cowboy Hall of Fame on the outskirts of town and we were given a guided tour of the whole place by a dear little old lady that managed to take two hours to give us the “one hour” tour. Well worth a good look though as it was full of history, stories, artifacts and artwork covering the whole gamut of the opening up of the west for both Europeans and the impact on the native Indians. We then headed out to the famous Cattleman’s Steakhouse for lunch arriving a little early as they never take bookings. And probably never need to as the place was pretty well packed out by then. Just what we needed in America, another place to give us a lovely big meal!! I’m starting to think that maybe getting “crook” in China may not be a bad thing after all as I’ll need to knock a few pounds off before getting home somehow.

Getting back out into the hot sun after that was more than a regular challenge for us but we managed to make our way down to the Stockyards, which is the biggest auction selling centre for stocker (store) cattle in the world, often selling up to 12,000 head on a Monday and backing up on the Tuesday for a few more. Oklahoma is home to wheat growing and cattle breeding and they are two of the biggest industries in the State. While there we saw a couple of semi’s, most of the livestock was being carted in by big pick ups pulling even bigger bloody trailers!! We then got to have a bit of free time before getting ready for another night of sport and a taste of an American icon in attending a local baseball game. About twenty years since I’d last seen a game and although the novelty value was quite high, I wouldn’t care to experience it without the added benefit of value adding beer! At one stage it was 0/0, 0/0, 0/0, 0/0 before the visiting side got a couple of home runs and the locals once again went down. Perhaps we weren’t very good lucky charms.

Today saw another early start and a longer drive after booking out of the hotel, as Hope had organized for us to be hosted by the University of Oklahoma at Stillwater which has a regular...
population of around forty thousand but is boosted by another 23,000 students. As you could imagine the place looked quite busy with new construction going on all over the place, and we were very fortunate to be given the whole day there with access to questioning many of the faculty on a range of topics. We looked at Horticulture, gardening, seed breeding, wheat processing, animal management (including a 6.5 million dollar swine facility that had state of the art waste management and methane capturing capability’s) and also got to have a couple of meetings with staff to discuss policy issues. I came to the conclusion that although the country around here is much better quality and higher rainfall (30-32 inches) than I had anticipated, academics, however, are very similar around the world in their reductionist thinking. There seemed to be a strong influence towards research funding (and therefore research) going towards projects within certain parameters such as high production, necessitating expensive inputs rather than towards soil health, which is more difficult to copyright. But maybe I’m just being a little cynical! The Uni did also give us a good look around their facility for testing and helping people promote new products, which very high tech, well utilized and a great way of value adding in the agricultural industries. There was a whole range of products on display showing the benefit of being able to help local entrepreneurs get a good start and it was really interesting to look through.

We then had dinner at the famous Eskimo Joe’s in Stillwater before driving about an hour or so to Enid, where we are staying for the night. Currently its nearly midnight and I’m still waiting for my drying to finish as I was last in the line up for washing. The idea of a good nights sleep is very appealing right now!

Friday, June 27th 2008, 10:37 PM

Last day in the States

Another late night here at Yukon, Oklahoma and we have covered quite a few miles over the last three days, even managing to sneak into the mighty Texas in the process.

It’s been a fast paced schedule, with limited time spent at most locations, giving us the opportunity to see as wide a range of people as possible to the credit of Nuffield and our host, Hope Pjesky. After a visit in the morning to the local farm bureau at Enid, in which there was quite a range of agricultural and social topics covered, we then headed out to Ryan and Hope’s farm for a first hand look at what they have been up to. They specialize in grazing, wheat, and trading stocker cattle, mainly store steers and because they tend to go against the normal trends they have been quite successful. Although quite a high input process and without any particular focus on regenerative grass management, their success seemed to lie in the fact that they have very regular turnover and Ryan has a great eye for market moves and opportunities. They were also harvesting wheat that day and although yielding ok, it had been quite severely affected by the unusually high amount of rain earlier this month. Ironic and quite typical of the sort of setback that can be common place back in Australia.

Lunch was at Hope’s recommended local Mennonite restaurant down the road and we all had the special “Chicken Fried Steak” which was actually very good, and being washed down once again with sweets, I could hardly walk out of there!!

Then after a quick call into a local winery (set in a beautiful location, as winerys tend to be!) and a bit of a tour, we hit the road heading northeast towards the famous Oklahoma Panhandle
country. This is more like it, a bit of drier country where we can get away from the possibility of oyster farming and girly vegetable growing and the chance to meet some real American ranchers!! A long way up there though, and luckily we got to break the trip up with dinner at a contact of Hope’s about 60 miles short of our destination where we once again were treated to a splendid meal and some terrific fiddle playing by one of the locals. He could have passed in appearance to a Culgo local with a beard and big hat (trains horses for a living) but he played the fiddle and historical cowboy tunes with a passion and had done, along with the piano and guitar, since he was a child. It’s a great gift to have. Quite a drive from there after dinner and we gladly arrived at Guymon in the heart of the Oklahoma Panhandle where none of us were too long out of the swag that night.

The next morning and it wasn’t long before we had realized this was some sort of special place, even though most of the group thought we were possibly in the middle of nowhere. We were starting to understand the American love of extremes, whether it be the warm weather or the extent and size of industry. This area is known as one of the most agriculturally important and successful areas of the country and it’s not because of the lush surrounds!! Although in severe drought (which the landscape is obviously suffering from) the land is quite populated with housing and sheds etc, but the most startling fact is the amount of industry going on. Not only the dotted about and often seen oil wells, but also an amazing amount of cattle feedlots, pivot irrigation schemes and the newest industry of all, intensive hog farming!

And that was our first visit, to one of the major swine conglomerates of America that has a base here in Guymon, the Seaboard Company. It really is very hard to get a handle on just how industrialized America’s food system has become until you get a first hand appreciation of the size and scope of some of these operations. We got to have a meeting with one of the sector managers at their office on the outskirts of Guymon and he gave us an insight into how the company started and its massive expansion, particularly into a fully integrated pig (or hog) production business. With 216,000 sows in their breeding sheds they produce one hell of a lot of pork and yet they are only ranked about 7th in the U.S. this year. So there are some REALLY big operators out there and actually it was an interesting comment from the guy though regarding China’s production to date. Apparently China still produces 35 % of the total world pig production even though it is done by small back yard operations in conjunction of course with the family enterprise. There was another comment that the Chinese method causes disease, but I wasn’t particularly convinced as China has been operating that way for a hell of a long time and they seem to have no trouble growing their population!!

Rather, when we went for a drive to have a look at one of their production sheds we were not permitted inside (without showering in and out) as it would create a “disease threat”. I ask, are we not going in the wrong direction with agriculture when we create monocultures that are so pathogenic and lacking in natural resistance that we can’t even let a pig express any pigness (by being in dirt and sunshine etc) because we fear disease. This has been a common theme in my experience traveling and if ever there was a culture on Earth that has separated itself from nature than I feel it is the good ol’ U.S of A, the most dominant and influential of all. Don’t get me wrong, I have had a great experience in America every time I’ve been over here and the people individually are fantastic and possibly the best hosts in the world. But I feel (my opinion only Tim!) that there is definitely a disconnect that has crept into this society and the wonderful crowd that was in Albuquerque and the ranchers we visited last year are unfortunately in the minority of the general American population. My opinions have created some lively debate on our long drives though the Midwest and I’ll admit that I’m not sure how
things can change for the better. But I am sure that unless we go looking then it certainly won’t be found.

One question I would pose towards “Industrial Centralised Monoculture” input reliant farming enthusiasts. What if (just like tobacco) the industry gets held accountable for society’s health issues because its found our focus on production has left out nutrition?? And of course the ecological question!! One thing I have trouble coming to grips with is the fact that the dry brittle environment can be the hub of such a massive amount of industry, completely reliant on the ongoing availability of the amazing Ogallala Aquifer providing the enormous amount of water to keep everything going. It has to be considered a finite resource and yet most of the really good country is being completely under-utilized. Call me crazy if you like, but something is not right with that scenario.

We then got to visit the Panhandle Research Centre where the main focus was on cropping etc and the only livestock focus seemed to be once again heavily geared towards looking at feedlot efficiency in cattle and how that could be improved, not how it could be avoided altogether. We also went to another feedlot with about 27,000 head of cattle currently in the yards. If you think that is a lot then get your head around the fact that the company in that region actually handles about 180,000!! I think there was about as much machinery involved in that single farming operation then is in all of western NSW!

After that we headed west again towards Boise City (ambitiously or historically named) to visit quite a large grain growing operation and give our “wheat growing unit” a much needed fix after all these animal based enterprises. This guy and his father farmed about 18,000 acres of wheat, as well as a grain elevator (silo) business and a myriad of other enterprises including the only liquor store in the county! It had been a brutally dry year to date so there wasn’t too much profit about this year in grain, although he wasn’t that concerned as they had a huge “bin buster” of a season last year. Seemed a great guy with plenty of enthusiasm for the future of agriculture and expected his son to become the sixth generation of their family to continue there. The fact that he and his father were partners in an expanding business model was a credit to them both and what they are achieving should be a model for farming families all over the world. As well as that, they put on a fantastic BBQ dinner that evening for us which we had to rush through a little so that we could drive another 60 odd miles where most of us got to go for a ride on some horses and do the “dude ranch” thing. Actually it was around 8.00 pm before we mounted up, with a few of the group not really sure about what they were letting themselves in for and it was after dark by the time we rode back in to the homestead- another very long but enjoyable and diverse day in the life of a “Nuffielder”.

The country here had changed quite spectacularly into a rugged cowboy movie type landscape and it was the ideal area for this sort of tourism enterprise. Leon, our guide was a nice guy but could probably advance his career by brushing up on a few entertainment and local knowledge skills. Tired as we were, our swags weren’t to be had there though as we had another short
drive down the road to the “thriving metropolis” of Kenton, where there was no phone/internet or communication of any type available. Shock, horror!! I’m a junkie too!!! We had to jostle a bit for a bed that night but I was quite happy to take the “verandah without gauze” option and chance the mozzies, and could quite honestly have slept under a barb wire fence with only my spurs for comfort that night.

Next morning we were up to a hearty breakfast of biscuits (scones), beans, bacon, meatballs and pancakes etc which was just what we needed?! One problem with this great American (and New Zealand, and Irish, and French) hospitality is that we are all in real danger of blowing right out! We have better feed conversion ratios than any feedlot we have visited so far, and that is getting scary. Ahhh, nothing a good bug picked up in China won’t fix for us.

First stop was back tracking to the mighty Boise City to check out a Beef Jerky enterprise that the owner had started there from scratch after not be able to source any jerky that he thought was good enough. Now it has grown to the point where it is taking off and they are considering selling out as a lifestyle choice, but retaining the intellectual property rights so that they continue to make money out of it. I really enjoyed the hosts’ attitude, especially starting off illegally to see if they could make a go of it before pouring money into infrastructure.

I think that is a real fault of the American regulatory system, that to start a new and small enterprise, you have to build all of this capital infrastructure and have it in place before you even know if the venture is feasible. To me that discriminates against start up entrepreneurs that may have a fantastic idea but don’t get the chance to trial it with careful growth. No Mans Land Jerky sure is tasty and I grabbed a couple of bags (they also gave us some) to take into China, just in case we get wary of the local fare and need sustenance.

From there we visited a museum, and then headed south to the lone star state of Texas where we were very fortunate (courtesy of a Craig McK. contact) to be able to get access to a huge, even for Texas standards, cheese factory on the outskirts of Dalhart. When I say huge, this place turns out about 1.6 million pounds of cheese a day!! The area is exploding with dairy growth and the Hilmar Cheese Company (owned and started by eleven dairy farmers 25 years ago) has expanded from California only recently and was extremely impressive, specializing in providing a wholesale product to customers and having close relationships with their suppliers, many of whom have also moved to this region from California to a more “business friendly” political environment.

After that we had quite a haul down towards Amarillo and onto the I40 heading East for about 250 miles with our destination for the last night in Oklahoma being Yukon, just short of Oklahoma City. As a bit of trivia, Yukon is the birthplace of the legendary Garth Brooks, and the university we visited in Stillwater was the place he first studied music. The next morning we could have used his local knowledge as we got a bit lost looking for a cattle stud to visit before catching our flight to LA, via Dallas. We did eventually make it there for a quick presentation from the Express Cattle Company which we were informed was the second largest
seed-stock producer in the States and the number one in Angus bull sales. Quite an impressive ranch, with more staff involved in mowing lawns and manicuring the gardens then most studs would have working with livestock. I’d like to see though, a direct comparison in performance for profitability with Kit Pharo’s bulls from out in Colorado on a level playing field. I know who I’d put my money on and even more so if the input costs such as grains continue to rise.

Anyway we made it through that and I’m now sitting in the airport lounge in Los Angeles awaiting a flight to Hong Kong at midnight. Luckily we had a chance to duck into LA with a friend of Craige’s for a few hours this afternoon to kill some time. Actually fought our way through quite solid traffic to his place for a couple of beers, then made our way to Huntington Beach and had a walk along the pier before catching a Mexican dinner and getting a lift back out to LAX. I would have liked to have found that spot last November with Cathy and Harriet as it was a very busy but nice area.

Been a long day already, so I’m not particularly looking forward to another 14 hour flight just to top it off. We will arrive in Hong Kong at 5.30 am on Sunday morning so that means we skip Saturday completely.

Cheers!

Wednesday, July 2nd 2008, 7:34 AM
Taishan, China

Hi All. I thought my blog site had been broken down as I’ve not been able to access it since being in China, so hopefully this will go on. Yes, the flight was long, as was the first day in Hong Kong which also turned into quite a long night ending up in of all places, an Irish pub! It proved to be a tough morning the day after as well for some as we had to take a ferry ride from HK to mainland China which took about one and a half hours. That proved to be about one hour and twenty minutes too long for our normally solid finance minister Simon and his fellow WA cover girl scholar Annabelle. And to be quite honest, I didn’t feel much better either, but managed to hang on. This trip to China was expected by all to be as interesting as anywhere on the GFT, and certainly hasn’t let us down at all yet. This blog entry will be a more concise version than usual as I’ve fallen behind quite a bit, so I hope I can do what we have experienced justice. We have also been joined by an ex
Scholar in Andrew Broad (2005), Angus Christian (our organizer for the China leg, as he has lived here before but now based in Britain), as well as James Parsons from New Zealand who was in the first GFT this year and who is coming up to the close of his five month tour of study.

The last three days have seen us be blessed with the great accommodation Angus lined up for us in the city of Taishan, southern China. The Taishan Phoenix Hotel is 5 Star, no less and is costing us the princely sum of about 55 dollars for a twin room, about as much as we had to pay for a ten share crappy room in Dublin! We were pretty happy about that!

The contact is a guy called Michael Chen (originally from Taiwan) who is a very successful business man here that has also taken us out for a couple of meals and given us a tour of his $40 Mill factory which manufactures poly tarps etc. I don’t think I’ve ever met a man as “hypo” and full on as this guy and he provided us with a lot of laughs and great insight into how business in China operates.

We got to see three factories yesterday. Michael’s Polytuff company, another one that manufactures alloy wheels for the top end of that market and another company that produces another product we are all familiar with, Supa Glue. One thing they all had in common, besides having a terrific recent history, is that they are all faced with rapidly rising input costs and labour shortages causing dwindling profit margins. That really surprised me, as it is easy to just assume that with the massive population here that you could never run out of labour. However, the rising standard of living is having an impact on the expectations of workers and they are setting their sights a little higher these days. Most of the labour is coming from the poorer regions of the north. As well as that there has been plenty of companies going out of business or moving off shore. Ironic!

We have also been to a couple of local markets and that is something to behold in itself. Just about everything you could imagine is there, plenty of foods, seeds and nuts as well as plants, fruits and meat etc that I could not recognize at all. We also have been to two schools over the last two days that our intrepid tour guide has taught at previously. One a kindergarten/primary school and the other a middle school where the kids were around 16 years old. The younger kids started at around two years old and some of the ones a little older gave us a great performance of some moves they have been practicing for the Olympics and their discipline was particularly well controlled and yet they still had great fun. About four teachers for every 30 kids would have helped as well. The older kids were telling us that when they go to school they start at around 6.30 and have a break for lunch and dinner,
but then go right through till about ten at night!! (And they also do some lessons Saturday and Sunday). The discipline towards work as well as school is incredibly strong over here and I don’t think they could fathom how easy we get it in the West.

Some of the things that have really been impressed upon me here, besides the above, is the sheer numbers of people and their seeming complete indifference to rubbish laying around in the streets, the completely different diet and lack of wastage (no part of the chicken gets thrown away here, as Alli found out when accidentally putting a piece of chicken in her mouth, only to find it was the head!!) The amount of motor bikes, push bikes and other strange contraptions getting around that our bus drivers continually honk at. And also the status of farmers who are described to us as being regarded as the lowest of the low in Chinese culture and although improving have been considered that for a very long time. Quite unfortunate and strange in that food itself, as it is in most places, is an important part of their culture and it has an incredible diversity. Actually we have almost been fed more here than in America but at least this food does not seem to bloat you as much. They seem to keep serving up dishes until they have you beaten as a sort of pride issue. Although there have been a couple of dishes that I’ve not been game to attempt, most have been fantastic.

We head North tomorrow and will have quite a bit of time on the bus, so maybe I can elaborate some more then as bed is beckoning.

Cheers again!

Thursday, July 3rd 2008, 3:06 AM
On the road from Taishan

Hi again. That last effort was rushed through and I’ve thought of quite of bit I have left out. Mind you, I could fill a book if I went into the full detail of all the information and adventures we have experienced on this trip both good and bad.

First of all I left out mentioning that we were also joined on tour for the China leg by another Nuffielder who is a big Scottish potato growing unit from Ardler, between Perth and Dundee, and not far from Carnoustie where my dad’s people are from. Although China is the biggest producer (by a long way) of the world’s potatoes, this lad gives them a bit of a nudge with his home operation turning out about 35,000 tonnes a year!

Also I forgot to mention Sarite, who was a girl that our tour leader Angus taught in China a few years ago and who has joined us to be another translator and guide, giving us a great insight into Chinese culture. We actually got to visit her family farm and village yesterday and also to quiz her mum and dad about any aspect of there business that we wanted to know more about. Sarite was adamant that no subject was taboo, which was a great opportunity to look inside a
culture that has been closed to the west for a long time. What struck me about little Sarite (she’s about four foot nothing) is her fantastic attitude and bubbly personality, despite the fact that she had grown up in a very poor family. Poor in monetary terms that is, but not in spirit, intelligence or will to do well. Her parents had sacrificed a hell of a lot, as had Sarite, to get the chance for a good education and their work ethic was something that most Australians could only aspire to. She was extremely proud, as she should be, to show us around her humble home, village and farm. Actually, she now works for Michael Chen’s company and not only is she a well respected member of his business but a fantastic asset to our trip with her contacts and local knowledge.

Another thing that has surprised me in China so far has been the humidity. We were expecting heat but the humidity has been as high as I’ve ever experienced. However, to offset that the air pollution has not been a problem at all. I had been half expecting us to be needing gas masks everywhere we went! It must be far worse when we head north towards Shanghai, although we don’t get to go as far as Beijing or the great wall. The food has been quite good here so far, but that may also change as we head north. Sarite says that’s where they tend to like a bit of Fido, Garfield or even a little rat. Apparently nothing much is on the unpalatable list up there!

Currently on a bus heading up towards Guanz Hao, a large city in the province of Guangdong. We have been to a large distribution company this morning that has plans for controlling and improving the supply chain of all the food in China. Quite high long term goals by any ones standard. It looked impressive for sure, but they have more than a few challenges in front of them before they get there I’d think. Coordinating about two hundred million one acre farmers to work together could be one! And also doing that in such a way as to appease the Communist Government’s requirement not to create social unrest could be another biggy!

Our lunch and next visit was to an Australian restaurant in Zhen Shan that is run by a very interesting guy called Ben Quin, who was originally from Tasmania. Actually he's a hell of a lot more than that, as he is director (and founder I think) of a group of businesses that have been operating in China growing supply chains for Australian produce that includes the Acton Beef Company and engineering interests here that export back to Australia. It was good to have a meat pie and mash potato for lunch, but it was even better to get a chance to talk to this bloke and get to hear what he had to say. He made more sense than anyone that we have got to hear speak yet in my opinion!! I’ll have more to say next time as I need to go.

Cheers again.

Friday, July 4th 2008, 4:41 PM
The mighty Guangzhou

Well Guangzhou (correct spelling this time!) is a big place, considering before coming to China I hadn’t even heard of it and yet it has something like 20 million inhabitants! Traffic and pollution are not quite as bad as I would have expected for a place this size and the general look of the population and improved tidiness would indicate that there is more affluence present here than we’d previously seen. Plenty of high rise housing apartments that don’t appeal to me as a place to live though and the view out our hotel (not 5 stars this time!) room gives us a look at a shambles that I honestly couldn’t imagine living in.
Our first day saw us take a visit to a dairy product processing facility and some “one on one” with the management giving us an insight into the changing culture of the Chinese diet. They are expecting the growth of milk products in the Chinese diet to lift from around 5kg per person per year to reach 50kg over the next five to ten years. Although it is a very low starting point (Aussies consume around 98 litres/year!!) it represents a massive growth and opportunity for dairy expansion in China. This company also has substantial dairy interests with around 5,000 milking cows and one of their farms on the outskirts of Guangzhou was our next stop. At first I couldn’t imagine there being a dairy within a short driving distance of the city as the high rise buildings seem to stretch away as far as the eye can see. However, there was and we were soon out there having a look around our one millionth dairy for the tour!! Giving our three scholars with dairy businesses a “fix” for the week, and possibly allowing our big Canadian Greg to make a fortune out of consultancy in their industry’s expansion over the next few years. Most of the milk consumed and supplied in China is UHT based, probably as there is very little fresh milk consumed and most places would have limited refrigeration capabilities. And that market is mainly dominated by a couple of companies in the North of China and we heard that they have plans to develop another twenty four 10,000 head dairies up there over the next five years. How much feed, concrete, steel and labour is that going to require???

That’s the thing about China, when they decide to do something than they don’t hesitate to do it in a big way. Not that labour is too big an issue just yet. The 1,600 cow dairy that we visited had 70 employees on their books and, it shows that economies in farm business here need to have different set of analysis than at home. On the topic of “big” though, we were also told a couple of days ago about another project the Chinese Government has planned for construction and completion in the next five years, a 200 km bridge across a bay!! It will also include
running the “bridge” under water for about 50 kms. Yep, that would be a five year project at home!!!!

There have been “banquets” for every meal here as per usual for the trip and if anything they are actually improving in this region. Seems to be more meat involved with the various dishes and less gristle but the prices (although still very cheap) are more expensive here, as is the case in most cities anywhere in the world. Last night we went to a seafood restaurant, much to the delight of Lester the Oyster Man who took about a million photos including capturing some video footage of a bloody live crocodile escaping and being wrestled back into submission. At least the food is fresh!! They had cages and tanks for about every species that lives on, near, or in water in that place and about enough seating to feed 2,000 people. As per the usual for us though we were whisked off to one of their many back rooms for a private meal, which was ok but I would have liked to have been in the main dining area to witness the crocodile wrestling action better.

The night before we did need a private dining area though as we would have disturbed the other patrons with our loud and lively debate about the merits or otherwise (my team) on the abomination of nature called “genetic mutilation” or modification as some will call it. Andrew and I went hammer and tongs there for a while and it was good fun and I did learn one thing- Don’t argue with junkies for they know not what they do. Ha ha!

We followed that dinner with a ferry ride along the river at the great suggestion of Angus and it was a site to behold with the city a mass of lights and you could almost imagine that the huge
river may in fact be nice and clean (in the dark!!) as we cruised along. We are off this morning to catch a flight to Nanjing and even more adventure no doubt.

Cheers for now.

Wednesday, July 9th 2008, 5:03 PM
Landed in Steamy Manila

Hi All. Apologies for falling behind with the tale in China, for the last few days at least. With arranged dinners at night and early mornings every day it becomes quite difficult to maintain the pace. I’m currently on a flight to Manila via Hong Kong again after leaving Shanghai this morning, which was the completion of our China leg of the tour. And a great time it was that we all had there, especially with the others joining us and bringing a new dynamic to the group, adding their own spin, opinion and/or facts and giving us even more cause for lively discussion. It was also fantastic that we had a trusty tour guide Angus along to really show us around as well as teach us some limited Chinese, as he is quite fluent and it was an immeasurable benefit to getting us places.

