

Hello everybody,

Well, it's that time of year again for an annual check in from Tony and Abby. For reference, it is Tony who writes this letter. Abby always thinks it's a group activity, but I quickly put the kibosh on that idea. Besides, engineers have much better humor than artists. Anyway, we've both rounded off 40 now and still have no plans for kids in sight. Even though we've made this abundantly clear, we've been told that we shouldn't even sarcastically joke about pregnancy scares with our parents, who are still hoping for one last "little miracle" now that the other grandbabies are becoming too cool to hang out with them. Haha, good luck. You've got a better chance of getting us to rejoin the church and start going back to mass. Besides, we've "fixed" the game (snip, snip). A side bonus is that I cash in on the office pregnancy pool every year since everyone thinks I'm bound to slip up, eventually. C'mon, engineers don't make mistakes. It goes without saying that you won't have to read about kids in our letter and I'll skip the kid-bashing this year and even give them credit that at least they don't sniff your ass like dogs do.

Man, I can't even imagine life with kids though. On the weekends, I get to sleep in until 10:00am, then drink coffee and read the Wall Street Journal, eat breakfast around noon, have a roll in the hay, take a nap, have mid-afternoon cocktails, then get ready for whatever evening plans we have. It's was getting nearly impossible for a while to make plans with other couples our age and some were even becoming first-time parents in their 40s. I think we were down to Gretchen and "The Ginger", but I tend to keep my distance since I'm fairly certain that she's a dominatrix and if you let her get too close that she'll probably want to swing or something. Otherwise, we've made friends within the geriatric crowd which is great because when we meet for dinner we're still half in the can from afternoon cocktails, can make happy hour yet, and get home by 10pm.

Ok, changing subjects now. Abby and I took two vacations this year centered around taking Amtrak trains. Yeah, it's like one step above riding the bus, but it's cheap and a great way to just kick back and watch the beautiful landscape pass by for hours on end. The only thing is that you have to be prepared for the train to run horribly behind schedule. For our first trip, we rented a car at the Minneapolis airport and dead-headed it towards Chicago. After a day of wandering around downtown, we boarded the train the next day headed back to Minneapolis. Interestingly, there were a ton of Amish on the train. At first, I thought it was like a huge family or something. But apparently, central Wisconsin has the highest population density of Amish in the US. Little known fact there, Cliff. For once, I could finally put knowing German to good use...by eavesdropping. Unfortunately, my German is not that good and I could only dish Abby the gossip in fragmented code, like "he said something about 'sister', 'standing' and 'bread'". On and off we heard singing too. It was weird though, like faint angelic humming...but we couldn't see anyone actually singing...and it seemed to come from everywhere and all at once like they were telepathically communicating in song across various groups in the lounge car. I wasn't sure if it was real or just the gummies kicking in. I ended up recording it on my phone to do a reality check later, and it was in fact real. Apparently, if you look up "Amish singing on the train" on YouTube, a handful of videos quickly pop up. I even saw one earlier this year where the boys were singing country classics. Where else can you find Americana like that than on the Amtrak !?!

- To do in Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art
- Skip...Portillo's
- Train time from Chicago to St. Paul, about 10 hours (~400 miles); drive time ~ 6hours.

On our second train trip, we flew into Denver with plans to take the Amtrak to Salt Lake City. This time, we'd be going through the mountains like when I took the Empire Builder from Fargo to Whitefish, MT in my teens during in the early 90's. Back then, I recall a trio of college guys getting on the train with a cooler full of beer and was under the impression that it was BYOB on the Amtrak (funny coincidence, 20-odd years later my Dad was working with this guy who was telling a story about taking the train during college with some buddies and a cooler full of beer to go skiing in Whitefish...they were from Fargo, we were from South Dakota and the story came full circle in Minneapolis). Well, apparently the federal government has become very prudish on this type of thing and like the airlines it is against the law to "serve yourself"...although you can get sloppy drunk in the bar car as long as you pay for 'em...the only difference is that on a train, they'll kick you off. That didn't happen to us, although we did have some tall boys on our persons since we typically pack a picnic for the train and make sandwiches because the food onboard is terrible. Where I was going with this is that west of Grand Junction, CO and into the night is a barren nothingness and the only trace of life you'll see for hours are fence posts on what looks like a Martian landscape. And as the sun sets, the sky turns red and the rock formations become ominous black silhouettes...that's when I'm glad I didn't crack a beer while the conductor was making his rounds because that would suck to get kicked off here...and they warn you that they're not afraid to do it either. The only downside to our trip is that we ended it in Salt Lake City. There's just not much to do there and the place is just weird. And if you hang around the Mormon Temple, you're bound to get bombarded by multiple duos of young girls from around the world who are super friendly and personable, but they offer poor travel advice..."you should check out the LDS Museum" or "have you seen the portrait of Jesus in America yet". Luckily, our hotel had a pool and was across the street from a state liquor store and a street tacos takeout restaurant, so the leg of our trip in SLC wasn't a complete bust.

