

In 2008, Mark and I were lucky enough to return to New Zealand with another hapless professor and 23 college students. On the southern island we went kiwi spotting, which consisted of a boat ride to a remote island in the dark of night with a human Kiwi. We followed our guide up and down several hills to a starlit beach where we found four shy, flightless birds about the size of chickens but with much fatter feet and really long beaks. In the dim light of one flashlight, we watched the kiwis use their long beaks to probe for tiny crustaceans. Sadly, none of the chubby birds would follow us home, they said, because it's too cold here in Michigan.



Next, we went jet boating, which in NZ is riding in a speed boat with a maniac guy who cranks the boat into 360-degree spins and passes rocky shorelines incredibly close and at insane speeds. Mark and I then led the students in the sport of Zorbing. This sport involves getting inside a giant, see-through ball with a wee bit of warm water and rolling down a giant hill. And that's all there is to it. According to one Web site, Zorbing "proves that New Zealand once again leads the world in stupid things to do while you're on vacation."

Only eight students joined us in the sport of Zorbing, so we "leaders" sent all of them on a hike up a glacier in the pouring rain while we went to the only indoor climbing wall in the southern hemisphere. Here, I managed to spike myself with my crampon and slice a hole in a pair of pants, while Mark shimmied his way up several 10 meter walls as if he'd been climbing on ice all his life.



A day or so later, I was sitting on a mountain top eating lunch in a cafe and saw a guy loitering near a giant parachute and nervously smoking a cigarette. The sky was blue, the weather perfect, Mark eating, so I kissed Mark good-bye, plunked down my credit card and followed the parachutist to the top of the mountain. There, I strapped on a harness, hooked myself to my Kiwi pal, and jumped off a nearby cliff. Several of the students went paragliding as well, but even more students went skydiving, which we learned is actually less dangerous than paragliding. But let's not tell my mother.

On the northern island, Mark and I led a group of students in the sport of blackwater rafting. This consists of donning a wetsuit, booties and a hard plastic helmet with a light on top, grabbing a rubber inner tube, and following an overly zealous Kiwi into the narrow opening of a cave. Inside the cave, were sharp rocks and six inches of fast-moving (and very cold) water, which we sat upon while taking in the stalactites and stalagmites inside the cave. After passing on an opportunity to flee from the excitement in front of us, we were led further into the cave, first walking with our innertube, then sitting in our inner tube and floating down the rushing water. All was well until we heard the rushing of whitewater, which, in the dark, is black water, and hence the name of the sport (the raft being the innertube). Rushing water meant a waterfall, the first of which dropped off five feet. This we overcame by standing on top of the ledge of the fall facing upstream, holding our inner tube under our butts, and launching ourselves backwards into the dark. The resultant splash was rather spectacular, if not shocking. (That's a student in the photo).





There were three butt-smacking waterfalls in all, one place where the ceiling was so low we had to walk in the water and push our inner tubes in front of us, one section where we shut the lights and followed the glow worms from the cave ceiling. Truly, one of the most outrageous things Mark and I have done.

In July, we noticed that Little Dipper's breath had taken a turn for the worse. It had been a constant state of farm muck for quite some time, but it had turned into a smell not unlike rotten eggs mixed with wet shoe leather. A trip to the vet revealed several bad teeth, and so the day before our vacation, Dipper had major dental work done. We felt like pond scum for leaving my mother to the care of our very

unhappy little dog while we ran off to Canada to go fishing, but got over it, thanks to my mom. (Dipper is the one not smiling in the photo).

Our goal in going to Nunavut, which is north of Manitoba) was to catch grayling because Michigan doesn't have grayling anymore and the four-inch grayling Mark caught in Montana apparently wasn't big enough. It was in this catch and release Canadian water that Mark caught a 20-inch grayling. It was here that I caught a pike exceeding the 45-inch measuring tape on the bottom of the boat after commenting that I thought I'd hooked the river bottom. It was here that we went by boat up a raging river pocked with evil rock, one of which bit into the bow of our boat, turned us such that we were facing perpendicular to the stream and nearly tipped us over. It was here that I caught my first red-back vole, a gentle little fuzzy-like mouse, which is the staple for wolves. It was here that we saw an arctic wolf less than 50 feet away, who, like the kiwis and voles, refused to follow us home.

In November, my brother and his family, my sister and her family, my mother, my father and his wife all endured a Thanksgiving lasagna dinner at my house. Lasagna is, of course, what the Italian Pilgrims first ate, and the Petersoni family suffered through in similar spirit.

Days later, Mark had knee replacement surgery. His was the special four-hour surgery that left a 13-inch scar on his knee against which I will measure my fish next summer when we return to Canada. Mark also got tenure at Alma College, which fulfills a life-long dream and made his head swell almost as much as his knee.

Due to Mark's surgery, our traveling adventures, Dipper's teeth extractions, and greedy politicians and CEOs, our retirement accounts have tanked. We have therefore established the Amy-and-Mark-Retirement-Bail-Out Plan. Ours is much, much cheaper than Congress' bail-out plans, stupid for all the same reasons, but voluntary. Ours will get you an annual Christmas newsletter not too unlike this one. Ours also buys a lifetime friendship or acquaintance (your choice) and an invitation to Amy's retirement part, which will come sooner than later with your help. Feel free to respond to this note with a check made out to MARBOP.

And finally, the kids. There were four of them the last I counted, and the last I knew, Willi was still in the Lansing area doing social work; Becky holding her breath as an engineer working for GM; Arthur a senior at MSU; and Holly a freshman at Alma College. All are well, staying relatively out of trouble and staying in touch. In fact, Holly just called from Florida on location with the Alma Swim Team. We told her to swim her little self back home so she can be cold and miserable like the rest of us.

Have a great Christmas and a happy new year.