Between Angus and the Nuffield Association we not only got to see quite influential government and business people but we also were afforded unbelievable hospitality and were even given a police escort one day, for the whole day!! That day we were taken to another city that has quite strong links with Victoria, Australia, in a corporate joint venture project that has them developing an integrated (trying to be) city with an agricultural network of farmers using more of a co-op system to create more efficiency and sustainability. The project has merit and the long term goals are good but maybe not as well thought out and synergistic as they could have been. Seem to be throwing in enterprises such as grapes etc without really having much idea of whether they would work, or if it was the right enterprise at all. We then went and visited a quite impressive museum for an unlikely regional hero, the introduced American Crawfish. The crawfish industry has flourished in this area over the last seven years to the extent that they now have a major festival in the area dedicated to the crawfish. It went from being an undesirable food dish to becoming a megastar in that period because a chef somewhere decided to try it out with a special 13 herbs and spices recipe (as in KFC!!). There are now over 2,000 restaurants specializing in the crawfish dish and hence the festival etc etc.
Great marketing story as Lester would point out. “What is your point of difference?” should be the number one priority for all of us if we want to be better than commodity price takers.

From there we went to a meeting at the local government offices where each space around the huge meeting table had its own automatically controlled computer screen that came up out of the table surface and during the whole episode were on live electronic coverage. Hell, we could have even been on TV, as we had that many photographers tagging along for the day and no wonder as along with the police escort, the pamphlet that was describing the group had our job description mixed up with our sponsorship. Hence I had become the CEO of AWB Landmark for the day and they obviously were expecting to line up some handy business opportunities for China out of their effort. Bit of a laugh for us!

They put yet another magnificent lunch on for us again, and with copious amounts of rice wine and “gambi” (bottoms up) being enjoyed it turned out to be a whole lot of laughs. The absolute highlight though was an impromptu performance of the Maori Haka by James Parsons, Craig McK and their ring-in honorary Scottish Kiwi big spud farmer Peter Grewe. Our esteemed hosts were blown away and completely terrified by the whole ordeal. James was more full on then any All Black performance I’d seen and the sight of these crazy, shirtless, inebriated mad Kiwi’s in full flight was fantastic and I was glad I caught the lot of it on video. One for You-Tube if I can figure it out.

Unfortunately though, we had to head back on the road for a few more farm inspections before the long road back to our hotel base that night. Long afternoon after a big lunch! Also, and I’m not necessarily blaming the meal we had a “hot pot” dinner that night and I was a bit dubious about the scenario from the start, as I was looking forward to not picking up any sort of stomach trouble while in China. The hot pot is a couple of bubbling away mixtures in the middle of your table in which you cook your food yourself and as you could imagine, small various cuts of raw meat etc being continually dunked in and out of the dishes and not really knowing whether any of it is actually cooked properly, can be a recipe for disaster. That is ,if you can call stomach cramps and having to go to the toilet a disaster. Well, when you have a big bus trip ahead of you in China, with pit toilets and you awake in pain at 4.00am, I do!!

I wasn’t the only one, and thankfully it eased up quite a bit with medication during the day and I’ve honestly had much worse before.

The only real stop and visit for the day was at a wool processing facility on the way to Shanghai, so we spent a few hours and another big lunch (not much for me) there looking through their operation which was quite interesting. The Tianyu company is one of Australia’s major buyers of wool, they process about 20,000 tonne into wool top every year and it was amazing to see all of the process from start to finish. They have plenty of issues as well regarding costs etc and the actual wool buy price makes up about 30% of their overall costs of production. I’d say there is not a lot of money made at their stage and the next couple of links in the supply chain would see the biggest mark ups. Had their own coal fired power station here to run everything, so that would be a bit of a cost!!!

From there our terrific bus driver (this time) made his way
into our hotel located in down town Shanghai, a city with amazing architecture and a really modern and fast paced feel about it. No trouble getting our way in through traffic and Angus was pretty sure that was because the “freeway” that we traversed on the way in was not even here the last trip he had (12 months ago) and it had really improved the flow. No doubt about these Chinese people, when something has to be built they just get in and do it in the time it would take to get through the first permit stage at home! One of the benefits of being controlled by a Communist government! Communist they may be, but capitalists still for sure and the whole city seemed to be a thriving ants nest of action. Another thing about the traffic here, as chaotic and disorganized it seems at times, we have hardly seen an accident or any sign at all of road rage. Plenty of honking, but it seems to be more of a courtesy warning about your presence rather than any inclination to be in a rush. Vehicles seem to change lanes and turn around at will and everyone gets along fine. Even pedestrians seem to take their life into their hands by wandering out onto busy streets and the traffic slows down or stops to accommodate them. Very civilized!!

Had a chance to do a little shopping when we walked down town that night but there weren’t too many bargains to be had in Shanghai, although the never ending stream of pests trying to accost you for fake products would argue the point with me. They would follow for blocks some times and eventually had a win with some of our group who couldn’t resist a bargain five dollar Rolex watch or two.

Angus also took us up to a 66th story bar to send off our Scottish lad who heads home the next day, and it was amazing to see the night lights of Shanghai from up there. Bit of a large carbon footprint happening in this place!!

Next day saw us get in a couple of meetings, one with Syngenta (large multi-national chemical and seed distribution company) and the other with Rabo Bank who have quite a strong presence here in China. It was great to get their perspective on doing business over here and also get filled in on some of the astounding statistical figures this country can produce. I get a feeling that the sleeping dragon is beginning to stir.

As it was the last night that our extended group had together Angus had arranged for another dinner at a restaurant on the top of a building down by the river. It was a spectacular setting and although a little expensive compared to what we had been paying we all had a fantastic night. They even had our menus personalized for the Nuffield group which was a nice touch.

Well, our ‘plane eventually got to Manila after quite a few delays that saw us touch down late and then get another bus right through the never ending traffic to our accommodation at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI). A room each, which is good, but no internet so I’ll have to find a way to send this off this morning somehow.

Plenty of storms around here last night and they did have a typhoon warning for earlier in the week, so I hope it holds off!! We did get involved in an earthquake while in Nanjing, 3.6 on the Richter scale, which wasn’t enough for me to actually notice although Matthew, my roommate of that night, picked up on it straight away. I don’t know if it was because I was standing up at the time, or because I’m just not a really sensitive guy!! Must be the standing up!

Back to just the eight Aussies now and I can’t believe this first leg of the Scholarship is almost done and I’ll be home next Sunday night. Sad in a way as this group has got along really well
and I’m sure we will all stay in touch and possibly start businesses together. But I’m also really looking forward to getting home as well.

Cheers for now and thank you to those that have taken the time to write.

Thursday, July 10th 2008, 9:53 PM
Rice, rice and more rice

Hi again, first day in the Philippines for me and nearly all of this group as well. We are accommodated in rooms at the university and there does not seem to be anybody else staying in these dorms with us so it is very quiet here tonight. Our bus driver just took us down the street so we could grab a bite to eat and it is extremely busy in town. It cost us all of about $7.50 for a two course meal with a couple of beers, so it's not an expensive option to eat out here. I think it was about 4 Dollars AUS for the lunch at the uni cafeteria as well today. We all seem a little subdued today and it would not just be the hot and humid weather. Maybe we are all starting to wind down somewhat, as we sure have covered some countries and quite a few topics in the last six weeks.

Spent today getting shown around this university or research institute, and now know quite a bit more about rice than any of us knew before! Actually it has been quite involved, with plenty to see and if you get a feel for how many people around the world depend so much on rice as a staple food source then you can realize the importance of the massive amount of research going on here. Interesting that with over 108,000 different varieties of wild and cultivated rice in the world today, there can still be so many new discoveries made. And even then, when a better variety is bred it can still be not taken up by farmers for cultural or aesthetic reasons, so winning them over can be a challenge as well to get it out there into the market. For instance, brown rice, although having higher nutritional benefits is considered here to be “poor mans rice”, so even the real poor people don’t like to be associated with it. That could be a problem with their so called super rice, the genetically modified Beta Carotene enhanced version that is very yellow in appearance. Matthew was adamant that he should get a picture of me holding some the stuff as my aversion to GM technology is an amusement to him. No luck there he was to find out! There was a very straight question asked of one of the scientists involved with plant breeding whether she thought GM was definitely safe to eat for the long term. Her reply was very hesitant and she even said she had thought a lot about how she would answer that question if asked. She eventually replied that she was not really sure, close enough to an answer in my mind. Interesting!

Feeding the world isn’t the real issue either. Even Asia grows more than enough rice now to feed itself and is an exporter to Africa whose issues with feeding itself are political more than anything else. It seems the better the technology (?) available to farmers through out the world to increase yield, then the less real profit from the effort they make. Then of course most of the western world eats far too much and we waste even more, so I don't believe it is a quantity issue (with amount of food, or numbers of people). There is a live update on a screen here in the museum that counts down the arable Hectares in the world (about the loss of one every 10 seconds) and counts up the world population, which is growing by about one person every two thirds of a second. At some stage that scenario will have to be addressed properly whether we are increasing yields or not, as without any arable land we won't feed anybody!
I've just been for a look through the Rice Museum here at IRRI and it really is astounding that the world (or at least half of it) has such a reliance on rice for their existence. Even the employees here at IRRI get a monthly bonus of one 50kg bag of rice per month on top of their wages, which has added considerably to the university budget due to the rising value of rice. Mind you, the wages only equate to about 6 dollars a day with a recent wage rise!! Terry, an Australian here whose portfolio covers the Uni farm among other things has been showing us around this morning (second day) on the farm, and also took us into town and a visit to the local markets. Traffic here is even more amazing than in China as the roads are not nearly as good, and yet seemingly without any noticeable road rules at all the people manage to get around wherever they like without the need to blow horns or get upset at all. Terry has said that you need to learn to be patient though as rushing will get you no where fast. The roads are cluttered with Jeepneys (like a land cruiser 11 seater) which are the local taxis and also motor bikes and trikes. The main road we were on this morning is the national highway, which although surprising in its inability to handle the load through town, actually deteriorates much more out of town where Terry says it cuts back to a single lane and even then he said it can often be blocked up by local farmers trying to dry their rice on the road, something we saw quite a bit in China.

Having a lunch time without lunch today as I'm back in loo visiting mode unfortunately. I'd like to think the weather at home is like it is outside here at the moment, with rolling thunder and steady rain. I’m not sure what that will mean for our scheduled farm visit this afternoon, although I’m sure the local wouldn't baulk at a little rain given they have around 2,000 mm here a year.

Last night tonight for the GFT, before we start making our way homeward.

Till next time!

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**Friday, July 11th 2008, 7:26 PM**

**The GFT Gift**

Hi Again. Just back from our latest farm visit and I’m extremely pleased that I didn't succumb to the pain in the belly I had and not go as it was well worth the effort. Mr. Masajo is an elderly gentleman who was quick to set the tone of the visit by insisting we hurriedly follow him to a sheltered sort of pergola area where he had many important things to say to us. And he was right!

We have been all over the world for the last six weeks; visiting many enterprises and hearing many people give their opinions on all sorts of issues facing world agriculture today. But excepting maybe one other guy back in the U.S. (who, incidentally, was very forthright in his opinions as some would say I am) there has not been anybody speak as much down to earth common sense yet on this tour as this elderly Filipino gent. And he could also back up his talk with his walk, as his sizable rice farm of 30 Hectares (the average size here is only 2) was a sight to behold and as healthy, or indeed healthier, than any we had seen on tour so far. Now this guy is not "Organic" at all in the commercial sense of the word but he was completely against the use of chemicals and actually blames their use on the rise for most farmers in the incidence of pests in cropping. He has battled politicians, bureaucrats and scientists for years
as they cannot understand how what he promotes actually works, and he was quite entertaining as he recounted the various arguments in detail.

His theory (very much in line with Allan Savory and others that I tend to agree with) is that to attack unwanted insects with indiscriminate killing chemical usage damages the beneficial insects and bacteria as well and it diminishes your systems ability to naturally defend itself. And he is right, as he has proved over a number of years and although there was early resistance by some neighbours they all now follow his principles. And that is a sizable area here of over 1,500 Hectares, or his whole town area!! Strange that this university doesn't seem to be so convinced, although that is institutionalized thinking for you- slow to change. His visitor book made interesting reading and every second visitor as I flicked through seemed to be a doctor of some description. They left very positive messages, many of them declaring they had no idea of the possibilities of what he is achieving!

Our last day on tour (besides the long trip home) was finished off in good style by getting stuck into some fitness with a game of touch football and the GFT Gift. Now the GFT Gift is a result of the big Queenslander challenging me the whole trip to a foot race over fifty metres and on our last day we finally got it done. So as it should be, we all competed and I’m sorry to say that QLD won again. Been a bad year for NSW.

I didn’t lose too much face though as I was giving him 13 years start as a handicap and I slipped on the start and lost about a metre and that's about what he dusted me by!! Actually, I came a close third as Organo man Jason got me by half a head as well. Worse was to come as I'm afraid I pulled a hammy in the process!!

Time to head home.

Saturday, July 12th 2008, 6:05 PM

Heading for Sydney

Second last flight for the GFT leg of my scholarship and this time on a plane again between Hong Kong and Sydney. We're all feeling a little under the weather today after having a group celebration of sorts last night and then having to kill quite a bit during the day waiting for the flight from Manila to Hong Kong. Airport was really busy leaving the Philippines and we were delayed for a while so there was not much change over time before connecting to the Sydney flight. Also said “Goodbye” there to Munzy and Jason who had a separate flight from us directly to Brisbane, so now were back to six. Jane and Annabelle had once again been upgraded to business class as is their way, leaving us commoners behind with out so much as a tinge of regret and so they left to begin their quaffing of champagne!

However we were in for a treat on our last flight as well, finding out when we boarded that our seats were upgraded to premium economy and the difference in leg room, comfort and service is like day and night compared with economy. We had smiles on our faces you couldn't wipe off and it makes a nine hour flight at the end of our hectic schedule much, much more enjoyable.

There was a Hong Kong school girl next to me and she is part of a group heading to Sydney for the World Youth Week celebrations and to see the Pope. I’m thinking we could be in for a
very congested Sydney terminal when we get there, as many others will be doing the same as them. Luckily for me, I’m catching another connecting flight straight out of there as I’ve had enough of crowded cities for a while and I’m just really excited about getting home and seeing my girls.

Won’t be able to relax for very long though as I’ll have to get stuck into organizing the second leg of my study, which I feel will be a very different experience than this one and I’ll be looking forward to it once I recover! Actually, I think I may have picked up a bit of a head cold. I hope it's not bird flu!!

Landed in Sydney and yes, it was very congested. Only one more short flight now to Dubbo where Cathy and Harriet will meet me, and then a four hour drive to home. My fears about a head cold seem to have been well founded and some cold and flu tablets were my first port of call. After some shopping through customs of course where to my dismay the electronics are far cheaper than any where I saw in Asia. Damn!!

Cheers for now.

Thursday, July 24th 2008, 12:08 AM
A brief stint "Home on the Plains"

Back home at Bokhara Plains for ten days since the GFT and although busy I still can’t believe it has gone so quickly.

Great to be back out on home soil though, and even the weather (middle of winter here) has been kind to me with it being very mild till this morning when we woke without much mercury showing in the temperature gauge at all. I was extremely glad I didn’t have to jump on a motor bike and go mustering, as that is what most of my time since coming home has involved. The Nuffield trip must be having an impact on me as I actually stayed inside and sent off a flurry of e-mails to organize the second part of my trip this morning, even though there were sheep being crutched down at the shed! That just wouldn’t have been possible not that long ago. Maybe Lester has been affected as well, as he called me up on Skype when he saw I was on line and he actually wasn’t out branding oysters- or whatever it is he does out there in the water all day with those little critters!

All the cattle have been mustered out of the river country and started on a new rotation through the system, while the remaining 4,000 sheep have been put through the shearing shed to be crutched and are still in the yards awaiting trucks to take them to their new destination. It has dried off considerably here over the last eight weeks and although there is plenty of dry grass in all paddocks suitable for cattle, the quality and length is not very good for sheep and they have started to struggle. Even without rain the cattle will be fine till about November and my grazing plan will take them through till then quite comfortably. Actually as I write there is a slow drizzle of rain on the roof and I’m quietly hoping it does not rain enough tonight to disrupt the trucks getting in and out of here tomorrow with the sheep, as we have 4 kms of very “sticky when wet” dirt road that will be a drama with as little as 10mm. We also have quite a few guests in tonight staying in our accommodation facility that will also be looking to get out early and get to work or home. Ironically we also need a really good fall of rain as soon as possible
so I don’t like to have negative thoughts rolling around in my head to put it off; but just one more day would be nice!

My little girl was home from boarding school for the first week I was home, which was a real bonus and it was particularly good to have Cathy and Harriet both meet me at the airport in Dubbo when I touched down. Took me a few days to settle down to reality again once home and it’s probably good that I’ve been able to focus on the livestock here to clear my head a little. Over the last two days though I’ve started to lock in some dates, contacts and flights etc for the second leg of the scholarship and with the fly out date set for the 6th of August it will no doubt come around very quickly indeed.

There was some concern regarding getting to Zimbabwe (or getting out of there!) for a while but my contact there has not only reassured me that it will be ok, but has also kindly offered to pick us up from the Vic Falls Airport on arrival. Peca Waugh from the green hills of Grafton will be linking up with me in Africa, and after being on an EL board with him for four and a half years, I expect he will add to the adventure in many ways and I look forward to it. Cathy is joining me for the journey through the States again and also down into Mexico. More on all that later though.

I must say a big thank you to Merv for handling a few issues with fencing and broken down vehicles in my absence (my priority list is very long at times!) also to Joannie and Fran here helping Cathy out with the Bokhara Hutz and also Jeff who has made himself extremely useful around this place before and since, I got back.

Cheers for now.

Wednesday, August 6th 2008, 9:55 AM

On the road again...

Here we go again. Cathy and I are sitting in the Qantas lounge ahead of our first flight and I’ve just written quite a long ‘blog entry’ straight into the web and frustratingly lost the lot when I accidentally hit the wrong button. It’s no use whining now, as I’d done it before and learned to use a word document and then copy it in as at my typing pace it can be a slow process to redo it all.

Quite excited now that we are on the road, and I’m looking forward to this second leg of my Nuffield Scholarship after the hustle of being home and probably should have taken another week off before leaving to tidy up loose ends. Only just got all the agistment sheep off the place, then had a computer breakdown which held up my ability to get the books up to date and also get travel arrangements sorted out. Finished off my bookwork yesterday in the motel, so that was cutting it a bit fine.

To add to the schedule at home, we also had a party to organize and get ready for out at Bokhara Hutz last Saturday. And what a party it was, my mum’s 80th Birthday!! It was great to see so
many relations make the long journey out to Brewarrina, some I had not seen for quite a while, and a few that had never been out to Bokhara Plains before at all. Mum has never been one to have a fuss made over her, so it was especially good to see her relax that rule a little because it's not every day, nor every person, that gets to celebrate the entering into of their ninth decade!! And it was made even more special by the fantastic entertainment from the “Motor Homer Band” that had made the long journey up from way down south where they play that funny sort of football.

Jeff (a legendary guitarist), Dick (crook leg couldn’t stop him) and Bob (Tex Morton isn’t gone) played music from about lunch time till midnight and would put many a younger group to shame with their stamina. Mum and her family really enjoyed the day and in particular the sisters who can still have a great time, including dancing and even getting up to have a sing along with the band (as did a few others- couldn’t help myself!) Being 88 couldn’t stop Joan from making her first ever band appearance and I’m really pleased to be among their gene pool. Of course the guys had plenty of backup from their ‘groupies’ Di, Pam, and those great chicks that are looking after Bokhara Plains for us in our absence “Joannie and Fran”, and we owe the whole lot of them a great deal for all of their effort. The family was really pleased to see Mum and Dad so happy with the day, and it was great to be able to show our love and appreciation for all that they have done for us. Sometimes those closest to us seem to get the least thanks, even though they are the most important.

Speaking of important- it was quite hard to say goodbye to Harriet last night when we walked her back to her boarding school in Toowoomba. We had a 4.00am rise to catch a bus to Brisbane this morning so she only had the one night with us and she is also very disappointed to be not coming with us herself like last year. We wish she could be, as besides being our wonderful little girl, she is also a very witty and comical traveling partner. Maybe next time; although she insists on going ‘first class’. Better to save her pennies!

This second leg of the Nuffield Scholarship will be fantastic for me as I can concentrate on visiting places specific to my topic and interest, so probably will not be any “dairy’s of hog dungeons” involved in my itinerary this time around! We head off to Denver via L.A. very soon where will hire a car and visit some contacts I have through Colorado and New Mexico, before heading back to Denver for a flight to Mexico. In Mexico we will spend a week with Ivan and Martha Aguirre at the Rancho La Inmaculada near Hermisillo, capital of Sonora. This is a...
place I have wanted to visit for a few years now and somewhere that I’d say everyone in the western division should visit as well. We then fly up to Texas, where one of the visits we have planned is to Bud and Eunice Williams’ place at Boise City. Bud would be about the best person in the world at understanding and handling livestock, as well as that he has many other skills and knowledge that you can get a taste of at their website www.stockmanship.com. Have a look through ‘Bud’s Musings’ for plenty of good old fashioned common sense, which is not so common anymore. Then from Dallas, Texas, Cathy and I part ways as she will fly home to Australia while I head off to Johannesburg, South Africa and then onto Zimbabwe, which will be another sort of exciting! Crazy Peca Waugh will be meeting up with me there, and he has been busily organizing ‘white water rafting and wild game hunting’ to do as well! Yep, its all about the farming!! Time to go, but worthy of a quick mention is the fantastic win by a friend of ours, big Nigel Kerin of Yeoval, in the Farmer of the Year contest last week. This guy is a great exponent and proponent of truly regenerative farming and he is an inspiration to be around, so it will be interesting to see how the ‘establishment’ handles him.

Till next time, cheers.

Thursday, August 7th 2008, 4:04 PM

Never a dull moment

Another long flight across the Pacific and once again I didn’t manage to get much sleep, even though we had ‘exit row seats’ which have quite a bit more leg room. That’s a trick I picked up from Craige on the first Nuffield journey, as he was always quick to ask when booking in if there were any available. Also got the same deal on the flight out to Denver from Los Angeles, although this time we didn’t have seats that would recline at all. Not to worry, past being able to get to sleep now anyway!

That is the third time I’ve been through LA in the last nine months and it is one city that I would certainly not care to live in. Mind you, I haven’t found one yet anywhere in the world that I would. Not for any lengthy period of time at least. But LA, it just seems flat, brown, dirty, smoggy and from the air looks like it could be devoid of all life, even though it has about 20 million inhabitants, if you count actors and other ‘celebrities’ that is.

When I get up in the air, especially at this height, that I get a real feel for the environmental problems that the brittle landscapes of the world suffer and the direct correlation, or parallel that has with the human populations living in these areas and relying on the local natural resources. The increasing costs associated with the transportation of all the produce and water etc that is needed to sustain this situation will throw up some interesting challenges before too long I’m sure.

Looking forward to Denver, except I wanted to pick up a GPS navigation unit in LA and wasn’t able to, so looking for our motel for Back in the U.S of A. with Cathy
the night might turn out to be interesting. If any one out there hasn’t used one of those things like a Navman or Garmin and you have had difficulty in following a map in a strange city, then I’d recommend you try them as they are fantastic. Just hope I can buy one in the Denver airport. Should have got one in Toowoomba as I’ll probably only save about five bucks here anyway!!

I downloaded a whole stack of audio CDs before leaving home onto an ITouch gadget that I picked up in the Philippines last trip and I managed to stuff something up as I’ve now lost most of the music and the CDs are all jumbled up in their order. Don’t you just hate that! Jumbled or not, they are still great listening. There is about 7 or 8 hours of Allan Savory’s “Holistic Management – A framework for decision making” and about 20 hours of a Jim Rohn conference taped in 2004 at the Marriott Hotel, Anaheim and all of them are fantastic. Both authors deal with many issues, from land (Allan for that one) management, business management, time and money issues right through to the most important of all- personal development and continued learning. Several of Jim Rohn’s guest speakers, himself, and Allan Savory are all in there seventies (“at least” for some) and are truly inspiring, not only with their vast knowledge, but also their willingness to impart it onto as many others as possible. That is one of the reasons I’m so grateful to have been given this great opportunity to travel and meet and experience so many inspiring people. As one of the speakers on the tape says: “You will be the same person, with the same life in five years, except for the people you meet and the books you read”.

Well, we landed in Denver all right. And no, we couldn’t buy a GPS unit!! Not only that either. The Denver airport is the 10th biggest in the world and we actually had to catch a train in the terminal to the baggage claim area which was a first for me. Picking up the hire car was another bus ride away as well but all of that was fine. This got a little interesting after that though, even though we had quite an easy time of driving the myriad of freeways and finding the motel I’d booked.