- To do in Denver: Meow Wolf, Cheba Hut sandwich shop
- Skip...Denver Contemporary Museum of Art
- Train time: Denver to SLC ~16 hours (~500 miles), arrived 2am.
  
- To do in Salt Lake City: Organ rehearsal at the Tabernacle (only 30 min.though)
- Skip...Tabernacle Choir (sounds like Disney orchestra)

For a third trip this year, we took a road trip to Rhinelander, WI in October. This was the third year in a row we've made the trek and keep going back because the fall leaf peeping and hiking trails are absolutely amazing there that time of year. On our drive, Abby insists on only taking bathroom breaks at Kwik Trip since the bathrooms are clean and they are conveniently located at just about every town along the way. She likewise insists on purchasing at least something to show her gratitude, even if it is a banana at 29 cents/pound. So, inherently along the way we accumulate a bunch of bananas. This is how I realized bananas made me burp. I thought it was just me, but Abby said it was a thing. She tends to make such assertions based on loose facts and I was pretty sure that our sample size of two was not statistically significant. I looked it up though and apparently bananas contain sorbitol which is a naturally occurring sugar alcohol and high amounts of soluble fiber which is a type of carbohydrate. So, in fact, "banana burps" are a thing. I don't have a good segue or tie-in to this next anecdote of our trip, but after we got to Rhinelander we did some grocery shopping and about halfway on the 20 minute drive back to our rental cabin we realized that we forgot to buy eggs at the store. Luckily, just as this dawned on me we were driving past a small sign on the side of the road that said "Fresh Eggs". Score! As I'm turning the car around, this is where things start to get weird. As I pull up to the house, I notice another sign that says "Amsoil Sold Here". Outside of the house are two guys that look

like Boss Hog and Cooter if they lived in the backwoods. I ask about the fresh eggs for sale and Boss Hog scratches his head and says, "We don't live here...But, if there is a sign that says that we have eggs, then we have eggs. Let me call the owners...". He heads indoors and I'm left standing there by myself since Abby's camping out in the car. The place is weird and smells like motor oil. Cooter is banging a tool on the garage floor for no apparent reason. I'm waiting like five minutes and am starting to wonder whether this will end like up like some scene from Deliverance. Finally, the guy comes back out and asks how many eggs do we want. This seems like an odd question since the denomination of eggs typically sold is twelve, so I respond confusedly, "um, a dozen?". So, he makes his way back into the house and comes out with a carton of eggs and hands them to me. He doesn't say anything and I finally ask him, "How much?". He scratches his head like he has no frame of reference what a dozen eggs costs (no judgements, though; I don't know what a gallon of milk or a loaf of bread costs), and responds questioningly "three dollar?" (note: the going rate at the store at the time for regular eggs was around \$4). I get out my coin purse, and the smallest bill denomination I have is a five...He pulls out his wallet and happens to have exactly two one-dollar bills. Perfect! I was willing to walk away from that transaction without any change just to get the hell out of there, but that ended up working out nicely. As I thanked the man and headed back towards the car, I made sure not to offend the friendly fellow by inspecting the eggs, but oddly notice that there are no chicken coops to be seen around the house. As we're driving off, Abby opens up the carton and lo and behold is the oddest collection of a dozen eggs that I've ever seen...just about every color an egg can possibly be and a hodgepodge of sizes...they obviously didn't come from the same chicken...or for that matter, a chicken at all. In any case, they tasted great the next morning for breakfast and now I have my story I call the "5W-30 eggs".

- To do in Rhinelander area: Hodag hunt, Lake Tomahawk Meat Market (Red Barn Sausage), Raven Trail Head @ Northern Highland American Legion State Forest
- Skip...CT's Deli
- Drive time from Minneapolis: 5 hours with bathroom breaks, ~250 miles.

Well, that's all I got this year. I've got to get this printed and sent out before it's too late, so won't trail on like a Midwestern goodbye, but hope you've enjoyed reading about our little adventures and insights from the year. Happy holidays!

- Tony & Abby