To put the following into perspective, we had just spent the last 32 hours traveling by bus, car, train and plane to finally get to our destination so were pretty tired. We couldn’t wait to have a shower and a short rest on a comfortable bed and were not too concerned that it was a rather dodgy sort of a motel that I’d picked out on the internet. However, we needed to find somewhere for a bite to eat as it was about 9.00pm local time and we also decided to drive as it was raining and not necessarily the nicest place to go for a walk. That’s when the situation started to go a little ‘pear shaped’ for us, as I missed a turn in the car park (yes, hadn’t gone far) and managed to back onto a short post in the rain and dark, panicked with the crunching sound as the car lifted about two feet off the ground, and drove forward again ripping the rear bumper right of the car! Not a good start!

So, as sick as I felt about that, we put all of the pieces into the trunk and decided to go for a drive anyway as we were still hungry and wanted to be able to sleep in a little in the morning to beat the jetlag. But the only thing we could find within reasonable distance was a “Taco Bell” which would not have been my first choice or anywhere close. Surprisingly the Tacos were ok, and I jokingly said “well things can only get better now” and we headed back for the motel. How wrong I was!

Finding the motel again was quite easy, but as I put the right indicator on to turn into the driveway for the motel a car came up quickly behind me and actually side swiped us on the right hand side, almost giving us our second heart attack in about thirty minutes and my second
accident in a city in my life!! Luckily there was not much damage and both cars just had a small scrape on the front panel. I was pretty freaked out and tired by this stage, so that was a small piece of positivity that I was desperately clinging to. We finally got to bed and even though we were very tired, it understandably took a while for the adrenalin to subside enough to actually get to sleep.

We were hoping to sleep soundly so we could have a fresh start in the morning and that was the plan, although we hadn’t fully explained the nuances of the time differences between countries to our sweet little girl and we got a phone call that again freaked us out at about 1.30 am our time. After we got over the initial shock of being woken out of a deep sleep, it was actually great to be able to have a talk with her and hear she was ok. However, Cathy, in her sleepiness had told Harriet that it was about five in the morning so at about quarter to four the phone went off again- another shock! Harriet was apologetic as she had calculated that it should have been about 8.30 according to Mum’s earlier advice and she wanted to talk to her Dad. We eventually did have that sleep in. The only trouble was, I was hoping that the previous night’s accidents were not real and were really a bad dream instead!

Anyway, off to breakfast after that and hopefully a place where we could find a GPS system for our mangled up little car. After we eventually got one (got lost getting there!) we decided to see the Avis company about the car as Cathy thought it was a bit ridiculous to be driving around with the rear bumper jammed up inside the car with us. Not a good look! So, expecting the worst, we entered into the GPS the Avis name, not knowing the actual exact address and we have ended up in the middle of the city at the Avis headquarters instead of way out at the airport. All good though, our insurance actually meant that we were not out of pocket at all and we ended up being given another car, which was a much better one as well.

I once read that “Nothing is ever as good, or as bad as you first think.” We should never get too carried away or upset in the moment as it really may have no bearing on the future.

Just sitting in the 16th Street Mall in the centre of Denver writing this and about to work out where we may get to tonight.

Hope all readers are well and cheers again for now.

Sunday, August 10th 2008, 5:22 PM
From Colorado to New Mexico

Decided to stay in Denver another night and spent some time walking up and down the 16th Street Mall doing some touristy site seeing as it had got a little late to be trying to get through to Colorado Springs.
This GPS gizmo is very good, but is unfortunately limited by our ability to know the exact address to log in when we start off. This was to become quite apparent over the next few days!! After looking at an information board on the street we decided to just take one of the many accommodation facilities on offer right where we were, so I typed in “Holiday Inn, Central Denver” as on the map it looked to be almost right next door to the parking lot that we were in and that would keep it nice and simple. Well not quite, as “Denver Central” happens to be about 5 miles from “Denver City” which of course is where we really were. After cussing the GPS for being a fool for about 6 blocks I realized my idiocy and relinquished control back to the machine and to my continued surprise it led us exactly to the ‘Holiday Inn, Denver Central which was a nice enough place for us and about six stars better than the night before. And I hadn’t pranged the new car yet either!

Thought about catching a baseball game with the locals playing a double at “The Coors Center” that night, but decided to not risk the traffic, which was incredibly dense and have an early night instead. Actually both of us were still quite jetlagged and that night I hardly slept at all, even though I couldn’t the previous night, or on the plane. None the less, we were up early and hit the road with the first stop being the Sheplers store off the I25 to have a look for some boots and jeans etc. I’ve bought plenty of stuff from Sheplers via the internet and they are very cheap compared to home for the same gear so it was good to have a look at one of there ‘super stores’ while in the US. About two acres of boots, hats, shirts and jeans etc, about the only shopping I like other than a saddlery with the smell of leather.

After that we headed South on 285 right down to George Whitten and Julie Sullivan’s place at Saguache, in the San Luis Valley which Cathy, Harriet and I visited last November, just before the onset of winter over here. It was good to get back again at a different time of year and especially as there had just been quite good rain in the last few days and in fact it rained again quite a bit while we visited. Not a common occurrence by any means in this part of the world as the average here is only around the six to seven inch range (150 to 175mm for those young ‘uns).
The valley was greening up quickly and looked quite spectacular with storms regularly rolling around the mountains and across the plains. Those that read last year’s ramblings may remember this valley as it would have to be quite unique in the world and a truly spectacular place. The valley itself is around 200 kms long, about 100 kms wide on average and surrounded on all sides by 14,000 feet mountain ranges (twice as high as Kosciusko!). Even the valley floor has an altitude of about seven thousand feet, but it is dead flat, so the horizon looks almost to have the mountains painted upon it and with their peaks occasionally penetrating up into the clouds and being shrouded in mist they appear quite mysterious. Almost enough to make a ‘cocky’ from the back country become poetic!! Be a nice place to have a ranch and I could almost live there, except for the winter.

Another reason I wanted to come back here (and actually the main reason) was to spend some more time with George and Julie who are a great couple with plenty of knowledge to impart and quite willing to do so. That is something that I’ve found with anyone who has made the decision, commitment and sacrifice to embrace new (and sometimes alternate and controversial) systems and in particular within the realm of sustainable, or preferably regenerative, agriculture. The common thread I’ve found is they are all willing to make mistakes, learn from others, remain positive and share knowledge with whoever may be willing to listen.

It was a great first evening with them, and I only wish that I had my new ‘Dictaphone’ switched on to catch the whole conversation as it is always hard to remember everything during that sort of an opportunity. I’m not sure how that technology would go if it were just left on the table anyway, as maybe people would not relax as much if they were conscious of it. Good if it does work though, as it holds about 125 hours of recording and can be down loaded straight to my computer as well. Writing notes can be ok, although the trouble is while writing I’m not listening, and it does not mix as well with drinking red wine or beer!

They breed Angus and Angus Cross cattle on about 4,000 acres of their own country and about 10,000 acres of BLM (Bureau of Land Management) lease country which runs up into the foothills of the mountains. It’s a spectacular landscape up there, with its own challenges relating to water and fencing due to its vertical, rocky nature. But what a place to run cattle if you like to ride a horse and enjoy beautiful scenery!

Julie has a background in teaching (and alternative thinking) and George was one of Allan Savory’s earliest recruits going back 25 years, so they make a great team and are constantly looking at the ‘big picture’ and questioning and measuring their decisions against their core values and goals. Getting their insight and opinion into a range of issues to do with America, as well as agriculture in general, I found to be quite sobering at times and probably a good foil for my ‘sometimes over optimistic outlook’ on what can realistically be possible. At least within a world economic system such as it is, although my gut feel is that this may not be the case in five to ten years.
It was great to finally get a couple of good, peaceful nights sleep without the jetlag or any traffic noise creating a problem for us both. Bit too quiet in one way as we hadn’t any mobile phone coverage around Saguache and hence no ability to call and talk to our little girl stuck back in Toowoomba at boarding school. We did however manage to work out that if we buy Skype credit than we could phone here mobile directly from the computer for 26 cents a minute and to any landline phone for less than 3 cents a minute, which means we may call quite a few more people now as well back in Oz.

I had a talk with Mum that was quite clear and couldn’t reach Harriet as she was out for the morning at church. That night we set Skype up on George and Julie’s computer, which took quite a while and eventually proved to be unsuccessful due to an insufficient upload speed on their service. We could hear Harriet, but she could not understand us! At least George broke up the wait by playing a couple of songs for us and strumming away on his guitar. He is pretty good and would have had a gig with the guys at Mum’s party a couple of weeks ago if he was there. Certainly he’s a much better singer than I.

Reluctantly we hit the road again this morning (also sad that Harriet had missed this visit, although Julie insists she can come back anytime, by herself even!). Heading further southward now, right back down to Albuquerque and dinner tonight with Allan Savory and Jody, so long as I can get the GPS accurate. Big thrill for me as any who know me at all would agree, and although a little nervous we’re really looking forward to it.

Cheers for now again.

Wednesday, August 13th 2008, 3:27 PM
Albuquerque and Chicken Ranching

Strange in a way to be back around “Old Town”, Albuquerque as it seems only yesterday that we were here at the world Holistic Management Conference (www.holisticmanagement.org) last November which itself was a great week. Trouble is, this time Harriet is not here with us, and while Cathy enjoyed re-visiting some of the shops in the area again, she was getting a little sad to be without her daughter for the experience. All the way down the highway after crossing the Colorado/New Mexico border you start to see more and more of the architecture with a Spanish ‘adobe’ style which I think looks great and blends in well with the rugged landscape. Still seems a little odd to see so many ‘casinos’ off the interstate, due I’m told, to the ability of native American Indians to generate income without gambling restrictions and the need to pay taxes. Good deal if you can get it I suppose, but I wonder how much the general Indian population benefits.

After spending some time wandering around ‘Old Town’ and getting a coffee at Starbucks so that we could check emails etc, I then called Allan and Jody to get an address to punch into this unreliable generic GPS system I bought so that we could make our way out to their place. This proved a little challenging, as they are about three or four miles down along the Rio Grande and there were road works halting all the traffic and confusing the hell out of our trusty GPS. Never the less, we made it on time and over the next couple of days learned the way quite well so getting around the city became relatively easy. I’m starting to relax somewhat after the disastrous start in Denver.
Getting to meet Allan and Jody again was great and to get to stay at their place for two nights was pretty special for us. Not only because Allan has had such a massive beneficial impact on my life and attitude (along with thousands of others he has helped) but because they are such down to earth people and great hosts with a beautiful house. We got there around 6.00 pm and dinner was an African flavour with a BBQ of a special sausage called “boerevors”, which surprisingly enough we had a couple of weeks ago at dinner with friends of ours in Brewarrina of all places. Francois and Almarie had done a fantastic job of hosting a lovely dinner while I was home and also had another great South African couple there with Ingrid and Deon (who is the excellent local doctor). And our local butcher “Pommy” did a great job of doing the ‘boerevors’ up for them because it was exactly like our dinner with Allan and Jody.

Their house was an original adobe structure (many of the new ones are fake and not the real mud brick) set back in among huge cottonwood trees and backing on to one of the many canals coming off the Rio Grande river that cuts its way down from the San Luis valley in Colorado all the way through New Mexico and down into Mexico itself. The area is well treed with plenty of bush all around, even though we were close to a highway and not far out of the city. It was not hard to see Allan’s love of Africa inside the house as well, and in particular the wildlife with their place adorned with a wide array of ornaments, paintings and trophy’s etc that are also a testament to his life “fully lived”. And plenty more years left yet I’d say as well, as he and Jody are very health conscious and fit with exercise a big part of their very early morning rise. The first morning I got to go along the canal with Allan and he set quite a pace, talking all the while and barefooted as well. In the Zimbabwe army he would make those under him go 10 to 12 miles barefooted as at times it would be necessary to fool trackers!

It was a great chance to be ‘one on one’ with a guy whose stories could vary from major land management breakthroughs, battles with inept bureaucracies, world politics and being on army patrol or hunting/studying in the wilds of Africa. I found it to be very interesting and could have easily walked ten miles to keep listening instead of three (not bare footed though!)

Also, I must mention the breakfast that Jody put together on the 2nd morning, as it was something Cathy and I must take up on my return home. Sort of like an omelet, it involved the use of far more spices, veggies and caramelised onion and sure was a great way to start the day.

We filled our day in Albuquerque quite easily as I had two meetings at HMI headquarters and we also had a pile of washing to get done. Another bonus for the morning was picking up a
few more contacts for us to see in Texas from Ann Adams at the centre and I think that week we have there will be fairly hectic, with a lot of miles to be covered. As I said, our confidence is returning with driving and a good thing as there is definitely more traffic around this year, being in the middle of tourist season this time.

Last night we took a drive up to the bottom of Sandia Peak, just out of the city and to a cable car ride that is described as the longest in the world. Not only that either, as it is a bloody long way up to the top, which of course is what we chose to do. What a fantastic view over the city, and the entire valley from 10,500 feet (remember Kosciusko is only 7,000) and to make it even better there is a restaurant up the top, aptly named High Finance. High cost and high altitude! Some appetizers that were as big as a meal would suffice and a couple of glasses of ‘red’, which have twice the kick at that height and we were set! We got there about 30 minutes before sunset and left about 30 minutes after dark, so caught some spectacular photo opportunities that I don’t think our little camera could fully do justice to.

Today we set sail from Albuquerque and headed South on the I 25 about 80 miles to a place called Socorro, where we had the contact name and address of a couple who run a grass based free range chicken ranch. Try as I might to contact them via phone I could not get through, so we risked a surprise ‘turn-up’ with our trusty GPS once again giving us an approximate location that proved to be adequate as we found it without too much trouble. Tracy Delahunty was busy (actually very hot and busy, as her help hadn’t turned up!) but after getting a few critical chores completed she very kindly gave us her time and a tour around what her and her husband have been doing for the last fifteen years in building up this enterprise.

Now you may well ask “What the hell is Graham doing looking at chickens?” Well, this is not a joke as I’m very interested in incorporating another synergistic enterprise into our grass based livestock system and about 300 layer hens running with the cattle could be just what I’m looking for. To scratch around in the dirt and cattle manure, improving the nutrient cycle, eating flies (and we have plenty of them at Bre) as well as their larvae etc, and then giving us a
cash return as well by selling the eggs. Simple!! Just need a little protection for them from foxes etc, maybe a Marama dog or alpaca!!

Tomorrow morning we are going back out to this ranch as they will be processing on farm about 500 chickens which should be interesting. This is possible because chickens aren’t included in the federal USDA Certification process as are all other meats. While I’m not a fan of over regulation by governments….? This time I’ve been told it is because of the massive political power of industry giants such as “Tysons” being able to push through legislators that it isn’t necessary for this industry and you would have to wonder why they don’t want inspection. I don’t think I’ll eat any more chicken in America unless I know where it’s coming from.

Their main market is the Santa Fe farmers market and they currently sell all they can produce at about 8 times the value of the industrially produced poultry through the super markets (obviously others are concerned). They have a higher cost of production per pound of course and labour is an issue so it isn’t easy.

Tonight we actually caught the local farmers’ market downtown in the Plaza and we bought a couple of trinkets and some fruit that was quite good. Plenty of Spanish being spoken here as we are not that far from Mexico. We watched a couple of guys cooking chilies on a big gas fired burner and when we questioned them they could not speak English at all. So, they got a little girl of about 6 to see what we wanted because she was fluent in English. She not only explained it to us, but jumped in and helped them when they were unloading. No McDonald’s and I Pods for her I suspect.

The Olympics are on TV in the background as I write and I have not heard a mention of Australia yet on this US TV. What’s going on?? Didn’t Australia end up sending a team!

Time for me to get some sleep and cheers till next time. Thanks to those that have taken the time to write.
animal species I think the system could really go up another gear. Like a lot of places and different enterprises though, labour supply and quality is proving to be the biggest ‘bottleneck’ for the business.

After leaving Socorro, Cathy and I decided to head down towards the southeast and then circle our way back north just so we could have a better look at more of the State. I was surprised by the green grass and good ground cover on most of the drive due to the monsoon season finally kicking in and also the lack of animals in a lot of the landscape. Not all of it was like that though, as not far out of Carrizozo (where we grabbed a late lunch) we drove through some spectacularly rugged country. All savagely undulated and made up entirely of black volcanic boulders, obviously the result of an extremely violent upheaval some time in the past. Oddly, there were still green plants dotted throughout that area since the rain and no chance of any animals ever being able to reach them. Made me wonder how people and horses first got through there, but I guess they wouldn’t have bothered, and just would have went around.

Another first for us was the sighting of a “Roadrunner” bird running along the road in front of us (as they do I guess!). By the time I realized what it was we were gone past and missed out on getting a photo. They look just like the cartoon so we kept an eye out then for ‘Wily Coyote’ but didn’t see him!!

Ended up making it all the way back up into Colorado that evening and pulled up at the first motel in Trinidad that looked ok. However it was a ‘Super 8’ franchise and my advice is that I won’t be staying in another one of those. Thought it would at least be cheap, but it wasn’t even though we had a room stinking of smoke and the breakfast (and we are not fussy, nor big breakfast eaters) was crap, with something I’ve noticed at quite a few accommodation places over here, throwaway almost everything in regards to utensils etc. We only had juice, coffee and toast and the rubbish left behind would fill a pickup!! I don’t know and care not to try and work out what the carbon footprint of a place like that would generate.

Dinner the night before was great though. We drove about five miles back along the Interstate to get down town to the restaurant and it was well worth it. The place was family owned and run, was lively, fun and with them all taking it in turns to walk among the diners singing a variety of songs. Good food too and we had a great bottle of red wine from California called “Conciti, a 2005 Cab Sav. I’ll be keeping an eye out for that one! They had run a restaurant in Las Vegas for 25 years so they knew their stuff.

The next morning we headed off again quite early and after finally getting a hold of Duke Phillips at the Chico Basin Ranch the night before to make sure we could go, we decided to stop over at Pueblo to buy a few supplies so we could be self sufficient when we got there. They have been real busy here at the ranch mustering and sorting out young cattle to be sent off to a feedlot, as this part of the State had missed most of the rain. The first rain for the summer had only fallen last week and yet I was quite surprised at how well the country was responding with ample ground cover greening up quickly from the one decent shower they had received so far. This time our GPS was right on target, with even the last 4 miles of dirt road on the map!
It was good to be back here on the Chico Basin Ranch which is about 30 miles southeast of Colorado Springs and comprises about 90,000 acres of rolling open plains country not far off the foot of the huge Points Peak mountain. This place and another 100,000 acres up in the San Luis valley are leased off a conservation group in the U.S. by Duke and his business partners as part of an extremely unique situation whereby they get to run several enterprises including cattle, hunting and Bison for 25 years! This shows what can be accomplished by some ‘out of the box’ thinking and a great holistic goal that gives all party’s involved the outcome they desire. Duke gets to run profitable commercial enterprise (and live a dream) while the conservation group get to have an extremely well managed large parcel of land that generates a good return and achieves goals such as a massively improved diversity of native plants and animals and a healthy ecosystem that is continually monitored. It is a great model for a truly sustainable way forward with genuine outcomes for NGOs with money to invest, young ranchers to ranch and vibrant communities to reinvigorate. I’d like to see more of that thinking throughout the world.

Well Duke said they were busy and he wasn’t one to exaggerate, with 17 truckloads of weaner cattle being shipped out and a crew putting in a massive trough and pipeline. It was interesting to see how they would load the cattle up the loading ramp straight out of a big yard on horseback. About 1,400 young cattle were due to be sent to a feedlot down the road a little way as Duke tends to be very conservative when looking ahead and managing the expected grazing pressure going in to winter. And for good reason too as winter here is called “drought” where I come from, so these guys sensibly do what we all should and prudently manage their stocking rate for the best economic/ecological outcome taking into account ‘worst case scenarios’. Rain is looking a little imminent going into the weekend, which tends to leave most managers ‘hanging on’ which can sometimes be smart (in hindsight) but more often than not can have people caught up in the downward spiral that ‘hope alone’ can get us into. “Sell and repent my friend……… but always sell”. The rain will always be welcome, even if the early decision is ‘not quite right’.

Duke took us for a look around and showed us the house that will be our home for three nights and which is part of their tourism operation. This house can sleep about 14 people, is clean and comfortable and is decked out and furnished just like any ranch on the plains and is a great place to stay. See (www.chicobasinranch.com) for some more info on what all action is at this ranch.

We spent the afternoon giving Duke and his young crew a hand to put down a water trough on part of his new water line, which is
all 3 inch PVC pipe, glued together every forty feet and put into the ground to a depth of 4 feet! Maybe “trough” isn’t descriptive enough. This design involves digging a round hole 39 feet in diameter and bolting together 12 ten foot lengths of heavy gauge curled iron. Then the base will be concreted to a depth of four inches, leaving the water holding capacity at around 20,000 gallons (76,000 litres). These troughs are fed by 6 inch PVC from a separate float system and can water 3,000 cattle or more in one mob, which is the intention of Dukes grazing system!! Some of the young “hands” Duke has employed were looking a little tired by the end of the day and no wonder. 4.00 am starts on horseback till dark and then swinging a pick and shovel can do that to you. Ha ha. They want ‘experience’ and they certainly get a taste of real ranch life here that may be a little far removed from their romantic notions of being a cowboy in the Wild West. Plenty want to try though and he has to adopt quite an extensive culling process to deal with a couple of e-mail requests coming in each week.

So much for self sufficiency as we were invited up to the house for a great “bison steak” that night with Duke and his family and a quiet beer. Beautiful evening with storms rolling all around the horizon, including plenty of bright lightning and deep thunder. Never the less, Cathy and I decided after saying goodnight that we would take a run into the nearest village to top up our ‘nearly empty’ fuel tank and pick up a couple of things we had left off our shopping list. Well, the storms had thus far seemed to be quite a way off in the distance, as had the prospect of making it to a ‘gas station’, when we not only ran in to a huge storm with driving rain, but then hail!! Not looking a good decision right about then, with thoughts of another damaged car! With the certainty of not getting back to the CBR and then making it into town a second time on ‘empty’ we decided to push on and luckily we made it out the other side of the storm fairly quickly, much to our relief. Then when the fuel alarm went off our reliable GPS told us we only had about 7 miles to go so we knew we would be ok. The storms kept rolling around all night though and it started to rain here quite well not long after we got back. Luckily this road can take quite a bit of rain as it has a high sand and granite content. Nice to go to sleep with the sound of rain and storms and I went to sleep dreaming that a similar thing would be happening at home before long.

The next morning I was up early and spent some time reading one of the books that was on the table here. Written in 1989 it was a real life story of Watt Matthews of Lambshead Ranch in Texas and an account of his families long association with ranching in that part of the world. At that stage Watt was 90 years old, a lifelong bachelor and still in charge of the management of the substantial ranching operation there in south west Texas. By all accounts an incredible guy with a fantastic affinity for the local history of the region, cattle and ranching in general. Ironically, it wasn’t until later in the day that I realised the significance of the chance of me picking that book up to read.

Duke was due to pick me up at 7.15 am (Cathy stayed here) so with the rain of the night before I decided to walk up along the road to meet him and shorten his drive in, as water had washed a couple of gutters in the road. The plan was to head east to the Lasater Ranch about an hour
away to give Dale Lasater a hand to go through his yearling bulls. Now, I wasn’t expecting to be much of a hand but when Duke invited me along I jumped at the chance as the Lasater Ranch was another place C, H and I had visited briefly last year on our tour and I was particularly taken with the quality of his cattle, as well as his philosophy, discipline and management style. We went (me observing and listening mostly) through the bulls so thoroughly and with attention to detail that I’d believe there would not be too many cattlemen could not learn a thing or two from this guy. I could fill another blog page talking about this place and his “Beefmaster Cattle” that the family founded with their ‘closed herd’ over seventy years ago. Their six essential criteria for selection include Confirmation, Fertility, Disposition, Milk Production, Weight and Hardiness. Most seed stock or stud operators would also agree with all that, but they would only give it lip service, however that is not the case here. No pampering and no second chances at all at this ranch and the results are a beautiful, quiet, fertile and profitable herd.

We were there till after lunch and I felt very privileged to be able to just observe how this operation works and get another look at the great results being achieved. Later Duke told me how he had worked for Dale Lasater and they have a business relationship here at the CBR. Also his father was a ranching partner with Dale’s uncle and the book I read this morning was about a relation of Dale Lasater’s and his and Watt Matthew’s descendants are still ranching in Texas and have a great herd of “Beefmaster” cattle.

And not only that. While at the Lasater Ranch, just before lunch I was having a bit of a ‘sticky beak’ at pictures etc on the wall and my eye was drawn to a news paper article and ad that was framed up on the wall, dated 1994. The headline read “Three men who made a difference”. I couldn’t believe what I read in the article. It was a story about three men who have made a huge contribution to cattle breeding, land management and livestock handling. The three men were Tom Lasater (Dale’s dad), Allan Savory (who I stayed with this week) and Bud Williams (who I am due to visit the week after next in Texas). How’s that for a day of “Good Karma”. I must be getting something right on this trip!!
Then the rain started (more good Karma) and by the time we got back here there had been good steady soaking rain and now, late at night, there is still a distant rumble and occasional shower drifting past. I now have slightly mixed feelings as tomorrow was due to be another interesting day with a program of competition roping involving local ranchers, a BBQ and night of local musical talent. The manager here is talented enough to be in a local band, writes his own songs and has cut a CD! If it doesn’t rain too much more it could still be on, as this country doesn’t get anywhere near as sticky (or slippery) as the black soil plains of Brewarrina. And it’s not ‘rodeo roping’ either, as it is more based on traditional working cowboy attributes. Using a rope and horse is still very much a big part of the way things are done around here and I must admit that I really like it. All those ‘Yippee Yarns’ I read as a boy I guess!

Before I go, I must congratulate Fran and Lance on the birth of their little girl Stella, and I know for a fact and personal experience that little girls are really special!! Also, A very big HAPPY 42ND BIRTHDAY to K.A. (You don’t look a day older!! Ha ha)

Cheers for now!

Tuesday, August 19th 2008, 12:00 AM
Arriving in Mexico

Hi All. Just a quick one this time as we are in Mexico and may, or may not, be able to be in touch over the next few days.

Flew from Denver down to Phoenix and then got a connecting flight that was very rushed (only 35 minutes) down to Hermisillo. Hermisillo is the capital of Sonora, which is the northern most 'State' in Mexico.

Bit of a hiccup when we got here, our luggage did not bother to join us!! This can be a traveler’s nightmare and was bound to happen sooner or later I guess. I think I've had over 30 flights in the last nine months without a hitch so shouldn't complain. However, this was the first international flight that I've had without taking a spare change of clothes with me. Cathy washed out her underwear and hung it off the ceiling fan which did the trick! Also, this had been our first experience of being charged for all items of luggage as, apparently, all US airlines are starting to do. I wouldn't mind if they actually looked after our stuff and didn't lose it!

Not all bad though, as Ivan and Martha Aguirre picked us up at the airport as promised and took us out to a fantastic dinner at a Mexican/Japanese restaurant that one of his sisters and niece owns. Ivan's father started the restaurant in the early 70's (along with many other businesses) and it is still going well. Hopefully our luggage will turn up today so that we can head out to their ranch which is around 4 hours northwest of this city.

Huge downpour of rain here last night and when we were driven home there was flooding in the streets, but still a surprising amount of traffic getting around!

Bye for now, and hopefully I'll get a chance to write again before next weekend when we fly back to Texas. I've been really looking forward to this part of the trip as I had read an article (and given it to plenty of other people) about what Ivan and Martha have achieved here in the
Sonora 'desert' and I thought it was inspirational. Hopefully I'll be on a horse by this time tomorrow.

Cheers!

Friday, August 22nd 2008, 3:16 PM
A Mexican Perspective

Having a great week out here at the “Rancho La Inmaculada” and actually have a little quiet time now after lunch so I’ve grabbed the opportunity to finally catch up on some writing. And what a setting. I’m sitting on an old rocking chair in a breezeway that is really the original main entrance to the headquarters and I have a couple of the horses munching away on beautiful green Buffel grass only a couple of metres away.

What a start we had getting here. First of all, our missing luggage finally got past the over zealous security guards in the good ol’ US of A and turned up on the 3.15pm flight the next day. Without our host Martha (Marta) doing some quick talking we could very well had been there for much longer.

Later on I could understand more fully their desire to get going as soon as possible. The trip out from Hermosillo to the ranch is about 180 kms, but distances can be a misleading gauge of time when the road conditions aren’t exactly freeway standard, so the normal time they would allow is closer to the four hour mark! The trip out was great with Ivan and Martha talking all the while about their business, the landscape and Mexican culture etc and we stopped a couple of times to check things out and talk some more. Then when we were only 11 kms from home (50 kms along the 60 km dirt section) we had our second holdup at a creek, or arroyo as they call them here, only this time there was no sneaking through in 4wd.

The creek was about 30 metres across and although probably not very deep, it was quick flowing and certainly was not passable till it dropped, so we were informed by Ivan who had learned well from previous lessons. Luckily there was a ranch house back around 300 metres and Francisco Mendez was kind enough to give us coffee to go with our Coyote biscuits for dinner and he also dragged out a couple of home made ‘cots’ (like a shearers stretcher) for us to sleep under the stars until the water dropped. With a couple of blankets for a mattress and another for shelter I didn’t mind too much as tiredness soon overcame me and in fact I didn’t wake until my foot hurt because I still had one boot on!! That might sound ridiculous to some, but I have a foot that gives me trouble if I walk
barefooted on uneven ground so I left it on in case I had to get up during the night. I know, I know, maybe I could have just put it back on when needed?

Anyway the next day the water was all but gone and their sons turned up and tested the creek out for us and we were once more on the way.

Finally we made it to the ranch headquarters which in itself was another huge surprise after driving through an amazing terrain for the last 80 kms. Most of the way the Sonora desert had surprised me with a huge diversity and quantity of plant and animal life, with cactus of all varieties in abundance and the huge Saguaro (like in the cowboy movies!) standing out above all others, like sentinels on guard to the way in to Ivan’s ranch. We soon knew we were on their ranch as the vegetation became much more ‘grassy’ with great thick stands of the introduced Buffel grass scattered throughout.

And then the “Headquarters”! Ivan’s father, who was a very successful businessman and entrepreneur, bought this ranch in the mid seventies as a scrub infested block with no improvements and set about transforming the place, including building this magnificent house. It’s quite hard to describe, let alone photograph. Suffice to say that Senor Aguirre did not do things by halves. The design is based on a Spanish fortress north of Hermosillo, has a huge central courtyard and internal 5 metre wide walkway (or verandah) and is made almost entirely of red brick which took ‘40 or 50 men’ a year to build! The whole complex would be a hundred metres long by about 50 metres wide and is really more like a castle than a house. His father also cleared the whole place of Mesquite and any other tree that got in the way on all of the 26,000 acres, including leveling about 2,500 and installing 12 large centre pivot irrigation systems. Like I said, nothing by half measure! Did I also mention that he owned one of the largest chicken (layers) sheds in the world during the seventies with about 1.2 million birds in production?
Unfortunately, this drive for production was all part of the ‘best practices paradigm’ and state of the art technology espoused by all the experts at the time (some still are!) and was to all come to grief when diesel went from about 10 cents a gallon to 120 almost over night. Also ‘unfortunate’ was the passing of Ivan’s father at the age of only 52 in 1980 when he was in the prime of his life. I can’t help but think a true entrepreneur like he was would be looking down on Ivan and be proud of what is now happening here.

Anyway, fast forward a few years to when Ivan took over the management of the ranch and there has been even more of a dramatic change in the landscape. I could write a whole book just on Ivan’s family and what has been achieved here, so I will try to hold back and keep it condensed for the sake of ‘blog readers’ who may not quite share my passion for this deal as yet. To keep it simple, Ivan was one of the first in Mexico (and indeed the world) to embrace Allan Savory’s philosophy way back in the mid 80’s. It was crisis time then for them and HM gave him a solid framework to test some decisions that needed to be made regarding over capitalisation in infrastructure and the direction he and his family needed to go with the business for the true triple bottom line.

Mesquite (a noxious weed in Australia and the U.S) has grown back thicker than ever on the whole place and is an integral part of there business with no less than 7 distinct benefits for the business and landscape. However, he manages his landscape (some of it as hard as any I’ve seen in the western division!) to grow more grass and that is exactly what is happening. If anybody out there in “cyber land” doubts me then do yourself a favour and book a plane ticket to Mexico to see for yourself. Their hospitality alone is worth the trip anyway!!

Back to Mesquite. (Anyone at Broken Hill reading this??). They have a team of seven men trimming the trees and cooking it into charcoal as a fulltime operation. (Scattering the branches leftover in the process) The seed pod is harvested and turned into a high value sort of flour. The seed pods and leaves are eaten by the cattle as a protein source when needed. They make timber flooring, table tops and doors out of processing the timber into small sections. The branches that are left in the paddock are a great carbon source and provide protection for grass to establish. (The trimming schedule was budgeted as a 25 year turn around, but may be as quick as 10. Completely self-sustaining!)
The trees themselves are legumes (nitrogen fixers) and are a terrific nutrient source for grass which is more abundant around the base than away from it!! Finally, the trees (along with other types) provide shade and plant diversity, hence landscape resilience throughout the drier periods of the year.

Doesn’t sound very “noxious” at all to me. Makes me remember a quote I’ve got somewhere. “You can look at something as though it is a ‘problem’ or an ‘opportunity’ and that is what it will become”. As well as that, the current carrying capacity is more than two and a half times higher than it was and it looks terrific.

Back to when we got here. We didn’t waste too much time and I got to be on a horse and moving cattle soon after we arrived at the ranch and plenty more since. Some of it quite painfully as I’m not as fit as I should be and these saddles can tend to rub where I haven’t been rubbed before. Getting better though and really enjoying it as well, even though I think I’ve broke my camera and lost a brand new “Dictaphone” that had quite a bit of info on it.

This week has gone quickly and I think that plenty has been learned, and as well as that we have been particularly well fed with some great Mexican dishes being served at every meal. We’ve had cheese soup, several things picked straight out of the paddock including ‘prickly pear cactus’ and sage, plenty of tortillas and burrito’s etc etc. I am hoping though that the extra exercise and heat will be having a beneficial impact on my burgeoning (thanks to Nuffield) waistline.

Early start again tomorrow as we will be sorting cattle out, with steers to sell and cull cows to get rid of. Ivan likes to sell now as it is the height of the growing season for grass and hardly anybody else will be selling so you know what happens then- higher prices as usual for those that are willing to buck the trend.

It will be interesting to see how the cattle are handled in the corrales (yards) tomorrow as so far it has been all on horseback. They breed Beefmaster cattle and true to their type they are proving to have a great quiet disposition with Ivan a big devotee of the Lasater style.

I went with three other guys this morning, including one of the sons, to rope calves in the paddock and tag them so that all mothers have their calves matched to them. I found it really interesting and surprisingly stress free for the stock, including calves, which do not even kick. And yes, I did have a couple of goes with my score so far zero from two. Maybe I’ll improve on that tomorrow!!

Better go for now otherwise I may sleep in and end up being “drug out of bed with a rope” by one of these cowboys.

Cheers for now. Hasta monyana!
Adios to Mexico and on to Texas

Monday, August 25th 2008, 6:09 PM

Well we did have an early start once again the next day, with us all up by 5.30 am and having strong black coffee and straight into the saddle. Six of us on horse back put the 1,400 head of cattle (cows, calves, steers and heifers) into the corral before Cathy and Martha brought us a breakfast of coffee and Mexican sausage, egg and re-fried bean burritos. Very good too, as we were quite hungry by then! The cattle all went into a couple of huge ‘cooler yards’ without much trouble at all, except for a bunch of calves having a bit of fun and giving a few vaquero’s some fun as well, with their ropes of course.

Actually I got to rope my first calf back out in the paddock, although unfortunately it was dead and threatening to be the demise of its young mother as well. Even ‘dallying up’ on my horse and using its considerable strength proved to be a bit of an effort to help her out so I doubt that little cow will be long in the Aguirre herd.

Drafting, or ‘sorting’ as its called here, went very well considering the size of the mob and was done a little differently than is done at home in Australia and all performed in a long alleyway with men positioned on three separate gates. Some of the cows had quite a bit larger ‘flight zones’ than was evident in the paddock and are also well equipped with big ‘coyote killing’ horns, so often it was necessary to get right out of their way instead of blocking them up.

Ivan was also selling about 50 steers and the buyer, a neighbour, with 3 small body trucks and accompanying drivers, had turned up at daylight to take delivery, even though the cattle were not even in the yards as yet!! So they had a very long day waiting around till all the cattle were sorted and it really wasn’t long before dark before they were able to be on their way. Not an easy job to get out there either as a decent sized small truck could barely get through between the encroaching scrub and the numerous washouts. They didn’t seem too concerned by the situation though and in fact I felt it was part of the culture here to take it a little easier and not to be in too much of a rush. Not a bad thing I think and we certainly still got plenty achieved during the day, without it being too stressful.

Labour is just as much of an issue here as anywhere else, with the difficulty being accessing people that are willing to live quite a remote lifestyle and do hard physical manual labour. A couple of his men are only boys really, including his son who was only sixteen (almost seventeen) although long and lean at about 6’ 2” or so. Being born in the saddle he was very capable of working well and his dad gave him plenty of responsibility to go with it, including milking the cow and helping his mum turn it into cheese (a lost art on most farms). The most likely of the four children to become a rancher, he also has his sights set on going to college and becoming a vet as well. The oldest son, Ivan, is currently at college studying electrical engineering and helps out with the wood working enterprise when he is home. The second oldest and only daughter is doing a marketing degree in El Paso and is also looking to use that skill as part of the business. The youngest, ‘Marco’ (almost as long and lean as his brother) is still at school and although not quite as interested in ‘cowboy ing’, he has other interests including skills and a knack with computers.
All are a credit to their parents’ efforts in ‘home schooling’ them throughout most of their school years. Although the ranch is quite isolated, Martha and Ivan have a very strong focus on an academic education for the children to go along with their passion for farming. There is a lot of countries, including home, that could use more of that philosophy in attracting the best and brightest back into arguably the greatest vocation of all!

Speaking of isolated, there is no rural power anywhere near here and they supply all of their own via solar (as well as wind in the future) and diesel back-up to re-charge batteries when necessary. Also phone is limited, with no mobile coverage at all. I’ve had my phone off for a week, although I must admit that we have been able to get limited internet access. Heaven forbid!!!

The next morning we were back to the corral as the cull cows were to be branded, cows and calves to be mothered up and some un-tagged calves that were left in the night before had to be matched to their mums that bellowed around outside the fence waiting for their babies. That was an interesting job, giving their son Auralio a hand to rope calves on foot in the big ‘cooler yard’ to put tags on. Interesting at one point particularly, when a stray roping loop, meant for a calf, landed around the belly of a trotting cow going past and left Auralio in a bit of a conundrum with how to get it off. Understandably, she wasn’t real pleased about the situation either, especially after he dallied the end of the long rope around a fence post and pulled her up short of running me down! Then I thought I’d try an old Territory trick used to throw grown cattle, so I ducked in and grabbed her by the tail, and as she turned to treat me like she would a pesky coyote, I managed to bowl her over and loosen the rope before she could get up. Llong time since I’d tried that one!

A Mexican “Character”

Some of their Mesquite timber

Catching up on some reading

Bogged on the way out
Before lunch I was taken to see their impressive bull herd that is due to be joined up any day. The herd was a mixture of Lasater bulls and ones they were breeding themselves. Plenty of both are great quality and I must admit that the last three or four ranches that we have been on have ignited a renewed interest for me into breeding cattle. I think done well, and utilizing a strict Lasater type philosophy, would be an incredibly satisfying career. My number one focus has been, and will continue to be, to greatly improve our land base and strengthening (or securing) our financial position by utilizing other peoples cattle in the short to medium term. However when I am comfortable that that goal is being achieved, we will be looking for opportunities to purchase a quality cow base.

If anyone breeding cattle would like a tip, buy the book “The Lasater Philosophy of Cattle Raising”, first written in 1972 by the founder of the Beefmaster Breed, Tom Lasater’s eldest son Laurence M Lasater. (Santa Cruz Press –reprinted 2000)

By the way,. Tom Lasater made an operating profit from cattle ranching every single year from 1931 till he retired in 1985. Not too many could claim that record in a volatile industry, and his philosophy on ranching and life in general is well worth the read or more precisely, the study!

After lunch we were due to be taken for a drive around the rest of the ranch, and that is what happened eventually. But not before a fantastic storm had cut a path across quite a bit of the ranch and we had a spectacular view of it from the second story observation room purpose built for just such an occasion. Looking out across the valley and seeing the distance hills get blocked out by heavy rain had our host Ivan quite excited at the prospect of further beneficial grass growth and we, like many if not all other farmers, could share his enthusiasm. We were quite surprised when he suggested that we resume our planned farm tour, as that sort of rain on the black soil plains of Brewarrina would have had us caught indoors for more than a day or two before any chance of a drive about. The benefit of their management to improve ground cover and hence the ‘water cycling capability’ of their soil was very evident on the drive as this relatively hard, sandy soil has a high probability of losing almost all moisture to runoff when it is hard capped and bare. A lot of Ivan’s neighbours (HM skeptics!) think they live under a “different sky” or “he’s under a different heaven to them” because he seems to always get the rain and has so much grass.

It was incredible how quickly that week had gone and it would go without saying that I enjoyed it immensely and learned quite a lot, with our hosts more than willing to explain to us all the triumphs and challenges they have had to endure in building up their business and transforming their ranch ecology. We feel incredibly indebted to them and I only hope that we can get the chance to return the hospitality some time soon. I plan to learn to speak Spanish by then as well. Although their English is perfect, I’d like to be able to answer their neighbour Chappo’s (who helped us all week) many questions about ‘ranching in Australia’ without the use of an interpreter.
However, the next morning saw us up early having some coffee and then hitting the road with Ivan and Martha taking us on the four hour drive back into Hermosillo to the airport and catching our 12.30 flight to Phoenix. One last taste of Mexico though before we did, with Ivan stopping at a traditional ‘Tortilla Stand’ beside the main road on the outskirts of town for a quick bite to eat. He said the same lady, and before that her father, had been operating this taco stand for about forty years and he had frequented it for about that long as well. Featuring cow cheek (what we had!), cow eyeballs, cow brains and cow tongue and it was actually very good and the chilies that I was warned about were very hot as well. A great way indeed to finish off our Mexican experience.

It was sad to say ‘adios’ to our new friends but I’m sure I will be utilizing their advice for many years to come and who knows, maybe we will even get the chance to one day import the terrific “Mesquite” products they produce!!

This time going through Phoenix, Arizona airport was a breeze and we managed to get to Dallas, Texas with the entire luggage turning up as it should. Although pleased with that scenario we were quite a while getting our ‘hire car’ picked up as our credit cards were not giving us much satisfaction on their computers. Just when I was getting really frustrated and making long expensive phone calls to Australia, the annoying Mastecard decided it would be ok and we finally got to test out our GPS again. Once again I could not lock in a correct address for the hotel I’d booked via the internet as it had very recently changed names, so we were back to directions on a map which had me feeling a little uneasy with a sense of “Denver all over again” springing to mind. Not to worry though as Cathy expertly navigated us right to the front door. Being about 10.00 o’clock though, the only place open for a bite to eat was a “Denny’s, which would prove ok though as it had been a long time since the Taco this morning in Mexico. If nothing else they will fill you up. Actually they have great ‘apple pie’ there, but if you have a first course there is no way you could eat anything else. Besides, that week in Mexico had just started to get me fit so I had better not spoil it!!

Till next time….Adios Amigos!

Saturday, August 30th 2008, 2:19 AM
Big, fast paced and green Texas

We stayed just the one night in Dallas and then most of the next day driving to various locations around the city trying to get camera repairs done. Carrying a camera on a horse through Mesquite is not such good idea. It seems to be that the zoom is stuck on. It’s still under warranty so we decided that Cathy would take it home and I’d get another. I’ve been in many big cities over the past few months, but there isn’t too many that spring to mind as being busier with traffic than Dallas. These multi-level overpass bridges are like an image out of some futuristic movie, and still they are being built all over the place here.
The next night we decided to head to Fort Worth, apparently another city altogether, although you would not know it as the urban development is continuous. Stayed in the old part of downtown and it was great, with many old buildings and a typical ‘old west’ atmosphere prevailing. Most nights there is a cattle drive down the main street and a rodeo on in one of the many bars. We ended up at a “Honky Tonk” bar that was described as the biggest in the world, and I wouldn’t doubt it either. That night was quiet though with only about fifty people there, most of them learning how to dance. No, not us, although we did get our photo taken on a big old fake rodeo bull.

The next day I had a meeting back in Dallas with Clint Josey at his office. A businessman and petroleum engineer, he is also involved with Holistic Management and ranching and has been since the early eighties. They are also involved in private benevolent company that gives out funding for issues dealing with water and land management.

We decided to take a drive out north of Dallas to visit one of his ranches up towards Decatur as it was on the way (sort of) to Bowie, which is where our next visit was to be. Beautiful country on the way, with it being an over 30 inch rainfall area. In fact much of Texas has far higher rainfall than I had previously imagined and having had quite good rain over the last few weeks the grass is green and growing everywhere.

We were running late by the time we got up to the LO Ranch so did not stop long, and ended up in Bowie (GPS working well) at about 6.30. Our accommodation for the next two nights was a B and B called “The Gazebo”, set in an historic looking typical pre civil war southern mansion. The owners (both retired teachers) say that the place was built about twenty seven
years ago and they have been taking in guests for about the last ten since the kids left home. I’m not sure how much “contents insurance” they would be paying, because the house was absolutely full of antiques in every room and had a great historical and homely feel about it. They were determined to show us typical southern hospitality, and at breakfast time that meant they would deliver much more than we could possibly eat. It was great; however the next morning we assured them that fruit and coffee would be plenty.

Just had a fantastic whole day with Bud and Eunice Williams at their home here in Bowie, Texas. I’ve been a big fan of the philosophy of this couple for several years now, with their marketing as well as the livestock handling for which they are quite famous. After getting there around 8.00 in the morning (actually our GPS took us to the wrong house first!!) we got to spend all day talking about a whole range of subjects almost non-stop, and we finished up around 8.30 that night. It was great value and extremely interesting, and I could easily have listened and asked questions for another two days!!

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Bud and Eunice have had an incredibly diverse range of experiences with handling “trouble livestock” for many, many years from the mountains, deserts and remote islands, as well as in the Arctic, Canada, Mexico and Australia, handling animals from cattle to pigs, deer, camels, buffalo and horses on areas as little as a horse paddock to vast open areas of millions of acres. After spending a long time dealing with problem animals and getting in livestock that nobody else could, they decided to put on schools to teach others some of what they had learned. So for the last twenty years they have taught and helped many people (and therefore helping many animals get a better life), and have also started others teaching using their principles.
We are fortunate in Australia to have three guys, Grahame Rees, Rod Knight and Jim Lindsay (LSS and KLR) teaching both the livestock handling and marketing schools (we hosted one back in '03) and they do a great job. The livestock handling techniques are quite a big paradigm shift for many people and not all that learn can fully grasp the potential. Bud and Eunice have plenty of video footage that can be quite unbelievable and can test even the most open minded.

To be able to sit down “one on one” today really clarified some points for me regarding some of the issues we have had handling bigger mobs with our grazing system. Also, the cattle marketing potential has me really excited again. Bud said “If I can just get you to fully grasp and understand this concept alone, then you will have paid for your whole trip right there!” And I don’t doubt him. Just to listen to their view on a range of subjects was invaluable and Bud is the only person in the U.S. that has not complained about higher fuel prices, stating that they “should be twice as high!” He reckons it would make people think a little more about what they do.

Unfortunately, we had a phone call while in Bowie that Jo and Peggy Maddox were ill and we wouldn’t be able to make it down to the West Ranch in SW Texas to visit them after leaving here. That was a pity as I had been looking forward to getting down there and seeing a place managed holistically in dry country (for a long time) even though it was going to be quite a drive. However we had another contact down near Cameron so we headed that way first thing in the morning. Steve, a friend of ours from Brisbane who has been a regular guest at Bokhara Hutz as he is a pilot and brings clients out, has a ‘brother’ on a ranch over here. Ralph and his American wife breed seed stock (stud) Angus and Red Angus cattle and have quite a nice little ranch that we were given a tour around. We were also well looked after with a great lunch and it was a very picturesque location.

After that we decided to head into another “big smoke” and set our trusty GPS for the city of Austin, about two hours away. On the way we decided to get onto the Brewarrina Mayor for some advice as apparently he is almost a local around the country music haunts in these parts! Sure enough, ‘Slacky’ was on the ball and gave us some great advice on a couple of locations, even checking out the internet to see who was playing. So we got a cab and headed on down to the “Broken Spoke” which looked very much like a typical old time saloon. It is located right on the main street going through the middle of Austin and yet it wasn’t even paved out front. Great atmosphere and we couldn’t believe the number of people that kept coming through the front door.

When we got there at about nine the place was quite empty, with just a few learning how to dance to some music, so we grabbed a drink and sat down to watch. However, when the band was ready to play the dance floor was clear and I wondered if anyone would dance when they played. I didn’t have to wait long, as half way through the first song people started to flock onto the floor and didn’t stop till the end of the night. None of that crazy dancing like I tend to perform either, this was all ‘proper dancing’ and a sight to behold with most of them very, very good. I was wishing we had learned. The variety of ages, shapes and sizes was incredible and everyone seemed to dance with every one else at some stage of the night.

Very different from the culture at home, almost nobody here needed a drink before getting up to have a go, tough looking cowboys included.

Better go.
Monday, September 1st 2008, 10:03 AM

Honky Tonks and leaving America

On the road in south west Texas with Cathy taking her turn to drive I’d give myself a head start on tonight’s ‘blog report’. It will be our last evening together for about six weeks so thought I’d better not spend it on the computer!

We just pulled up somewhere between San Angelo and Abilene (so many of these Texas towns remind me of songs! – “Abilene, Abilene, prettiest woman I’ve ever seen”…..) to take some photo’s of a huge area of wind farms. They look quite spectacular and I think they are far more aesthetically pleasing than many other things dotting the landscape. Yet that is one of their strongest criticisms, people don’t want them in sight. I wouldn’t mind a few at home, especially if it meant that we had less expensive power bills.

After staying the night in Austin we decided to head further down the road to visit the bigger metropolis of San Antonio, so we ended up back onto the crowded I 35 and locked “The Alamo” into the trusty GPS. For some reason I had originally pictured the Alamo as being somewhere out in a God forsaken piece of desert, but that couldn’t have been further from the truth. The well restored ruins of the famous battle are right in the middle of the city and in fact the whole area is well managed and a huge tourist attraction. The countryside all the way down from Dallas has lot higher rainfall than I had imagined, no wonder the area has a long history of nations fighting over it. I suppose if the land were not that good then the population of Texas would not be up around the thirty million mark as it is. And they must all own two cars!!

There was some serious traffic congestion, even on the Interstate, getting in to the centre of San Antonio, but once we were near the Alamo Plaza it lightened off to the extent that it was quite easy to even get a parking place close enough to walk around everywhere. We got a room at another Holiday Inn, this time with a back door opening right onto the “Riverwalk”, which is beautifully tree lined and dotted with restaurants, bars and shops etc and winds its way for quite a distance in that part of the city.

Had another talk with Slacky back in Bre and this time he put us on to another bar with live music, this time with the salubrious name of “Sam’s Burger Joint”, a short taxi ride away. Well, the ‘burger part’ was very average indeed and I, at least, was less hungry at the end of the meal than the beginning, more out of disgust then actual sustenance! Also, the clientele were not quite as clean cut as the night before with more “ink and steel” involved in the personal makeup than BHP and Rupert Murdoch could come up with. The bartender had a big contraption sticking out of one side of his face and I’m still not sure if it was a part ‘his look’ or in fact he had a broken jaw and it was there simply to speed up the healing process. Never the less he was a friendly helpful guy and a good barman.

Things definitely improved after that when they let us into the main venue and the lead act was a terrific singer and played for an hour or so to warm up the gathering crowd. We got a seat with the father of the main band’s bass player, who had come from Washington State to hear the band. Their name is “The Band of Heathens” (a nice bunch of lads really!) who have been together for a little over two years and play a very good brand of ‘country rock’ with the occasional slower ballad thrown in. It was a great performance from a bunch of guys with plenty of talent and I wouldn’t be surprised to see this group go places. Three of them took turns being the lead singer and it was all their own music. Might even get the chance to get
them out to “Bokhara Hutz” one day, if we can get our entertainment manager on the job! Anyway, needless to say we had a great night and didn’t get going too fast the next morning.

Did have a look around the city a little more, went through a museum and had lunch before heading west out of the city to look for some drier country. Went as far out as Sonora and the landscape started to flatten out and get harder looking with plenty of limestone in the landscape. Plenty of green grass and quite well timbered with Juniper pine, Ironwood and Mesquite.

Today heading north again, the country became more red looking, with not all that many cattle at all to be seen. Lots of goats though, as I guess they are using them for scrub (or ‘brush’ as its called here) control and there seems to be a big infusion of Boer goat involved.

We had a quiet night and caught up on e-mails and telephone calls although we did go down town for some Tex Mex dinner, which we have done frequently. Quite cheap, nice and very filling if we are careful not to get too ambitious with the hot stuff and in fact we just pulled up and had lunch at another one, “La Familia” or “The Family Restaurant”.

Every town we have been through has notable numbers of vehicles parked outside the various churches. Being Sunday it is understandable of course, but the numbers are quite incredible. Also every town, even the very small (by US standards!) have numerous churches of every denomination imaginable and quite a few of course that have been recently ‘imagined’ due to favourable taxation laws. The US is a land of geographic variation with a massive diversity of culture and beliefs.

There is an extraordinary amount of media coverage, as you could imagine, regarding the upcoming Federal elections. Some (or most) of the talk back shows are 100% political commentary. I almost said ‘debate’, but its not like that, more like one station will be totally Democrat and another totally Republican. Old Johnny Laws wouldn’t be able to find a fence to sit on over here! I’ll add some more comment on my take on the whole American political process tomorrow while waiting for my flight out.

Hard to believe the US leg of my tour is almost done and I’ll miss traveling with my trusty partner Cathy. We both would have loved to have Harriet with us as well; maybe next year when we come back with Slacky to check out the “Honky Tonks” again.

Cheers all.

Tuesday, September 2nd 2008, 7:22 AM
Politics, politics and I’m getting out of the country

Sitting in the “Admirals Club” in terminal D at the Dallas airport after saying goodbye to Cathy at the domestic terminal and seeing her off through the security section there. Very sad indeed as we had expected to be able to have coffee and a meal etc before taking off on our respected flights at 5.30pm and being apart again for another six weeks. However, there was no where at all to sit as all the shopping was ‘through’ the security gates and I had to get back on another bus to get over here to the British Airways area. So alas, we are still together for another four hours without being able to actually ‘be together’. And I feel even worse as I’m able to get into
this club because of my membership with the Qantas Club in Australia. However, the clubs in Australia are much better than the ones here in the US, where you still have to pay for everything and they won’t even let me onto their wi fi system for the internet. At least the seats are comfortable!

The news on the TV is all about the hurricane and I can’t help but think (very cynically) that a lot of these reporters are somewhat disappointed that the storm is not proving to be as cataclysmic and damaging as they were first reporting. It’s like everything has to be turned into some bloody Hollywood script with most of the media practicing their acting skills.

And that brings me to the politics. Politics is such a serious business in reality, especially in this country with their huge world influence and massive over-resource use and yet their seems to be an air of fantasy about the whole process. Don’t get me wrong, I have enjoyed my time in the States immensely and the people by and large are extremely friendly, polite and courteous and we have got to meet some truly genuine types in our travels. However, I get a feeling that the whole deal is far from being truly ‘sincere’ a lot of the time and the word ‘fake’ uncontrollably springs to mind occasionally. And the political process unfortunately highlights the worst of it.

Having a system that boils down to two massively funded political machines fronted by the two most charismatic leaders available after all of the ‘runners up’ have been disqualified due to a character failing too immense to be covered up or dismissed, does not strike me as the ideal way forward. Now, I don’t want to sound too critical of the American system alone, as I’m not a big fan of the political process and politicians in general in most places. I guess we do get the politicians we deserve as has been noted many times, however our democratic system of short term thinking and continually promising all and delivering nothing does not necessarily leave us with the leaders we initially intend on having when we get a chance to vote.

Another way of doing it is hard to think of within the current paradigm. But maybe one way forward would be to have longer terms, say five years and then if at the halfway mark the incumbent government hasn’t enacted policies and driven forward programs that it promised when elected then they are thrown out with no compensatory pension plans to fall back on to keep them fat and shiny. I also dislike how politics is always polarized between liberal/democrat, liberal/labour, right/left etc etc as if a person can’t be both caring and entrepreneurial or run a forward thinking and environmentally conscious business that makes a good profit. I’ve found in my travels that there is a bigger disconnect than I could imagine between most of society (especially but not exclusively ‘urban’) and the realities of life. And probably most decision makers in society, such as politicians, lead the gulf divide. Whether they are leading it or just succumbing to it is debatable.

To the Democratic / Republican debate over here. The race between Obama and Hilary created huge interest for obvious reasons as the successful nominee either way was going to get the chance to make history, being either the first woman or first black president. And boy, don’t they like their record books over here! So you would have been forgiven for thinking that there was another political election to actually win before the deal was done. Obama became the darling of the media and did look ‘odds on’ for a while, but personally I believe he made a mistake of not picking Hilary for his running mate after it being such a volatile and close nomination race, with obviously huge numbers of Democratic voters left with their noses out of joint. Like they used to say in Roman times, “Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer”!!
And after McCain picked his running mate, a chick who was almost unheard of from the ‘Alaskan Outback’, the media went into a frenzy of criticism and ridicule. But again, a day is a long time in politics and now it is looking like a very, very clever and shrewd move indeed as she is a quite capable and tough cookie it seems. Hold the press. Just on TV, her 17 year old daughter is having a baby and is going to marry the father!!

That’s enough of this stuff for me, the vultures in the media are circling and I’m heading to Africa to get away from it all. Two months to go before the election and it would drive me mad.

I have a 9 hour flight to Heathrow ahead of me, then a connecting flight to Johannesburg and then another connecter to Zimbabwe. So bye for now!!

Thursday, September 4th 2008, 11:10 PM
Deep in Africa with a baboon!

Well, I’ve landed in Africa with a bang!! Met up with my mate “Peca” at the Johannesburg airport yesterday morning after a long flight from Heathrow and was glad to finally get there. Still had about another three hour wait for our flight on to Vic Falls though, but at least I could stretch the legs a little as I had been stuck on a widow seat and only got up once in 12 hours. By the time I got to bed last night at “Dimbangombe”, the HMI ranch we are staying at, I had been awake for most of the previous 42 hours and I don’t think a wild hungry lion could have woken me!

We did not have to wait long to get our first African experience, with the first encounter of “The Big Five” happening before dinner soon after we got settled. The farm has all sorts of wildlife roaming through as there are absolutely no fences at all and they also have there own ‘pet’ elephant. She is a beautiful 9 year old baby that was rescued after her mum was trapped by poachers and was well trained by her constant companion and he was more than willing to give us both a ride. Biggest horse I’ve ever been on that’s for sure. Extraordinarily intelligent animals and it was amazing the tricks she had been taught.

To back track a little. I had a long stay at the Heathrow airport after landing there at about eight in the morning and not having to catch the connector till 7 that night. Luckily they let me into the British Airways lounge as I’m a member of the Qantas Club, but not after first saying ‘no’ and letting me walk away. It must have been my ‘hang-dog’ sad expression as I walked away that changed their minds as they called me back and said “Yes we’re sorry, but you are
eligible to enter”. Well I wasn’t sorry as they had comfortable lounges, free food, free drink and free internet access which was one hell of a lot better than was on offer outside.

It was a long day and being tired I thought I may be able to find a quiet corner to sleep in, but my body clock wasn’t in to that idea and refused to let me. It was great internet access and I made a stack of calls on Skype to fill in a lot of the time and sent off a few emails as well.

One pity was that I found out a bit late that two of my Nuffield mates were in the airport as well. Craigie and Simon were over in another part of the airport, which is like a city itself, and if I had known earlier I could have made it across there to catch up with them. Still, I talked to Craigie on Skype with a link up to another Nuffielder, Jason, who was still in West Australia. Skype setup is really good if you are traveling overseas.

Also, it was great to hear (once we got phone connection in Jo-Burg) that Cathy had arrived home safe and sound. Actually Cathy had the best flight she has had yet, as she got upgraded to Premium and was pampered all the way home. Wish I could say that I’d organized that as a treat but I couldn’t! Biggest thrill for Cathy though was to be let straight through security at Brisbane Airport. Cathy is usually double checked, much to her annoyance! Then she was almost ‘teary’ to see Rebecca there to meet her as a big surprise. So a big thank you to Bruce and Rebecca for that as another six weeks apart is going to be tough and I’m really pleased that people are helping out.

Back to Africa. Peca and I have been treated like kings at the ranch and today we have been taken to town (37klms) to see the majestic and world famous Victoria Falls, which were fantastic and also to a crocodile farm and now to lunch (and internet access) at a great location overlooking a waterhole frequented by an array of animals. Also, at the crocodile farm we saw the second of the Big Five, a magnificent huge lion!!

I have no phone access for some reason, and the only internet is in town so I’m not sure when I’ll be back on line. The farm manager is home tomorrow and we expect to be very busy over the next few days with farming stuff!.

So till next time!

Saturday, September 6th 2008, 6:50 PM
Elephants Galore!

It has been quite a surreal experience for in Africa, especially in Zimbabwe as the media reports of the political situation would have you think the place is uninhabitable. And certainly in some areas it is pretty bad. Shane, the Manager of Dimbangombe, has just returned from a week in Harare getting his hunting license renewed and reports that there isn’t any electricity for days at a time and some suburbs have not had running water for six months. Hard to believe in a city of millions and a sad indictment of the country’s current state of affairs that the “Jewel of Africa” can hardly feed itself and has an inflation rate at unimaginable levels.

The rest of our first day included a good look around the back roads of Vic Falls, mainly looking to buy a few beers for our host as we had his to drink the night before and thought it would be a good idea to replace them. A good idea maybe, but not so easy to do as most food
supplies (or any supplies) are in extremely short supply throughout the town and indeed the whole country.

It really surprised me just how many people were getting around the streets and along the road on the way into town. There is obviously a terrible poverty gripping this great nation and many problems for the population to be depressed about, yet nearly every person we could see was happy, well dressed and clean with an obvious pride in themselves. A thought that springs to mind is ‘wouldn’t it be incredibly beneficial for many different groups of people in our society to be able to come over here and have their misconceived perception of “difficulty” turned on its head. Depression levels would drop way below the ridiculous levels currently in Australia, and maybe we would start to address causes of problems instead of new ‘medical conditions’ mostly treated with state of the art, latest breakthrough drugs.

I’ve often wondered why a certain situation that can make one person “depressed” can be just the impetus for another to drive their business and life forward to a much better place. It seems to me that all societies that have advanced to a higher level of comfort, security, wealth and leisure also seem to have a corresponding increase in many of the modern world’s major problems. Whether it be depression, drug addiction, crime or family breakdown etc etc. I’m not saying the situation is better here of course. But maybe there is something to be learned about an improved middle ground somewhere and maybe the decisions being made by both systems are inadequate to deal with the complexity of the situation. Governments of all persuasions don’t operate under a holistic goal and that is the biggest problem.

I nearly had a problem of my own coming back from town. On the highway about 8 kms out the lads on the back of our truck yelled that there were some elephants beside the road. We had noticed that the pedestrians had all stopped walking, so we spun around and went back for look and sure enough a group of about eight big bulls (and I mean really big) came crashing out through the scrub and onto the road in quite a leisurely fashion. We couldn’t believe our eyes and I jumped straight out of the truck with my camera like I was a member of the paparazzi at
some movie premier. That is, until the guys on the back all yelled at me to get back in before the elephants, who were only about thirty feet away would charge!! Right! No need to tell me twice as one huge fella was already shaking his mammoth head and flapping his ears at me. Luckily they weren’t under the impression that the crazy white guy was any sort of threat and decided to keep on busting braches out of trees. You don’t have to go to a game park in Zimbabwe to see elephants in the wild, the latest estimation is that they have over one hundred thousand on the loose. Many more than in all of South Africa.

I mentioned that we have been looked after very well here on the ranch, as well as off it, being picked up at the airport and then being chauffeured around town by the capable Mboso, who
may well have been given a kickback from his friends at all the locations yesterday. I hope he did as he was well worth it. Also the cook, Tembre, and his assistant, the ever smiling and happy Gladys, who would set the table in the huge Gazebo for just Pec and I. So far we have had ostrich and zebu as well as beef and chicken and we’ve been made to feel like very special guests. Warranted or not, it sure is much appreciated and the whole African experience so far has had a very relaxed and friendly atmosphere about it (not withstanding the elephant episode!)

The next day was quite a relaxed affair in the morning as well, with a stroll down to Allan and Jody Savory’s camp on the banks of the Dimbangombe River. A very picturesque arrangement of near new ‘adobe’ thatched roofed style buildings in a beautiful location with clear running water in the creek and huge shade trees. This is their home for almost half the year and it was another surreal experience to be able to sit there, drinking tea and discussing principles and philosophies with the man responsible for many of the beneficial changes in both our lives. Even more so after I’d been to see Bud Williams and the Lasater’s and heard Allan’s views on their various philosophies and how maybe Peca and I could incorporate this into our respective businesses. I think we both agreed on the walk back that he, Peca, has far too many pampered cows and he needs to get serious and cull a stack of unproductive old ‘favourites’ from his herd!!

Went for a look at the Dimbangombe cattle late in the afternoon yesterday, just before they were due to be corralled for the night. This is for their own protection of course as they would be killed otherwise by the array of predators that roam the place. Wild dogs, which kill lions, lions (when they dodge the wild dogs), leopard, hyena etc etc. They also have around 400 goats that have to be locked up as well and all of the livestock have stockmen with them 24/7.

Went down to Shane and Roses house last night for a drink before dinner and what a fantastic spot. Sitting there talking and looking out over the valley was a real taste of Africa, with all sorts of wildlife to be heard and spotted in the distance and the sound of baboons scolding their children in one large tree not far away from us.

Early start this morning, as Pec and I hitched a lift on the back of the farm truck to go into Kasane, Botswana. Shane, Jody and Allan were going in for business, shopping and to hopefully get a new fridge so we thought we would take the chance to spend a few days in another country and maybe go on a safari. So we jumped on the back with the old fridge for the hour and a half ride into one of Zimbabwe’s neighbours. On the way we noticed the lack of ‘road kill’ along the highway, a sure sign of the number of predator/scavengers in the area. We pulled up for a break not far from the border and everywhere you could look there were elephants. Apparently one of the parks here in Botswana alone has about 90,000 elephants so they are one wild animal not in any immediate danger of becoming extinct.

In Kasane now and may have just booked a 2 day trip into the Chobe National Park, as getting up to the Okavango Delta might be out of our reach in only a few days. So we’re out in a tent tonight among all the meat eaters of wildest Africa and hopefully I get to return and tell you all about it on Monday.

Cheers!
Lion Bait!!

Surprisingly we are both still alive! ! Not necessarily because the lions were a real threat to our safety as they were very well behaved, more likely the biggest danger to our health was the enormous meal we have just consumed at this Hotel. A smorgasbord as big as any I’ve seen at home was too tempting for a couple of guys who had been out camping (for only two days, and well fed there as well!) so we made pigs of ourselves and deserve all the pain we’re in. Especially when you don’t have to go very far in this part of the world to find people facing the very real daily threat of starvation!

Botswana is one of the more politically stable and democratic countries in Africa at the moment, with an economy based on diamonds, tourism and farming. As such, the people are noticeably more affluent and the shops far more appealing with a wide array of most produce available to buy. They could probably do with a little more road and pavement maintenance as some of that is quite ordinary, although with the country being the size it is and a population of less than two million, the dollars have to stretch a long way.

Kasane is not very big, maybe 5 or 10 thousand , and relies heavily on tourism thanks to its close proximity to the northern national parks, particularly the 11,000 square Klm Chobe Reserve right on its doorstep and the Okavango Delta about six hours away.

Our foray into the Chobe began with a river cruise along the Chobe River starting from one of the hotels on the bank of the huge watercourse. Actually the same one we are at now and that tried to kill us with good hospitality tonight! I started to get a feeling that ‘Shifty Rex’ the salesman (“This is really a discount”) may have pulled a swifty on us as we were the only ones on board and it was the smallest tour boat on the river. Anyway, we arranged our deck chairs near the middle, cracked a cold one (not provided) and ate our crusty salad roll (which was provided!) and away we went.

People kept telling us that we would see plenty of animals in this park (actually I think that was Rex!) and we certainly did indeed. Not only that, but they seem to take hardly any notice of the dozens of tour vehicles driving all around the many roads along the Chobe River and inland as well. Our tour consisted boat ride in the first evening, then a bus or road tour till dark, then another road tour at daylight each of the next two mornings and another boat trip the second evening as well.
As I was saying, we didn’t have to wait long on that boat as straight away elephants came into view, closely followed by buffalo, then plenty of crocs sunning themselves on the banks and also kudu. Then about sixty hippopotami, who were just coming out of the water to graze on a big flat island and our guide coasted his little vessel to within metres of them. “Surreal” is a word that sprung to mind several times over the next two days as it was hard to believe that there could be so many animals, of such variety and that we could be so close to them all, including the big cats such as lion and leopard. There were also mongoose, vultures, fish eagles, jackal, hyena, impala and about a hundred other things that I can’t remember. Some things we will remember better than others, such as sleeping in a tent with lions roaring in the distance (not enough distance!) and also having lions and elephants taking a menacing step or two towards our open sided tour bus on a couple of occasions. Especially one lion with fresh blood and muck all over his face who walked right up to the side underneath Peca who almost dropped his camera trying to quietly turn himself inside out retreating from the edge. We had been told “You must be quiet”. We had another six people join us on our tour before this happened and I’d say it went through Pec’s head that he could throw one of the smaller members out ahead of him if bad came to worse.

Afterwards the guide told us that the animals view the vehicle as ‘one entity’ and don’t perceive it as a threat to them, so they don’t become aggressive. That may be right, but when a 200 kg cat that can probably jump 20 feet from a standing start is only about five feet away (absolutely stinking from a rotten carcass) than it can be quite hard to relax or even remember to breathe!
A couple of things really blew me away about our visit out there, besides the sheer volume of diversity and close proximity to the animals. First of all the numbers of everything and in particular the elephants, and secondly the condition of the park itself with its massive overgrazing. It seems there is no easy answer to this issue as it is not just a numbers game, with pressure from grazing highest along the banks of the river where the “tourists” can get a good look at them. A forced reduction, by shooting etc, is not a government option at the moment and is politically unsavory due to reliance on the tourism dollar, but eventually the result of doing nothing will be far worse. Disease and starvation will run their course, causing far more overall animal stress and anguish, and the long term environmental cost to this landscape will mean more desertification and reduced capability in the next breed up. How to introduce rotation/migration, along with number control would be very difficult but necessary and may involve the introduction of far more predator species, both natural and man made into the equation, but at the cost of a simplistic tourism system that relies on ease of access and huge numbers.

I’ve just read that estimated numbers of elephants in Southern Africa in 1930 was around 5 – 10 million, and in 1990 there was only 600,000. So maybe numbers aren’t the biggest problem now either. Loss of habitat since 1930 would be big, but not representing a 90% decrease as the elephant numbers. Maybe fragmentation of habitat and restriction of movement play a large role, as Allan Savory would agree, I think. It will be interesting for us to get a chance to discuss it with him in a couple of days when we get back out there.

Whole areas (actually almost all we saw) were completely denuded of all ground cover, with every square inch covered in tracks and all but the most unpalatable and big enough trees or shrubs having their leaves stripped bare. A lot of the animals are going to be hoping the ‘wet season’ does not start too late as the middle of November will be a long way away and I had difficulty trying to imagine there being enough forage left for six to eight weeks. Maybe they will push beyond the park boundaries, or swim the croc and hippo infested river into Namibia, where there is community owned land so there will be a threat from hunting. To see animals, such as these huge elephants, in large numbers is great and the thought of them being shot is not necessarily very appealing (as roo shooting isn’t to many people I guess!) but the reality is that something has definitely got to be done and there are many clients quite willing to pay $30,000 US for the chance of a ‘trophy’ of one elephant. Another possible 30 – 50 million dollars into these local communities, some to fix roads!, not to mention hospitals, schools and meat supplied to those that are hungry etc in a perfectly sustainable way must seem an appealing idea.

The next couple of days will see us head by bus back towards Vic Falls and maybe some white water rafting and bungee jumping if I’m game enough after surviving lions, elephants and over indulgence. Then I’ll really have to start thinking about this farming thing I’m supposed to be interested in! Actually, all this seemingly peripheral stuff we are being exposed to has changed my perception a little regarding farming and given me a few ideas, or direction, for my report so it’s ‘all’ good.

Better go as I’m hoping for a long, sound and ‘lion roar free’ night’s sleep tonight.
I’m not sure when this will be ‘posted’ onto the blogsite as its now late Friday night and we have been without electricity at Dimbangombe since we got here at lunchtime yesterday- till just now. And there is no internet anyhow!

Apparently it is a common occurrence for the farm to go without electricity for this long and is worse for most places in Zimbabwe, including the cities. There is a major back-up generator but it is broken down and waiting on spare parts from China, which is another ordeal for the locals to have to live with.

We were the only two on the small bus from Kasane in Botswana back to Victoria Falls and on another ‘hot tip’ from a tour operator we booked into The Rest Camp which at least was handy walking distance from the centre of town. I say ‘at least’ because the “rest” part of their name was some sort of poetic license on their behalf with Pec and I being attacked all night long by mozzies in a jail cell type room that could also have roasted a chook while we tossed and turned till daylight. No towels at all and the poorest excuse for a pillow I’d ever seen rounded off the deal.

However, we did have a decent evening earlier with a cruise on another little river boat along the mighty Zambezi River just upstream of the huge falls the town is named after. These cruises apparently are often referred to locally as “Booze Cruises” due to the usual practice of customers being plied with drinks as part of the purchase price till you stagger off at the end. Ours was a pretty quiet affair and in fact the name might hark back to the days before political instability when the falls were more patronized than they currently are. Pec and I shared a couple of beers with an Irish couple (another farmer) who were having an African honeymoon and would have probably stayed on the boat if we had known how horrible the night ahead would become!
To make matters worse we had actually booked and paid for two nights at the “Restless Cramp”, and of course there would be a no-refund policy. We had booked for two nights as we had also booked and paid for a full day ‘white water rafting’ and thought it may be better to stay in town for the second night instead of getting a lift straight back out to Dimbangombe.

We decided against doing a ‘bungee jump’ as it was a little too expensive for our closely monitored budget. Do you know those things can pop your eyeballs? Anyway, at our age the white water rafting was a plenty big enough thrill and we had reservations about doing it (too late!) when faced with our first rapid, and even probably before that, when walking down the steep hill to even get there. The water was fantastic fun and it is hard to describe just how much water is hurtling along between those towering cliffs. We went through 20 individual rapids and didn’t get fully capsized through any, which is unusual, although Peca and a few of the other guys got thrown out a couple of times. We had two guides and three Polish lads in the rubber dingy with us for the day and it was a lot of fun, with a stopover for lunch about halfway and a couple of swims, including one through an easy rapid.

I’d highly recommend it except for one thing, the walk out at the end. It’s a bloody killer and is around 750 feet almost straight up some locally made steps that were pieces of branch pegged across the path, sort of mimicking steps. Having spent the last three months traveling, sitting on my backside and being the recipient of ridiculously good hosting, I started to think that maybe the steps were more of a hindrance than a help. God, was I glad to get to the top and could not even stomach the thought of the cold beer they were offering us when we finally got there. What really got me questioning my dubious fitness level was seeing these young African guys running down the stairs to GO AND CARRY THE BOAT BACK UP. People that fit just make me sick these days!

Weren’t we sore that night? And the thought of another night of battling Malaria carriers was not appealing either, so luckily we found some smoke coils in one of the shops for the bargain basement price of Zim$200 or about $1 Aussie. A couple of quiet whiskeys and a cooler night
also helped the cause a little. We also had a look at the markets and the enormous amount of quality stuff these guys produce and have to sell for a fraction of its worth. And boy, do they work it! Every owner’s little stall was individually numbered and we met many great marketing names, Mr. Honesty, Mr. Discount, Mr. Truth etc etc. Pity we have to travel so light, as it would have been great to be able to help them out and a lot of it is really good quality gear.

Another bit of entertainment happened while we were down that street, with a brawl starting out just up the road. As you can imagine, people came running from everywhere and it all got briefly exciting. There was not any ‘alcohol’ involved (like I’ve seen elsewhere!) even though the shirts were ripped off and it all evaporated just as quickly as it started. Even though you do get continually pestered by rip off merchants trying to sell rubbish, we at no stage felt threatened and even when you tell them quite sternly to ‘go away’ or ‘no business’, they eventually do so with no malice at all.

Speaking of being sick earlier: - . My traveling mate Peca woke very early this morning with the dreaded “vomiting and diarrhea” and has not been too good all day. At least he has so far held his dinner down and hopefully it’s just one of those short lived bugs. Strange that I have not got it yet (and hopefully won’t at all) as we have eaten the same food and had all the same drinks all trip. He did not sound very good, I must say, and it’s a bug I’d gladly pass up if possible.

After lunch he became well enough to jump in the back of a truck and Allan Savory took the two of us for a tour of Dimbangombe, which was the combination of a farm tour and a safari. We saw stacks of grass which Allan commented that he does not know how the manager will get the cattle around to knock it all over before the wet season starts. Not enough cattle on here and given the country’s predicament, they are not easily sourced. Interestingly, he views the cattle as simply a tool to promote greater grass growth for the wildlife, of which there is plenty.

On our drive we went past kebu, sable (if they had stopped we could have had a shot), zebra, giraffe, impala and plenty of guinea fowl, which we would also have had a crack at if we had a
smaller gauge rifle. There are also elephant, lion and buffalo and pretty well the whole gamut of species that this amazing country produces. Then back to his place for a couple of “sundowners” overlooking the river with him and Jody who, incidentally, split their year almost evenly between here and their house in New Mexico. That is when they are not traveling to other parts of the world for business and pleasure.

Before arriving here (the same day we did) they had been on a horseback safari with a group, including some Australians, up in Kenya for ten days, which would have been fantastic. They saw enormous herds, well over a million head, of wildebeest followed by zebra etc migrating after the dry season and that is something that will now definitely be on my ‘to do list’ for a family holiday.

We didn’t hang around their camp for too long as walking back here through the bush after dark can be quite different from home and it’s about a mile back over to our camp for dinner. We didn’t want to “become the dinner” for something else you see, or disturb wandering elephants which was probably more of a real threat to our well being than ending up an entrée for a lion would actually be.

Another early start this morning with Shane (the Manager) picking us up to go for another drive around the ranch explaining the nuances of grazing management for the cattle herd and how they incorporate all of the wildlife into that strategy. I also managed to have some communication with Cathy via text messaging from the one small area near the workshop that the phone will work in. And then, very surprisingly, I was standing up on the back of the truck while we were driving around the ranch and my phone went off again with a message from home. Talk about a surreal setting!

I was meant to be spotting kudu, as Shane had mentioned we might get a chance to knock one over with the rifle we had with us, a “Holland and Holland .375” that is capable of dropping an elephant. Well we didn’t get to kill anything although we did both have a shot at a tree and the power of that thing was quite impressive and it seemed to be really well balanced.

Now we are about to join Allan and Jody down at Shane and Rose’s house to watch the rugby that is on here at midday our time. The winner out of Australia and the All Blacks will decide who this year’s Tri-Nations Champions is, so as you can imagine, all these guys will be barracking for the miserable All Blacks to beat the Aussies just because South Africa finished off by flogging us. Maybe it’s a good thing that we are leaving here tomorrow as this lot are going to be sad by two o’clock! We’ll see.

Well, we saw all right. Not quite as I planned but a very good game none the less. I thought the Aussies went very well except for letting in three extremely soft tries, letting themselves down to lose only 24-28 again to those girly bloody All Blacks.

Peca is still crook but has some tablets now (including a few more that I belatedly remembered that I have!) and he’ll be hoping, no doubt, that it improves markedly before tomorrow’s flight to South Africa. It will be hard to leave here as we have been so well looked after by all the staff as well as Allan and Jody who have invited us for dinner tonight.

It really is a pity that this country has had to suffer so much internal conflict and foreign sanctions for so long and now, with a new cabinet being announced on Monday, there is finally a hope that there will be some sort of better future to look forward to. Probably a little while
yet before Mugabe will relinquish all control. He still dominates with the use of the military of course, but at least it’s a start. The latest inflation figures here are an unbelievably staggering 320 million percent!! I’m pretty sure that even the “treasurer of the century”, Peter Costello, would not be able to rein that one in. How do they even measure that?!

I do know that most of the economy is running on U.S dollars or the SA Rand and that there are massive lines outside the banks and people complaining bitterly because their money is severely devalued from when they first join a queue till when they actually get their it, and then there isn’t much to buy anyway!

Hardship and adversity can drive ingenuity, enterprise and entrepreneurship in a lot of situations, but this is ridiculous. Allan believes that a lot of the hardship, sanctions and political turmoil actually produced farmers in Zimbabwe that he rated the best in the world a few years ago. Trouble is, things have got so bad that a lot of those farmers either quit, left or were kicked off their farms and ironically (or tragically) they are the very ones needed here now to rescue this desperately struggling economy.

Just had another interesting morning, having a bit of shooting practice with Shane. Or at least that’s all it turned out to be as we only bagged a couple of pheasant type birds that the young guy on the back was pleased to take home. Those Guinea fowl are hard to hit from the back of a moving truck.

Yep, it’s all about the farming! Off to Jo Burg now and no doubt a new adventure.

**Wednesday, September 17th 2008, 10:58 PM**

**Learning lots in South Africa**

Well, we made it into Jo Burg on our flight, got ourselves a Hyundai Tucson hire car from the good folks at Avis and more importantly I guess, we got ourselves onto the highway and right back out of there again. Not before Peca had a disagreement with our GPS system (don’t do it mate, I’ve been there!) and put us onto the right freeway going in the wrong direction!

We had also met up with Terry and Pam McCosker (he’s the head of Resource Consulting Services, Australia) at the airport who have Tony and Mandy Mott from Queensland traveling with them for their few weeks in Africa running schools. Terry called his RCS contact in Harristown for us and he booked us into the motel right here where we have joined them for half the week doing a grazing and pasture cropping school. A good roll up of just over forty farmers are involved in the conference and we couldn’t have asked for a better chance to pick up some more contacts for our South African adventure.

Much like a Principle Focus, RCS or HM group get together back in Australia would be, there are plenty of positive farmers involved with a wide variety of enterprises. It’s astounding how similar many farm issues are throughout the world and how the same problems come up again and again. Although Pec and I both agreed that being on the land back in Australia is one hell of a lot easier than on the African continent. Political instability and land tenure security are very real threats to their future and yet these folks seem to take it in their stride by taking steps to plan for the possibility of loss, while at the same time being determined to stay on here in their homeland.
Most of this group is involved in Executive Link Boards with RCS, and a lot seem to have been through the Holistic Management Training as well and they cover rainfall regions from over 30 inches down to as low as only 7. The first day started with a couple of talks from invited guests, one from guy talking about a benevolent company who provide funding for improving sustainability issues in small communities as well as farmers. Projects such as bio gas systems to run on manure lagoons and smaller septic tanks that will produce enough methane gas to run small burners for several hours etc. The second was a local farmer who gave quite a detailed talk on his own family business and some of the trials and tribulations they have been through to succeed in this difficult and uncertain environment. It surprised me that there are only about 44,000 farmers in South Africa and one of their challenges is that there are just four major retail chains controlling 80% of the produce sales. Hmm, don’t we only have two now in our monopolized little country!!

Then Terry started his talk (or several talks) on Carbon Trading and Pasture Cropping which held the groups interest and sparked plenty of conversation for the next two days. For soils not to be involved in the carbon trading scheme yet seems incredibly short sighted to me as the benefits for agriculture are immense if a regenerative farming system is embraced. A win for soil health (therefore plants, animals and human health) a win for the environment, and obviously a huge win for our planet, with as little as a 1% increase in carbon for the world’s rangelands (using perennial grasses) being enough to negate the overload of Co2 and the threat of global warming. No other policy, reduction, alternative energy or new technology can do that! And for trees to do the same we would have to plant the world’s land area to trees four times over!

Terry’s view is that we are heading into a carbon based world (economically) and that the trade in carbon will be the ‘next big thing’, much like the IT explosion of the 90’s, and that within 5 – 10 years it will be the planet’s largest commodity market and be in excess of 500 billion tonnes. It might just be a great time to learn how we, as farmers, can maximise the opportunity and be involved in the benefits.

And this pasture cropping is about the only way I’d be interested in growing a crop at Brewarrina, or anywhere for that matter. It was pioneered by a guy in Australia called Col Seis at Gulgong about ten years ago and, in fact, he was on my table at a GFP course in Dubbo and I was intrigued about it then. With the increase of input costs over the last 12 months there has been a huge uptake of the system with over 2,500 farmers utilizing the method so far this year at home in Australia and also in other areas of the world. Without writing a book here, it involves sowing an annual winter crop such as wheat or oats straight into a summer perennial grass base (or vice versa) without damaging the native pastures. In fact the research is confirming that the winter crop enhances both the crops ability to survive and yield well and invigorates the pasture. This is a low cost farming method that utilises many synergistic benefits (some not known or understood as yet) to increase overall soil health while utilizing the land for a full year with a grazing program and a cash crop. Its another huge paradigm shift for most and it flys in the face of the current ‘keep it bare and fallow’ mentality that supposedly preserves moisture but keeps the chemical companies profitable.

Could be a real winner for Peca and he is keen to use the system on his high summer rainfall country in conjunction with the cattle. May have just paid for his trip!
Interestingly, they are finding that the worst ‘weed’ in the system is actually Lucerne, another paradigm shift. Some of these guys are from a drier environment than me and may not crop at all, although I think that if we view it as an opportunity when we do have the moisture then it could work well. Actually, one of the blokes said he measured his rainfall in “Surprise Units”. Ha ha!

The next day these South Africans got a bit of payback for flogging us in the Rugby because they had to listen to three Aussies talk! Terry had asked Pec and I to give a presentation on our respective operations so we had an early night after dinner to prepare. It went quite well though, as we both had plenty of photos for the big screen and we have been using systems that these guys are learning about and utilizing as well. And of course, many of our biological and animal issues are quite universal.

Another great guest speaker they had lined up (besides us) was a guy described as the ‘Father of Biological Farming in South Africa’ called John Fair. He was excellent and really pushed the boundaries on the need for and overuse of fertilizer in farming and has proved and documented that it is not only unnecessary but extremely detrimental to soil health.

Couple of my Nuffield touring mates should have this bloke and a few of his contacts high on their list of people to see and learn from, if they want to get a look at the real future. Economic necessity may just be the catalyst to bring about change, as it usually is, even though the results of this speaker’s farmers should be enough to inspire all involved in agriculture anyway.

Hitting the road again from Harrismith and heading to Ladysmith to catch up with another family who are getting amazing results. We have not seen much of the country side as yet because it was dark when we drove down the 300kms from Jo Burg last Sunday night. The very rugged and spectacular mountains around this town remind me of New Mexico or Arizona.

After all the great contacts we have just heard about and been invited to, I’m expecting an extremely busy next three weeks ahead of us. It was good to finally get to speak with Cathy and Harriet on the phone after not being able to do so properly for almost two weeks. Glad to hear everything is running smoothly back at the ranch, with lots of guests to keep things operating while I’m gallivanting around overseas on this big junket. Thanks Darl!! Enjoy having our little girl home for two weeks and make sure you help your mum out lots my little princess.

Cheers for now!

Saturday, September 20th 2008, 12:49 AM

More cattle and the Indian Ocean at St. Lucia

Pulled up in town to check e-mails and Pec grabbed some much needed ‘belly ache’ supplies before heading for the Mitchell–Innes’ farm about thirty kms out the road towards Newcastle. I’d rang the son, William, who was the only one home at the time to get exact directions and we still missed the turn due to an accent problem on our part. GPS won’t help without correct spelling we realised, especially if the first letter is wrong!
William made us feel right at home in the magnificent two storey house that reflects their success at farming and also the family’s long history in this location. They have been farming here since about 1860 with William being the latest in line and the fifth generation and at twenty eight he seems to have good handle on the skills necessary to continue the tradition. Unfortunately his father was away for some time writing lectures in Capetown, as he does quite a bit of consultancy in his role as a HM Educator, also spending around two months of the year in the U.S. None the less, William filled his shoes quite capably by cooking us dinner and giving us a guided tour of their significant cattle based operation here in Natal the next morning.

The property is about 18,000 acres (district average is around 2,000 acres) of mostly open 30 inch rainfall “vlei”, or grassland which is quite hilly by Brewarrina standards and then also runs up into steeper, and very rocky country. Currently they have on around 3,000 cattle and considering they are just coming out of winter and there hasn’t been any rain in six months, it is surprisingly well covered and has plenty of green pick coming through with the warmer weather. He says that his father’s opinion is that the place could run up to 15,000 head of cattle, which represents an astounding improvement in carrying capacity and a testament to the advantage of focusing on biological improvement. Most of the neighbours and indeed most of Africa, use fire as their only tool to knock down old vegetation and moribund grasses so that the new, fresh growth is promoted. This method does provide higher quality, or at least protein levels that boost animal production and performance in the short term. The trouble is that burning creates many short and long term detrimental effects to the landscape. Firstly, it is a gross waste of energy, with all the plant matter going up in smoke instead of being utilised by animals. With all the talk of “global warming” and the CO2 load in the atmosphere being such a problem, I am continually amazed that these same academics can promote the use of fire ‘to control fire’ as though that were the only tool available. Reminds me of a quote: - “If the only tool in your toolbox is a hammer, then all your problems will look like nails”.

When country is continually burned (whether cool or hot) it always leads to less plant diversity, bare ground and more water run off, loss of litter and mulch and the death of all the beneficial soil building microbes. I’ve read (and I will stand corrected) that pasture and crop burning, especially in Africa, contribute something like 60–70% of green house gas emissions world wide. Almost all of it unnecessary!

This farm knows the benefits of microbial activity in soils and has been importing a special brew from China to mix with chicken litter to create a high protein supplement for the cattle. It is composted in a bunker till it turns into a sweet smelling concoction that has the capability of making your cows too fat to conceive if you aren’t careful. They are also utilizing a worm farm that they intend to expand on if trial results prove that the cost is beneficial, as well as being successful in the paddock or ‘veld’ as they say here.

Being just off the road, security is a bit of an issue here as it is elsewhere I guess, and there is a substantial fence around the homestead area with electricity and razor wire both involved.
Also, a couple of great big St Bernard’s roaming around the yard one of which threatened to slobber me to death.

Picked up a couple of good ideas from William regarding using investors as a source of capital to breed into a line of livestock. I spent about two hours in bed that night writing up a plan and developing a policy for it and will give it a lot more thought over the next few weeks. One of the real benefits of this opportunity to travel has been the broad range of ideas I’ve been exposed to, and I think it will take me quite a while to fully appreciate and realise the potential of it.

On the road again now and will hopefully find somewhere to send this and check e-mails soon. Yep, we made it all the way to the Indian Ocean at St Lucia which is about two hours north of Durban on the east coast of Africa. Long drive through some unbelievably populated areas that are flogged bare of almost all vegetation, then through a game reserve, seemingly without much game but plenty of grass. Incredible numbers of people walking along the roadway, mostly school kids heading home to do chores, if they get home in time! Seemed to be a long walk for most.

St Lucia is different though and could be somewhere on the coast in Australia as it’s much greener and very touristy. Will be heading south tomorrow to catch up with some more contacts, go to a KIT (Keep in Touch) day, and look at plenty more African farms in a much drier environment.

Cheers again!

Thursday, September 25th 2008, 6:25 PM
Bedford and the Eastern Cape

We’ve done plenty of miles over the last two days, going from Harrismith across to the eastern coast of South Africa at St Lucia in Kwa – Zulu Natal and then right down into the Eastern Cape Province.

There was a big storm the night we were in St Lucia and it continued to rain throughout the next day as we drove down the coast and we could have been in Australia around Coffs or Grafton with the similar tropical scenery. Another surprising sight has been the amount of country that has been put under forestry that we’ve seen on our travels so far and much of it Australian trees such as Blue and Red Gum. Its one thing to see it in some country that has abundance in food supplies with ample arable land (if there is really such a thing) but it is a little off putting in a nation with so many barely scratching out an existence with so little good land available. I don’t even think the landscape in China was as populated as it’s been on our drive today with villages almost linking up all the way and there are always people walking along the road.

A lot looked to be well dressed today, probably going to or from church as it is Sunday. There have been very few regular shops to be seen outside of the bigger urban centres except for some tiny buildings that I’m still not sure if they sell stuff now or whether they are relics of a more opulent recent history. The Coca Cola and Omo (can wash 5,000 socks!) ads stand out quite a bit in this environment; with several schools we have seen proudly displaying their
Coke sponsorship. What is even more surprising is the number of mobile phones around and the unlikely people you can see pull one out for an impromptu chat right out in the middle of nowhere. A guy where we stayed last night said that “Yeah, a lot of people in this country would rather buy a phone than a meal” and that does seem to be the case.

With the huge numbers of people and much of the housing obviously without electricity or water etc, there is still pride in the way their belongings are looked after. Rubbish is a problem though in a lot of places and sometimes there will be miles of barbed wire fence covered in plastic bags and other throwaway items that really should have no place in this sort of society. Mind you, we have seen some quite industrious uses of plastic bags with all the wet weather along the way!

Another big problem, going right to the core of my studies, is the absolutely horrendous soil erosion happening throughout much of our travels through rugged terrain today. It’s a typical example of “the tragedy of the commons” with what I guess is community shared land being continuously grazed by thinly scattered livestock creating bare slopes and a ‘gully scarred’ terrain that is falling apart under the strain. The real tragedy here though is that they already have a ‘herding’ system and plenty of labour, so if the animals were put into much bigger mobs then the country would get the impact and rest that it needs for land improvement.

We were intending to make it down north of Bedford to a contact we had, but I had trouble reaching them on the phone and then it was almost dark driving into Queenstown so decided to stay there rather than risk travelling after nightfall. Got ourselves a B and B quite easily and it was a nice place although the security around the perimeter of it and many like it, is a little disturbing. Should be glad it’s all there for our safety I suppose, and although it is needed we have yet to feel threatened at all anywhere we have been. Even though there have been quite a few occasions where we have been the only people of European extraction within eyesight, so to speak.

Next morning we decided to be a little adventurous as we had some time up our sleeves and we took a back road all the way south to Bedford. This took us through plenty more village lands that were getting more isolated from each other due to the landscape drying out and the terrain became more and more rugged. We twisted and turned along a narrow gravel track (still trusting our GPS!!) right down through a valley with very steep rocky hills reaching up either side of us. Occasionally going past extremely optimistic farm cottages and then surprisingly green little irrigated river flats with large mobs of nervous Baboons scampering away up the hillsides as we drove by them. Had a gun or two pointed at them I’d say! Also saw plenty of
‘Rock Rabbits’, which are a favourite meal for the incredible ‘Black Mamba’ snake that we had heard could attack vehicles, so we were keeping an eye out for them.

Our GPS finally let us down the last turn by telling us to ‘now turn left’ when all there was on the left was a dirty great big mountain and no track at all!! So we back tracked about a mile and asked a friendly gent, who looked liked he could have lived around those parts for the best part of the last century, if he could point us in the right direction and much to our GPS’s disgust and despite its protests the old guy turned out to be much more accurate.

As we drove up the “Chestnut Grove” driveway (this is where we were meant to get to yesterday) we thought that this would have to be one of the more secluded farms in the country and wondered where they could actually fit livestock in among all the scrub, rocks and hills. Never the less we eventually turned into the beautiful garden of Nick and Michelle Basson’s place and only had time for some quick lunch and a chat before we hit the road again following them to the other side of Bedford. Our destination being an RCS run two day workshop at the farm of Angus and Nadine Dixie who kicked off proceedings with a presentation of their business and a farm tour in the afternoon.

I don’t think I could have ended up at a better location or in a better group situation to get an insight into and feel for, the South African farming perspective and hear their honest opinions and concerns about their uncertain future. This week’s resignation of the SA president and half the cabinet just added to the drama. Who ever do eventually become the supposed leaders of this country would do well to encourage farmers, such as these people, to remain on the land and keep farming. They display a great passion and determination for what they do and it would be a terrible tragedy for the nation to lose them. Unfortunately the lesson should have been learned by looking just north at the situation in Zimbabwe and the debacle that it has become, to realise the importance of sustaining a viable and prosperous agricultural base. There is a very grave fear here that the lesson may well have not been learned and that there is an intention to replace many ‘white farmers’ in the next few years. However, although many present showed feelings of resentment, fear, despair and distrust, others were actively dealing with the prospect of losing their home and making plans for their business to become more resilient and less reliant on the farm alone. Or planning on the possibility of selling to an investor and leasing back to protect capital, and many such scenarios were thrown up during discussion at the end of the two days. I’ve a feeling that those who become prepared will be those that capitalize on the opportunities that will no doubt be thrown up in the next few years, whatever happens.

Angus Dixie gave a great talk to start with, and then we had a farm tour to look at the achievements and challenges they have with grazing and livestock management in their 18 to 22 inch rainfall environment. Many of these issues are very similar world wide and with Terry McCosker present it was good to hear his view on what he thought was happening and what needed to happen to continue the succession process forward. An extremely nice farm of about 2,000 Hectares with terrific ground cover and it is easy to see why Angus would be
keen to stay. A bit of an issue with ‘Thorn Tree’ encroachment, a typical woody weed, although with horrendously long and sharp thorns all over it.

The next morning and part of the afternoon we had a Low Stress Stock Handling workshop with Tony Mott who recently sold a large cattle operation up at Richmond in north Queensland. At one stage Tony, Mandy and their family ran 6,000-8,000 cattle in an intensive grazing business with single mobs of 1,500 to 3,000 in cells. That takes a hell of a lot of good stock handling ability to get results and his experience and skill were very evident throughout the day here. Although it was hard for him to condense what is normally a two day school into just over half a day I think the 45 people present all got quite a bit out of it.

We had two great nights there with the hospitality of Angus and Nadine, then had another tour (just Pec and I with Angus) the last morning and then hit the road again to the north of Bedford back to Michelle and Nick Basson’s place to have a night with them. After driving in here the other day and wondering what the hell anyone would live here for, we were about to be in for a big surprise indeed. Nick and Michelle are both dynamos with more enterprises happening here than you could poke a stick at. First up, Nick gave us lunch and insisted on us having a rest and while setting up computers for us to check emails etc before we were given a whirlwind tour of what turns out to be a really spectacular place, with magical mountain views, plenty of grassland and a hive of activity.

They run cattle and sheep here, have an off farm mining investment, an on farm timber mill and three Hectares of Blueberries. Michelle has a flourishing interior decorating business and they are in the process of having builders completely renovate an extensive and spectacular old house on the farm.

We also went for a drive in the evening up to the top of ‘one’ of their mountains and took in magnificent scenery, before having dinner and spending half the night with lively discussion on all sorts of topics and then this morning they have gone out of their way to help plan out the rest of our trip.

The hospitality over here has been as good as any I’ve experienced anywhere in the world and I’d love to bring my family over here one day, although after seeing the numbers of staff, Cathy may not want to go home again. Once again there is plenty of ‘help’ in the labour department here and for all the South African farming challenges, and there are plenty, they do have a massive advantage over us with the availability of cheap and plentiful labour. I can see how they would get very used to having it.
Sunday, September 28th 2008, 6:11 PM
Cold in the Eastern Cape

After leaving Michelle and Nick’s place (and getting a very dodgy mud map off Nick!) we managed to drive about 50 kms further than we needed to when trying to find our next farm visit. Found ourselves halfway up a rocky mountain on a dirt road getting narrower by the minute, when we eventually stopped at a boundary gate that had a warning sign on it threatening dogs, guns, handcuffs, poison and death by a thousand cuts, so we decided to turn back. While making our retreat we ran into Anton who we were looking for, as his staff had mentioned a strange vehicle going straight past their house earlier. Not to worry, as we had a good look around this incredibly rugged valley of which Anton and his wife Katrina own about 12,000 acres.

Except for the lower creek flats and irrigation areas, the rest of the whole area is almost vertical and covered in broken stone and plenty of thorn trees. Once we could get over the shock of people actually living here and get a chance to have a look around we invariably find they have plenty going on and they all have beautiful houses and loads of staff. This couple has just started with RCS and is going through the Business Link program and I have a feeling that they may be in for some big changes and a wild ride over the next few years.

Currently they have quite a complex enterprise mix with about 100 Hectares of irrigation to compliment the low rainfall and challenging grazing ‘camps’ (paddocks). They have cattle, Dohne merinos (sometimes joined to Dorper), boer meat goats and Angora goats for mohair production and seemed to me to have far too many competing enterprises, causing difficulty with grazing control and way too labour intensive. Although labour may be cheap, it is still a cost and a management intensive situation for Anton to maintain the 15 plus people on his books

I didn’t mention that they run a tourism enterprise as well, with accommodation for up to 16 guests at a time, mainly based around wild game hunting. The facility is very unique and has a markedly different selling point in that the ‘rooms’ are covered Ox wagons set in a half circle around another camp surrounded by towering peaks reminiscent of an old western movie.
Although there is an incredible amount of stone in this country, once we were driven up the hillside I was surprised at the amount of grass about due to the lack of desire for animals to climb up there to get it. The road itself had me holding my breath at times, especially with Anton telling stories of how his mum once left him in the vehicle as a seven year old and the truck rolled over the edge and he only survived because he was thrown out! Also, the Baboons don’t make it any easier as they have an annoying habit of pelting great big rocks onto the road, which was already rough enough!

When we left there we were given much better directions than for the previous move, and decided to kick the GPS back into gear to make sure. It wasn’t that long a haul this time and we were soon into the thriving metropolis of Graaf Rinett, where I couldn’t believe there was also a ‘Harley Davidson’ rally happening. Now those that know crazy Peca will maybe also know that he is a fanatical Harley owner and general car, boat and bike freak and I had thoughts of not being able to get him out of town to visit any farms at all. However, after he had drooled over all the chrome, fat tires and predominantly black fashion on display I managed to get him back into the car and on the road again. I wouldn’t have minded if the only local internet café was open but the hundreds of bikies roaring into town must have been a deterrent to opening that afternoon and it probably cost them plenty.

Our destination was the Kroon farm “Excelsior”, about a supposedly 45 minutes out of town, although Pec got us there along a quite winding and mountainous gravel road in fewer than 35 to surprise our hosts. Now this is a place I was keen to see and had been recommended to do so
by several people on my travels as they are the earliest practitioners of the Savory - Parsons Philosophy in Africa, and probably the world.

One thing I was not expecting to see out here was the extent of this mountainous terrain for such a low rainfall environment and to feel such cold weather. Roland and Sam Kroon have been our hosts for two days and it has been another fantastic visit and these people are yet another example of dynamic positive thinking and I am continuing to be inspired. Also another great house with a Mediterranean feel set in a beautiful garden with about 4 Hectares of irrigated grass on a flat out the front, water running past in little spring fed streams and all surrounded by towering rugged mountains.

I’ll have to mention Peca’s first comment when we arrived: - “So Sam, this is a new house then that you and Roland live in?” “Well no not exactly, it was actually built in 1796” said Sam, with me rolling around in the back ground laughing. He’d been ribbing me about a stupid comment I’d made to Allan Savory for weeks, so it was good to have the score evened up. In his defense though, part of the house was new and it was freshly painted and in really good condition. Yeah, and 200 years isn’t that far out!

We went for a big farm tour the next morning and I was very thankful for the coat Roland lent me as the back of the Ute (or ‘backy’ as they call them here) was on the chilly side of freezing. Roly, Pec and I were on the back with Sam in the front as chauffeur along with four kids. And no wonder it is cold here as their farm has mountains with altitudes higher than Kosciusko, and from the top of one spectacular peak we could look over most of their 5,500 Hectares and straight across to another that was over 8,000 feet. The annual rainfall is a bit higher here on the hill tops but the farm’s average is only around the 14 inch mark, and I find it difficult to associate the low rainfall with the mountains as there is nowhere in Australia anything like this.

They have had a big challenge here in this environment with managing animals for effective change in the landscape and are now capitalizing on all the effort. Another recent breakthrough is the use of a by-pass protein lick allowing them to more effectively utilise unpalatable grasses, and this will see the carrying capacity increased even further and cattle numbers possibly doubled to compliment the Merino breeding enterprise also here.

They are now capturing all rainfall on the farm with increased ground cover to the extent that two more springs that had been dry for decades have started to run again. One hundred years ago the place had 14 fresh water springs but by the middle of last century that number had dropped to 3, and now they are effectively bringing them back to life. Exciting stuff!! However, that is just one enterprise for this dynamic duo and we were soon to be blown away
by the diversity of yet another business seemingly situated in the middle of nowhere and just down the road from “The Valley of Desolation”.

Roland also has a contract fencing business that has five teams on the go, employing up to seventy men and doing a lot of ‘game park’ fencing, which is a rapidly growing industry here. He also has a farm supplies enterprise and is agent for Gallagher products in South Africa, and he is in charge of the RCS investment advisory group down here that is helping farmers spread their risk by using their farm equity ‘off farm’.

Along with all that they have set up, in a shed next door, a massive and complex freeze drying machine that produces a product with the potential to revolutionise nutrition and health benefits all over the world. Somehow (and with plenty of trial and error) these two have designed a method of drying various sprouts etc at a critical stage of development and with such speed that the full nutritional benefits are locked into the resulting material in a form that our bodies can actually access. With all of the billions of dollars involved in the world wide pharmaceutical industry, the big companies have yet to develop a way of replicating in a laboratory a ‘pill’ that can deliver the nutritional benefits that our failing food system is meant to be doing. That’s why the supplements industry is booming and yet most of it is wasted money because our bodies just cannot access the form it’s in. The benefit is nothing more than urine colouring.
The amount of research they have put into this boggles my mind, although it must be very frustrating to have the huge challenge of marketing such a product when the power of ‘the big boys’ under threat is against you. I’ll be watching the progress of this one and hopefully be taking some home to try.

Last night Pec and I went to another house on the farm where Roland’s mum Wendy lives, to have a chat and a drink with her before dinner. Her family goes back in this area to about 1802 when the great grandfather came out from Scotland to settle here at Graaf Rinett and as a “Murray”. I wonder if there is any connection to the Louth Murrays? Wendy has also had an incredible journey and her married life began with a 1,500 mile dirt road drive into Namibia to a farm her husband bought in the middle of a drought, then a six week stint on the road with a thousand hungry cattle. It was there in Namibia, back in the late sixties that they first had contact and worked with Allan Savory and Stan Parsons who were working together then with some revolutionary new concepts they had been developing, so they were the first to utilise this thinking and had great success.

Unfortunately her husband passed away at an early age in the seventies, leaving her with three young children and several farms to manage on her own back here in the Eastern Cape. By utilizing consultancy from her friends Stan and Allan, and no doubt her own substantial ability and keen mind for business, she has been able to continue a legacy of Kroon innovation and success throughout this district that she can be proud of.

Her father’s story is also worthy of a mention as in 1962 he had amassed a land empire of some 500,000 acres and was running in excess of 100,000 sheep, which is comparable to some of the big operators in Australia around that time. However, the story then became tragic with him suffering a stroke and subsequent family turmoil and mismanagement seeing much of it squandered and lost. Amazingly diverse history in this area and in South Africa in general and I’d be hard pressed to think of a more interesting country to visit.

Till next installment.

Wednesday, October 1st 2008, 11:23 PM

Inspiration and Vertical Fencing (Prelude)

No time for writing now, but just a quick note to let you know I’m still kicking along with three farm visits in the last two days. We have had an incredibly inspiring tour so far with no sign of letting up. Today we drove 4,000 feet up into a mountain range that forms part of the farm for Norman and Jenny (Aussie girl) Kroon to see a very successful ‘cell grazing’ operation in the most difficult and inhospitable terrain imaginable. Nothing, and I repeat nothing, will ever be in the “too difficult” basket ever again as far as improving my country goes. Norman, who at over seventy, says he may slow down a bit ‘when he gets older’ is showing no sign of it now and was an incredible inspiration for us.

Anyway…much more on this and others later on as we have another visit lined up this afternoon with a couple we met at Harrismith and Bedford. They own and operate an Arab horse stud and they must be tough horses. Should be great once again, and my next installment could threaten to be a book!
Meeting legends and making more miles

If anyone out there in ‘blogworld’ is interested in travelling abroad in the near future than I would highly recommend Africa to be on your priority list right up near the top. The hospitality we have been treated to has been excellent everywhere we have visited on this trip and especially the farms which, as I have mentioned before, is an indication of the type of people involved in positive, proactive and forward thinking agriculture that I’m proud to be a part of. Even if I am at the beginner’s stage of sponging off other people’s knowledge, all have been more than willing to give and I am extremely grateful.

Graaff Rienet has been a fantastic region to look at progressive farming techniques as far as grazing management in a drier climate goes, as it represents a wide climatic variability and some really difficult conditions.

Our first visit after leaving the entrepreneurial Roly Kroons was to a contact of his a bit farther out past Nieu Bethesda at Howard and Judy Sheard’s place, which was relatively flat compared to Roly’s. Still very rugged on the hill tops though and another beautiful house, with streams running past and water all around the place, a real feature in such a dry terrain. This included an old water wheel that was still connected to a hammer mill and quite usable despite its old age. This was another couple diving into diversity on farm, although probably not with quite the zest or scale of the Kroon’s. Still, they had quite a variety, with a woolen product enterprise, and a “Karoo Moon” conserve enterprise both employing quite a few people. The jams etc were all very good quality and Jenny proved to be quite a good host and chef that night with another neighbour joining us for dinner as well.

The next day we had lined up with another contact that we could, unfortunately, only get to spend a few hours with due to our tight schedule. We could easily have spent several days with Doug and Liz Stern on their very well managed and maintained farm, as Doug is the sort of bloke that just oozes optimism and passion for what he’s doing. I’m guessing he is about 60 years old and has been practicing HM or cell grazing since the late seventies with great results, especially on the lower ‘vlei’ or flatter country which originally was not too dissimilar to my hard capped bladder saltbush landscape. If you can imagine this country without the surrounding mountains of course!!

The amount of grass coming back into this landscape (after being gone for generations) is quite amazing and he has lifted the carrying capacity from a government accepted 15 to 20 Hectares
per cow, to an average of less than 10 Hectares per LSU and in some areas even less again. That’s at least a doubling of the stocking rate simply as a result of transforming the capacity of his soils to hold and utilise the meager rainfall received here through improved grazing management and control of animals. And of course, the ability of being able to have more cattle, sheep and goats or whatever, is the result of improved capacity that flies in the face of conventional thinking that implies that “too many numbers of livestock” is the problem with rangelands. All these guys are adamant that their biggest challenge is getting the higher numbers and density required to continually improve the ‘veld’, because this brittle, dry and hard capped environment desperately needs the beneficial herd impact to stimulate water retention and plant growth.

I’ve de-stocked our place at home completely four times in the last eight years as a drought management and land protection strategy and now I’m coming to the realization that maybe that was wrong (or at least not quite right) as the animals, correctly managed, have such a crucial role to play in improving that hard capped, clay pan infested country.

Doug and Liz have cattle as well as Dohne Merinos, which has been quite a common mix and I must say that I’m surprised at the numbers of Merinos still on places we have visited. That should please many of my colleagues at home where there is a strong history and attachment to the breed. We’ve seen a few other breeds on our travels as well such as Dorpers, but not as many as I had anticipated. Labour costs are quite a bit lower here which helps, with shearing costs around 5% of what they are at home, with wool and sheep values being a little higher here to help on the income side.
One other thing I’ve picked up over here is the idea of having a management group of like minded people (not necessarily farmers) get together several times a year to help with each others business. This is a concept that RCS have adopted in their Executive Link (EL) process, in which Pec and I were involved on the same ‘board’ for four and a half years, and it had great effect and appeal for me at that stage of our business. However, these people have a voluntary agreement that has seen their continued commitment to each other span several meetings a year over the last two and a half decades. The trust level created by that is phenomenal, allowing them to strategically and critically examine any sort of issue, idea or drama that their lives and business could throw up. The energy and dynamics of a positive outlook has developed an optimistic environment into which the next generation is now becoming involved as well and to bring fresh ideas and a youthful perspective on board. Its an exciting possibility, to have sons and daughters wanting to be involved, instead of parents pushing the willing youth away because farming is “too hard and not rewarding”. I get the feeling that nothing is too hard for these folks.

That brings me back to Norman Kroon whom we visited next and stayed the night. After spending the first afternoon driving around his lower block, which is relatively flat and checking out the sheep, goats and magnificent Nguni bulls and then having a wonderful evening with him and Jenny, the next morning we were in for a real surprise.

Now, we have been over some rough roads this week and seen more rocks than would collectively fill the head space of the worlds wonderful politicians all put together, but the road up to the top of Normans second (of three) farms was a sight to behold and has even had to have loosened huge boulders blown off the road by dynamite from where they had fallen and blocked the path. Seeing the grazing country on top of the plateau was surely a surprise, but the attitude and tenacity that must have been needed to get a road up there at all in the first place was mind blowing. The Landcruiser was in low range at first and still struggling at times to climb the steep gradient, with the remains of a wrecked old dozer lying dormant beside one spot on the track about 100 metres lower than from whence it fell, a testament to the drivers foolish carelessness.

The top of the mountain is only about seven kilometers from the house as the crow flies and yet is 4,000 feet higher and averages about 27 inches of rain a year, as opposed to only about ten at the first farm. We stopped half way up to start the diesel pump that supplies water up there and to our utter amazement Norman pointed to a sheer cliff of around a hundred metres height off
in the distance where the pipe actually goes up. This water system and the many miles of fencing (goat proof 7 wire!) all have to traverse rocks, thick scrub and incredibly steep inclinations and will surely be a stark reminder for me if I ever choose to complain about any work I need to get done at home.

Norman has split all his country into camps (paddocks) of around ten to forty hectares for maximum control and has inspired me to be much more intensive in my approach at home. The following may or may not be relevant with today’s land prices, which by the way are much higher here than the drier country at home, but I’ll tell it anyway.

When Norman bought the second farm in the ‘70s the previous owners were reputedly the best pasture managers of the district and were held in high local regard for their ability and experience as long time farm owners. Within three or four months of taking over and putting in many more ‘camps’ Norman was carrying 50% more livestock than the long term average and insists that he paid for the whole farm purely out of increased production in the following three years. Like many others I’ve met, he also insists the best investment you can make for improving the productivity of your land is to buy wire. By the way, their other farm is in 7 inch rainfall country and all the same principles apply.

We left there reluctantly, leaving behind the warm hospitality of our hosts, and headed back through town and out to Bob (Francois actually) and Laura Segers place where they specialize in breeding Arab endurance racing horses and Nguni cattle.

Horses are their passion, and it is a difficult enterprise to run in this country with the continual threat of ‘Horse Sickness’ hanging over them. This disease is the catalyst behind the legend of ‘Darkest Africa’ and the reason why colonising this country was such a difficult task for the British. Its also one hell of a lot worse than the recent threat of Horse Flu at home (which they simply vaccinate for here) as this one does kill and can be incredibly quick about it. Bob and Laura have lost 15 this year and considering one of their best sold for almost 200,000 Rand (about 28,000 Aussie) then it represents a huge economic, as well as emotional strain. Ironically, it has been exacerbated this season because its host, the midge fly, has flourished following a high rainfall summer last year.

This couple has a very philosophical outlook on their lives and business and they remain positive and optimistic in the face of quite a challenge. Actually, another real issue they have is the continual threat of horse thieves due to their close proximity to town and their latest ploy to deal with that is to employ a Hottentot Bushman to live out with the animals to guard them. Yes, it’s a different world over here! They already use, as does almost everyone we’ve visited,
Anatolian guard dogs to stay with livestock and I would have thought these huge Jackal killing beasts would have been enough of a deterrent to the ‘two legged pests’ as well, but apparently not.

Had an early start the next morning after being up quite late in lively discussion the night before and once again we hit the road with plenty of miles to cover. And quite a few more eventuated, as the GPS lady was inexplicably turned off (Peca dislikes her voice!) and I missed a turn which saw us take quite a few back roads and almost run out of fuel. Of course this happened while going through some of the most isolated country we have seen so far on our journey! Luckily, with only fumes keeping us going we came across a small depot that had just got in a load of fuel the day before and was owned and operated by a local farming couple.

Interestingly, this pair were far from the positive mindset we had encountered in Africa so far on the trip and they bemoaned everything from the lack of rain to bad lambing percentages, political turmoil, feral predation, high winds and low pay, and were insisting that their children leave farming, their families and their country and head off to Australia. We were lucky to bolt out of there before their negativity drove us to depression and sullied our view of all we had learned and enjoyed so far.

After getting out of there alive we kicked on right down to East London to our rendezvous with David Oldfield (not the Pauline Hanson one!) who gave a talk in Harrismith on the development of biogas digesters, which had both Pec and I interested. This is a system of capturing the methane gas from either human or animal waste and turning it into energy for hot water or cooking etc. You can also incorporate the run off effluent into algae ponds for protein production and the cleaned, oxygenated and filtered water can then be used for fish farming or growing vegetables etc in a completely closed and self sustaining system. Great stuff and David was very helpful, explaining it to us in more detail and driving us all over the countryside to look at projects that his company is involved in.

Unfortunately it got late in the day for us before we realised and our planned overnight visit with Nigel and Gayle Flannigan had to be cancelled so that we could start to make our way south towards Capetown. They have been using camels on their farm to control woody regrowth and I would have been interested in checking that out.

I really need about six months over here to see everything that I’d like to. My wife and daughter would have to make the journey as well though; otherwise I may not be welcome home! Actually this trip has been fantastic, but after almost four months, about a dozen countries, countless road miles and 34 flights it is starting to wear me down. I’m looking forward to getting home and getting stuck into incorporating some of what I’ve learned into our business and getting back in touch with my wonderful family.

Cheers again!

Sunday, October 5th 2008, 2:21 AM
Fear is only temporary

Hi Again. On the road now so will probably get more chances at getting onto the internet over the next few days, as we are heading down along the ‘Garden Route’ to Capetown. Unless we
are surprised by something, then I don’t think there will be any more farm tours or agriculture related visits till about Tuesday so we are taking some time out from studying to do some touristy stuff.

And we couldn’t get further removed from farming than what we did yesterday late in the afternoon after driving all the way down from “Grahamstown”. (Yep, they named one after me, so we just had to stay there!). Now, back in Zimbabwe we had declined the chance to have a go at Bungee Jumping, which I had been quite pleased about missing at the time, so you can imagine my distress when my travelling partner spotted a sign for another one and insisted that we needed to do it this time. Well I agreed that he needed to do it all right, preferably without the rope attached! However the closer we got, the more adamant he became and he assured me it was fantastic as he had done it once before off a bridge in New Zealand. It wasn’t till later that evening that I found out he had been 20 at the time and there is a big difference between 20 and 40 I can tell you! We stopped about 50 kms short of there to grab a bite to eat and I was still quite sure in my mind that it was not going to happen and quite happily munched away on a lunch that was unnecessarily filling. Back on the road again the nerves started to take effect and a slightly sick feeling started to creep over me as the realization came that maybe this was something I also needed to do. Not just because the whiskery faced freak beside me was continually questioning my manhood, but also because the words of ‘Jim Rohn’ kept sneaking persistently into my mind. “Life is not about how long you live, it is about a collection of experiences”.

Now I feel that I’ve been very fortunate in my life to have had many varied and great experiences and this years Nuffield Scholarship has given me the chance to collect many more that I will never forget. Though I’m not real sure how Jim Geltch and David Brownhill would categorise this one, except that I know the Association did stress that we were to look and experience things other than farming on our trip to broaden our minds? Maybe not lose our minds though, which is about how I felt as we drove over the ‘jump bridge’ which is actually 450 metres across, and Two Hundred and Sixteen Metres above a massive gorge with a miserable little creek right down at the bottom. Yes that’s right, we had knocked back the chance to jump off one in Vic Falls that is just over 100 metres high and instead were going to leap off the BIGGEST ONE IN THE WORLD. “Ohh Yeah!” I was thinking, “This is just insane!”

This bungee is 216 metres high, the first gut wrenching drop is almost 180 metres and the second bounce is over 110 metres and the third over 60. So the third bounce is higher than the whole bungee Peca did in New Zealand and somehow I wasn’t buying his argument that it was
like we would be getting extra free jumps that you don’t get at other locations! Once we drove in there and watched one I surprisingly felt a little better, even though it was a breathtaking sight and I didn’t think the rope was going to stop stretching. Fear can be a strange thing and over the next 15 minutes it came in waves, my thoughts alternating between pulling out (not too late yet!) and feeling really exhilarated and keen to do it.

However once we signed up and had it locked in, I realised that my mate was on the verge of retreat and was losing confidence (and colour) rapidly and admitted that he would have joined me quickly if I had of quit. Too late now though and we were soon harnessed up and walking out along the ‘see through’ alley that goes right out along underneath the massive bridge. Boy, now the nerves were kicking in as 216 metres is bloody high when you are looking down, especially with Peca behind me alternating between a sort of insane giggle and being seriously on the edge of being ‘sensible’ and questioning our sanity. “Graham, don’t look down as my god its high”. Then the nervous laugh, “What are we doing? I feel sick!” At least when we eventually got out to the platform, everything seemed to happen quickly and luckily I was first up. I used to like that when riding in rodeos as I’m not a big fan of having to wait while confronting my fears.

It wasn’t long before they had my legs strapped up and I was thinking that I am probably the only person to have ever jumped off this bridge with cowboy boots on, and their laughing assurance (got to be a sadist to work there) that it would probably be ok to wear them did not give me much confidence at all. Now I’ve ridden quite a few bulls and bareback broncs (and tried to ride even more) in my younger days and that was always a real thrill, but hopping out through that last barrier and standing on the edge of that huge chasm was something else again.
It amazes me how much adrenalin cuts in when you are right there and you are trying desperately not to look down and part of your mind is screaming, “Just have one look and stop what you’re doing”. Then the guys are loudly counting down from five (why only five?) and you are past the point of no return, and then crazily jumping into oblivion off a perfectly good, safe, secure and comforting bridge.

That first two seconds feels like a lifetime and is indescribably scary as you cannot even feel the support rope. For a bloke from the flat country whose only real association with heights has been to work on a windmill, it was way, way out of my comfort zone. That’s the irony though, as it is the absolute terror that makes the whole thing so fantastic. What was not so great however was the 4th, 5th and 6th bounces and then hanging there upside down worrying that my boots were slipping off, till the guy abseiled down to winch me back up again. At least when he gets there you can get into a seated position as I felt like my eyes would pop out (they don’t though!) during the ride up, which is still bloody horrible as being suspended that high is quite unnerving and I could not wait to clamber back onto the deck.

Pec was still waiting and was a little concerned at my colour when I came up over the edge as it seemed to be much more ‘pale’ than good health and fun would suggest it should be. And of course he was now at that point of no return himself, and seriously beginning to doubt his own sanity, judgment, and manhood. And didn’t I enjoy watching his terror?!

For those that think it was an irresponsible thing to do, and both my wife and daughter fall into that category according to text messages I received, I can assure you that it is quite safe and professionally done. Safer than ‘rodeo riding’ and probably many other sports, activities or even driving down the highway. However it is the fear and the overcoming of it that makes it so good and I would recommend the experience to everyone to try at least once in their lives. And I think ‘once’ will do me too.

A great quote that is featured there, and could be useful throughout all of our lives in many ways goes “Fear is only temporary, regret is forever.” No regrets baby and no surrender. (Bruce Springsteen 1984)

Tuesday, October 7th 2008, 6:09 AM
Meeting Great Whites and climbing up Tables

After surviving leaping off an extremely high bridge our plan had been to get to a quiet little spot for the night called ‘Natures Valley’ right on the ocean. Roly and Sam Kroon had kindly offered us a bed in their holiday house down there and had given us the number of the caretaker to arrange it. However we decided to decline the chance of even more of their hospitality and pushed on a little further down the highway to a very modern and touristy looking place called Plettenburg Bay, realizing we had to cover more kilometers than we first budgeted on. We spent most of the next day on the road, only really pulling up to refuel, check out the occasional farmers’ markets and a couple of opportunities at sight seeing off the coast at whales etc. After driving through quite rugged terrain for most of the trip and in dry environments, the landscape remained hilly enough but we started to see much more cropping country and many more green fields.
Unfortunately we came across an accident at one isolated intersection where it looked as though a ute load of young people had T boned another vehicle that had obviously been overloaded as well. Quite a few people already stopped to help, including one poor young policeman who I doubt would have had any emergency training at all. Two were still trapped in one vehicle and there were several bodies lying about in the table drain being cared for as best as could be and others walking around obviously distressed. They quickly stopped us to ask if we had any medical training to help and I was wishing I had, or at least had someone like KA or Heather there as I suspect it was going to be quite a while before anything like an ambulance would turn up. With the thousands of overloaded ‘backy’s’ and buses etc that we’ve seen in our travels and the crazy driving, this is probably quite a common occurrence. We drove away both feeling quite sick in the stomach and drove decidedly more carefully.

It wasn’t all that much further when we drove into the quaint little town of Gansbay, about two hours east of Capetown and the location of the “White Pointer Shark” capital of the world! And of course our plan was to add a little more adventure to the trip by taking a boat cruise out onto the ‘big blue’ and do some swimming with the most feared creature on the planet.

Now, I don’t even like going out onto water that deep, so the idea of mixing that up with the very reason why I don’t like the ocean so much in the first place seemed quite illogical to me. But we did it anyway and being inside a cage, of course, was why we could, which was actually fantastic as they lure them right up to edge of it, making you pull in your fingers and toes quickly (especially when the furry fool beside you grabs your leg!!). Apparently there are literally hundreds of them in this area and with electronic tagging devices they have been tracked all the way to and from Australia. When one of these 3 or 4 metre killers is only inches away they look awfully big and sinister and they would appear suddenly in a ghostlike way from out of the murky water. Bobbing around in the ocean if a ship sank, waiting to die by shark would be about the most terrifying way to leave this world that I could possibly think of. However, our marine biologist host was adamant that they were a beautiful creature in need of desperate conservation measures as they are a critical ‘axis predator’ species. And fair enough too, I guess, as there is are estimated 100 million a year killed, mainly through illegal or accidental fishing. And as long there is a very strong cage, or preferably much dry land under me, then I’d be happy to support that.

Matter of fact I quickly got quite comfortable with the shark scenario, as I started to develop another fear that overcame it, feeling bloody sea sick! It had been quite cold all day on the water and there had also been a constant wind blowing and producing a very choppy swell. While we were anchored in the one spot most of the morning, the boat had continued to rock slowly up and down. Not too much really I suppose, for everyone else seemed ok, except that
I’m not much of an old sea dog at all and was feeling rather pleased that the sharks started to disappear and we finally headed back to shore. Getting back in was quick enough (just) but then he pulled up within sight of the jetty and we had to bob around there like corks on the huge swell until the captain could pick his wave carry him through the extremely narrow entrance. I’m not a big fan of tractors (what? sacrilege!) and have possibly seen enough on this Nuffield trip to last a lifetime, but the little John Deere that was waiting there to pull us out of the water was a great sight for sore eyes, and a crook belly.

Peca of course was right into me for being weak as he is an old boat loving, fishing loving, jet boat skier and Cadillac driving dude (I kid you not) from way back and spends plenty of time at it. That’s why he has so many big ol’ fat dry cows hanging around out at Hanging Rock! Matter of fact, I think he has gone off now looking for a boat show or Harley shop or something.

After leaving there we headed to Cape Town, arriving here late in the afternoon and booked ourselves a room at the “Hotel Graeme” for a couple of nights. Bit more good Karma there I’d say.

We have been looked after by our fantastic hosts on farms etc for a lot of the trip and I hope I can one day get to repay them all for that. However, when we have stayed in towns etc we generally stay at B and B’s, which dominate the accommodation market in most areas, with a distinct lack of motels around such as you find in Australia. Or even ‘pub’ accommodation. Hotels are usually a little more up market and of course, there are plenty in the cities and this place we are in now is quite ok, especially at 1,180 Rand ($157 Aussie including breakfast) for two nights for the two of us. Most of the smaller ones we have stayed at have seemed quite cheap to me after Cathy and I owning and understanding the game with Bokhara Hutz, but here they can have 4 or 5 workers for next to nothing, while Cathy has to do it all herself at home. As I’ve said before, if Cathy came over here with me I’d doubt my ability to get her home again. Still, it’s given me a better perspective on how we can change that.

This morning we were up and out the door for a look up at the top of the spectacular and world famous “Table Mountain” which towers ominously over the city of Cape Town. You go up by cable car once the endless line up eventually grants you access to one of the two cars operating continuously. This one is not as big or long as the ride Cathy and I had in Albuquerque, New Mexico but is just as breathtaking as it looks to go straight up the rock face in one span and you look out over the ocean. Fortunately we got a fantastically clear day, without wind and not too hot. Pec was keen to go abseiling off the edge as there was a company there running tours etc and we watched one guy go over the top and disappear. His wife was there taking a photo and I said “Hey look, the rope just went all slack!” I don’t think she was too impressed and obviously wasn’t too keen on him doing it. We didn’t end up having a go and really it was never going to happen for me when they said that you go down about 100 metres, but then have to walk all the way back up, which will take over an hour.

No thanks. I’m not fit enough, but hopefully that will change when I get home.

Cheers for now

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Thursday, October 9th 2008, 5:06 PM

Chops, Chips and Peas

Back on the road once again, this time heading north from Capetown on the N1 highway up towards Jo Burg. We got as far as Laingsburg before dark last night after getting out of the city by about four o’clock and were lucky to get a room there at all, such as it was. Could not get in at any of the three B and B’s in town so settled for the less salubrious Gal Ghion Country Club, which although ok, did not quite match up to its name’s inference. However the service was quite courteous and they pointed us down the road to where we could get an evening meal.

And what a meal it was this time, with the both of us choosing to pick chops for a change as it was the first time we saw them on a menu. Dorper lamb chops I’d say as they were meant to be local and the only sheep we had seen for many miles heading into town were Dorpers. Not much other stock at all. Chops, chips and peas, enough to make me homesick!

Filled in our last day in the Cape by taking a tour out to Robben Island, which is situated about a twenty minute ferry ride into the local bay. It is famous for housing ex-President, Nelson Mandela for eighteen years against his will, for opposing the apartheid system. It has also been a penal colony for various other rulers for almost four hundred and fifty years. The cells were either 80 bed (actually no beds) dormitories or special two metre by two metre single cells for the targeted leaders such as Mandela, with bars and windows non-closable against the cold and heat, and buckets instead of a toilet. A few unhappy spirits would inhabit its rocky shores!

Incredible to see what they had to go through, especially the political prisoners, and even though the conditions for working (lime and gravel mining chain gangs) and living were totally inhospitable, Mandela’s legacy was to always promote forgiveness and reconciliation. Terry McCosker talked a few weeks ago about the difference between ‘power’ and ‘force’, and how there have been but few people throughout history with a high enough level of ‘consciousness’ to impact millions with true non-violent power rather than force. Mandela fell into that auspicious category, along with others such as the likes of Jesus, Buda and Gandhi.

Our tour guide was an ex inmate and veteran of seven years hard labour on the infamous island, yet he chooses to relive it all daily, sowing visitors what is now an historical museum. Some of the former guards do the same. Mandela insisted that they were also victims of the regime, albeit in a different way.

Actually, Mandela spent a total of twenty seven years in jail before being finally released in 1990 at what had to be the inevitable end of the apartheid era, then of course going on to be the first black leader of a country where 90% of the population is non-white.

Plenty of challenges still ahead here though, and plenty of turmoil at the top of the political scene, which I must admit we don’t get much of a feel for as we drive around because the roads are fantastic, the people, both black and white are, by and large, very friendly and the service everywhere has been unreal.

The main highways, not counting the multi-lane motorways, may be only one lane each way but there is enough room on either side for two cars and traffic in front will often pull over to the side and let you past, regardless of oncoming vehicles. We still hang back when trucks are approaching though as it isn’t quite that comfortable!
Today was a seven hour leg on the road and we made it all the way up to Kimberly and arrived with enough daylight left to take a tour of “The Big Hole” near the centre of town. This is the remnants of the massive De Beers Diamond Mining Company’s first diggings. It was very interesting to hear the mining history and I never realised that Cecil Rhodes was the main instigator of the huge diamond consortium and that De Beers was just a company name, derived from the family of farmers of that name who were in the area at the time. Of course the Oppenheimer name has also been synonymous with diamonds and that company for a long time as well.

Cecil Rhodes could be described as a man who ‘had a bit of a go’ after being sent out to Africa from England as ‘a sickly child of 17’ for health reasons. By the age of 35 he was in a position to pay 5 million pounds to consolidate the mining interests at Kimberly into the De Beers Company. That would have to be in excess of a Bill Gates style deal in today’s money and he also went on to be political leader of the colony and to have aspirations of delivering the U.S. back into the British Empire. Liked to think big young Cecil! And of course he then bequeathed his “Rhodes Scholarship” legacy for those abroad to study at Oxford University.

Anyway, back to the big hole. It really is a very big dent in the ground and we had to go around quite a bit of new road works to find our way in as some of the road is succumbing to falling into the hole!! I’m not sure how far it is across the rim but the open cut is about two hundred metres down to the water that flooded operations in 1914 and brought about the end of mining, then another eight hundred metres to the reach of the underground mining.

We are staying in a guest house right at the mine among a group of 19th century style buildings that have been restored to celebrate the area’s famous and turbulent history. A beautiful room, a little more expensive than our budget would usually cater for, however we rang around all over the place and once again the town seems to be booked out. Annoyingly, there is no internet here and I’ll have to have a look around down town this morning before we leave.

Isn’t communication just fantastic these days? I was woken up at 6.00 am this morning by my phone vibrating off the desk and crashing to the floor because Cathy had sent me a photo via ‘text message’ of the cattle at home as she was moving them. So then we proceeded to have a conversation about their condition and moving them etc etc, all while she is working in the paddock at “Bokhara Plains” and I’m sitting up in bed over 12,000 kls away in Africa. Amazing!!
Today we head further north (after I find an internet café) to catch up with Dick Richardson near Vryberg and then on to Sandy and Monica Speedy’s place which is about another 70 kms. Should be a good few days to finish off our travels before venturing back into the sprawling metropolis of Jo Burg and catching our flight home on Sunday.

Hard to believe it’s all coming to a finish, but I’m very much looking forward to getting home and helping Cathy! I was getting a little homesick during our communication earlier.

Cheers once more!

Sunday, October 12th 2008, 9:05 AM
Winding Down

It’s early Saturday morning here and I’m sitting up in bed writing once again as I was woken some time ago by a cacophony of noise outside my window from to the array of chickens, geese and turkeys in the near vicinity. We are at Dick Richardson’s farm called “Brussels”, about twenty kilometers south of Vryberg, a hustling town of maybe Dubbo’s size and surrounded by grazing country as good as any we have seen on our travels in Africa. At least it is for the rainfall average (from 16 inches here to over 20 in some areas) and it has really surprised me as I was under the impression that it would be far more arid in these parts. My assumptions have often been proved wrong on this trip!!

We got to Brussels mid afternoon yesterday as we had driven straight up to Sandy and Monica Speedy’s from Kimberly the day before and they live about fifty kilometers north west of Vryberg. Dick had suggested we visit them and as he was off fighting a bushfire (and we had missed a turn to his place and had another bit of a look around the district) we then decided to head out there to Speedy’s and ended up staying the night and half the next day.

I was particularly glad we got the chance for a visit as Sandy, who is possibly close to 70 years old and despite some health issues has the passion, optimism and enthusiasm for agriculture of a twenty five year old. Along with their daughter Jennifer, they run the 12,000 acre ‘Roitveld’ (Sweet Fields) that has been split up into 240 camps or paddocks. I kid you not, this family is “having a go” and the map of the place with its paddock layout looks like an assortment of spider webs. One of the water points has twenty separate
camps coming off it with the average camp size for the whole farm being around 17 hectares. I
would not have thought it possible unless I’d seen it myself and although not quite as
mountainous and rocky as a lot of farms we have been to, it still has some challenges for
fencing such as the Thorn tree and Fynbos shrubs. Actually it has much more Thorn tree now
than in recent times after the country was originally almost totally cleared for mining braces
and firewood and once again it is considered a real benefit for grazing diversity and a critical
part of the ecosystem.

If I ever left Australia and wanted to farm somewhere else in the world, then I would be hard
pressed to find a place more appealing than around there, with its slight undulation, scattered
timber and fantastic grass base. I’m not a big mountain or rock fan and like a lot of the dryer c
ountry in Australia, these grasslands are very good for sheep and cattle to thrive on. Not that
everything is perfect here. Some of the safety requirements, such as locking up and living
behind a huge electric security fence I find to be quite disturbing. I guess you wouldn’t even
think too much about it after a while if living here all the time?

Those 12,000 acres at Roitveld would run (with their management, not the average) between
1,500 and 2,000 cattle on 17 inches, although Sandy says it has actually had more rain over the
last twelve years. They run the cattle in four herds, two breeder herds with separate calving
and then a steer herd and a heifer herd. Of course with whopping 240 paddocks this still gives
great flexibility and grazing control, although personally I’d be getting it back to at least two
mobs and simplifying things a little.
After leaving there and having a quick stop in town we ended up out at Dickson Richardson’s place and once again found a great big house and terrific hospitality. It was an interesting last farm visit as they have a few issues regarding labour, phosphorus deficiency and damage to fences from game such as the large and herding gemsbok, that are capable of destroying a five strand barbwire fence easily. Dick is a very knowledgeable guy and has been an H M Educator for a number of years and visited several continents teaching. It has been great for me to be able to spend “one on one” time with all of these people and really get an insight into their challenges as well as the successes over a lot of years and now hopefully I’ll be in a position to go ahead with much more confidence at home.

Now heading off for Jo Burg and will have clicked well over 6,000 kms in South Africa alone with this little hire car over the last four weeks. Although we have both enjoyed this experience and learned more than we could have imagined, we are both looking forward to getting on the flight home and implementing some of what we have learned on our own places.

Peca got on a horse this morning to show off his “Polo Cross” skills with Dick and Adele while I took a few photos hoping to get an action shot of him getting thrown, but it wasn’t to be. The sport is a bit of a passion here and the horse numbers threaten the cow operation in scale and, although I love horses, what a waste of grass!

Will be having quite a few hours to kill in the airport tomorrow after dropping off the car at twelve, so some may get a phone call while I’m hanging around there!

Hope all are well!

Monday, October 13th 2008, 1:40 AM
Leaving Africa

Last day in Africa and last day of the Nuffield Scholarship travels for me and it’s been one to test me so far. Pec and I managed to get all the way to the outskirts of Jo Burg by about 8.30 pm and booked ourselves into a decent sort of a lodge for the final night of our African adventure. Also found our way to a quiet little bar for a couple of drinks to celebrate the trip and be thankful we’d made it after all of the earlier misgivings about the safety of travelling the “dark continent”. As I’ve said before, the only danger we faced was from over indulgence and
my bet with Cathy way back in America about losing some weight in Africa is doomed to utter failure. With all the fencing I have planned, it won’t be a problem for too long.

My mouth has been soured somewhat with the realization that my wallet was missing when packing my luggage this morning. That is the sort of nightmare that I’ve managed to avoid thus far on my many travels and after turning the room upside down it could not be found anywhere. I think what made matters worse was my surprise because the night before we had pulled up to help a couple with a young boy who had run out of petrol in their car. At first we had gone straight past and then I thought “No”. As tired as I was, we turned around and went back, then back tracked a couple of miles to get some fuel for them as I insisted it would be Good Karma and we would be repaid. Well losing my wallet was not what I had in mind, so now I’m sure something really good is waiting just around the corner. Late the night before I had gone to the reception foyer, checked emails and called home on Skype, and the only thing I can think of is that the damn thing must have somehow fallen out of my bag then when getting the cable out for the computer. And no, I did not take it to the bar the night before!

They have security cameras in the lobby and I told them that there were two other security guys there with guns (taking delivery of cash I guess) when I went to bed, plus the receptionist and no one else, but as fate would have it their video footage wasn’t working at that time! Great, just bloody great. My biggest concern of course wasn’t the limited amount of cash involved, rather the inconvenience of ringing Australia and canceling the three plastic fantastic cards that were in it. And with Cathy in Toowoomba it also meant that her card which is linked would be out of action as well. At least I could call home with the computer and luckily I had a reliable travelling mate to sponge off as well, or it could have been much worse. I had to remind myself that it was better to be happening on the last day and not on the first, and I suppose it will seem funny one day. Not just yet though!

Now I’m sitting in the BA lounge awaiting our next flight, and while it is comfortable with food and drink etc their internet won’t work, so I’m still feeling a little aggravated. Being anxious to get home and see my girls again must be adding to my poor frame of mind.

Nuffield have got the time allocation of four months quite good I think, as although difficult to do and a strain in many ways on a business and family, it adds value to both through strength out of necessity. “What does not break us can only make us stronger”. Unless we are pushed (or choose to jump!) out of our own personal comfort zones, then how can we possibly grow and learn and therefore create a larger comfort zone? A slight feeling of discontent is healthy, I think. Jim Rohn says “We should be both content and ambitious”. I guess he means is we should be happy with what we have achieved yet willing to try harder to do better.

I’m sure this trip is going to influence my destiny for the rest of my life and I’ll always be thankful for the great opportunity to jam so many beneficial experiences into such a short space of time. If anyone out there in “cyber land” is contemplating applying for a Nuffield Scholarship (or any other such scholarship) or just taking the chance to travel the world, then I could not recommend it more highly. I’d like to think that I have learned invaluable lessons from a wide variety of people who were willing to share their knowledge, and also learned to be more humble in my opinions, of which I have many! The world is far more complex in many ways beyond my earlier comprehension, yet many of the major issues and problems are so similar.

Enough of the philosophy, the next blog will be from home soil in Sydney! Till then!
Awake early in Toowoomba...

Not home yet? Staying in Toowoomba to have a couple of nights with my little girl who is at boarding school here in her first year as Harriet and I have not seen much of each other over the last four months.

Pec and I didn’t have long to wait around in the Sydney airport as our connector to Brisbane was due to fly out about twenty minutes after we got through customs (which was hitch free) and made our way to the right gate. This could have been my last flight for quite a while and at number 35 over the previous 10 months. I won’t be planning on going anywhere till at least the next Nuffield conference in April ‘09. It was fantastic to walk off the plane in Brisbane and out the gate to see Cathy and Harriet waiting there for me. Especially as my little girl isn’t so little anymore and almost as big as her mum, not that that’s so big!

Great to be back onto Australian soil and really looking to get back to home turf at Bokhara Plains tomorrow to check out how Cathy’s management has handled the situation. Probably better than me and as soon as I started to think about what was happening out there I got a call from Leah to tell me that the pump at the Swag Rooms had run dry and people were without a shower. Not a lot I could do from 900 kms away as I could barely remember how the ridiculously complex water and pump set up is configured. However, Leah had it under control, turning the pump off and sending all the guests to another area of our setup to where there was water. Also, thankfully, I could get my brother to go across from Carcool to change pipes over for me and get the shower block operational again. With five separate electric high pressure water pumps, a back up over head tank and three separate sources of water that are all interconnected, it was always a better option to get him just to fix the one not working and leave the confusing taps alone.

It’s not just the great hospitality and Nuffield (especially my sponsors, Landmark) that I have to be thankful for after this trip, as plenty of others have also been a terrific help in stepping up to the plate for me in my absence.

Just got up again at 3.30 am after laying in bed wide awake for about an hour with my head whirling around and too many thoughts due to the excitement of getting back home, and the effects of jet lag, which always seems to be worse flying from West to East. I felt really tired yesterday, even though the flight out from Jo-Burg to Sydney was one of the few that I managed to get any sleep on.

Boy, haven’t the world’s share markets been volatile place over the last six months and particularly in this previous week. I’ve been expecting a correction of some magnitude now for over four years, so I’ve been a little out in my timing you could say, although the dramatic rise of that period has been more than wiped out for a lot of stocks. I don’t want to seem pessimistic or some sort of doomsayer but I feel very nervous about world events as they currently evolve. The latest round of “heroic and dramatic decisions” by various political leaders to, supposedly, address the situation is the biggest “band aid” to fix a hemorrhage ever seen.

The huge disparity between “paper money” and true wealth based on the use of natural resources and services such as labour is quite alarming. When governments can print billions to feed into greedy banks that have no social or moral accountability and other governments
can let go of all previous claims of fiscal responsibility (and concerns of interest rate hikes) to generate more spending for the God of Consumerism then I get very nervous indeed. It seems we have a world financial system that is based purely on the need for continued, consistent, and exponential growth of western economies at the expense of sustainability and equality inside a reality that has proven throughout history that, in nature, exponential growth eventually leads to vicious corrections. Paper money, originally developed as an easier and more reliable way to extend the barter system and linked directly to real wealth such as gold, is now an entity in itself, based on nothing more than confidence and capable of becoming absolutely worthless.

Could the Zimbabwe example be a lesson for this credit crazy world?? Hmmm, getting a bit deep here early in the morning and no wonder I can’t sleep! The thought of spending more than we’ve earned over the last few years (for business investment and drought proofing reasons) has me continually questioning the wisdom of that strategy as current events unfold.

As always, I guess, whatever happens will create plenty of pain for some and fantastic opportunities for others that are on the look out.

Looking forward to my own bed tonight

Friday, October 24th 2008, 9:17 AM
Home on the "Plains" once again.

I’m back! Actually I’ve been home for a full week now and I’ve finally settled in after really struggling, especially during the first few days. I felt quite shattered and was feeling sort of deflated I guess, which is something that we were warned of by previous Nuffielders. Not that I had been physically challenged on too much on the trip, I’m as soft and unfit now as I’ve ever been. However, mentally it was quite something else again and maybe that was having a cumulative effect that I wasn't necessarily fully aware of until I had slowed down to a stop. Also, I have so many plans to enact and a list of things “to get done” a mile long that is also leaving me somewhat daunted by the prospect of what to do first and how much there is to actually do!!

After a week though, I'm feeling great and
really pleased to be home again with Cathy (after a bit of an adjustment to convince her that I can be needed again!) and we've already had three cattle moves squeezed among Cathy having over two hundred "guest nights" with the Bokhara Hutz so far this month.

Basically has not been much rain here all year and the fantastic summer we had last season has held on, but the dry conditions surprised me as it had been quite green all the way down from Queensland till not far from home, when it started to run out. There had been about 20 mm here a fortnight before I got home and although grass butts are quite sparse, they are greening up with some growing back a couple of inches in a matter of days after we have taken cattle out of the paddock. With a green pick over most of the country we are well poised to receive a couple of inches soon and have the place jump away nicely. That’s the plan and I hope “The Big Fella” obliges again this year!

I’ve spent a bit of time over the last couple of days planning some fencing (well not really “some”, more like 140 kms all together!) on a mapping program I have and how I wish it was as easy as drawing lines on a computer screen! Not that I think or worry about the work involved so much as I have firmly in my mind the future result I can create with the landscape by doing it properly and I just wish I could get it all done tomorrow. That was one of the many great things about Africa, plenty of staff and don’t I wish that I could access some of that right now?

I haven't really had much of a chance to catch up with anyone other than family since being back home, but with the Xmas season fast approaching I guess that scenario will change soon enough!

Cheers again!