

When we visited Europe in 2012, we had an amazing time and came back thinking no holiday could ever be that good. We were wrong. Our USA winter adventure was a little unexpected. The original plan was a trip to Thailand. We were close to booking when the kids came up with the idea of the USA. Initially we weren't keen - we had been there quite a few times and thought it was madness to leave summer for an extra month of winter. However the idea stuck, and its appeal quickly grew. We agreed to the kids' plan on two conditions - no theme parks and we went places we hadn't been before. They were happy with that (although did later try unsuccessfully to get a theme park added!) and the flights were booked quickly before Christmas flight prices went any higher.

The holiday turned out to be a far bigger success than we had ever imagined. Our biggest concern was the cold. We would spend most of the month in temperatures not far above freezing (and well below for a lot of the time) and faced potential disruptions to our plans from snow storms. We had Plan A booked, but were fully expecting to have to make some changes and go onto Plan B. There had been lots of snow storms before we arrived, and that same snow lay on the ground for our entire trip. In one month we had no rain and half an hour of snow fall. We enjoyed beautiful calm sunny days so the cold was never an issue.

South West USA must have some of the most stunning scenery in the world. I thought we might get tired of endless red rock scenery, but each place we visited was unique. The contrast of the snow against the red rocks, along with the intense blue skies, made for scenery that we would never tire of. Visiting in the off-season had the added bonus of no crowds. Often we would be the only ones on a hiking trail, which made it more magical. The downside was that some shops and restaurants were closed, but we never starved.

American food is probably more different to our food than we experienced in Europe. We loved the supermarkets. The choice of pre-prepared foods was amazing and everything was so beautifully presented. Shopping at Countdown Pakuranga on the day we returned was even more depressing than usual! Restaurant standards were high and portions were huge. We never left a restaurant hungry and usually couldn't finish our meals. We didn't entirely manage to avoid unhealthy American food (Sonic Diner, deep fried bacon, Navajo fry bread....) but we were so active that it didn't really matter. The Americans aren't big on veggies - common sides were fries, mash, corn bread and mac'n'cheese. They do salads and meat really really well though. I'd been reluctant to give up a month of NZ berry season, so it was a nice surprise that berries were everywhere and cheaper than home. The prices didn't even increase for Christmas!

Customer service is pretty high in the USA. People were almost always friendly and super helpful. I guess they were hoping for maximum tips. In the more touristy places like Grand

Canyon and San Francisco, we were just one of thousands of foreigners. Off the main tourist path, we were quite a novelty. People were intrigued by our accent but most had no idea where we were from. They were always eager to talk about NZ and it featured on a lot of people's bucket list.

Travel is always a great education for the kids. Apart from the obvious knowledge they gained of geology, geography and history, the cities were a bit of an eye opener. We were surprised by the number of homeless people in San Francisco, and lot of them were quite in-your-face and very vocal. Las Vegas had its share of dodgy characters as well. We are so thankful that the kids are such great mates, it makes travel so much easier and more enjoyable.

We packed a lot into a month. We came home physically tired, but still felt like we'd had a good break. Because the days were short and it was so cold at night, the evenings were lazy. We never want these adventures to end, but it's been lovely to come home and catch up with friends and family. We thought we would find it very hot when we got home, but the weather has been downright disappointing. Cold winds and cloud have been the norm, although summer has returned today. At least it made the return to work easier!

So here we are back in NZ, re-adjusting to work and a more routine life. There is a lot of talk of where the next adventure could be. We have learnt to take the kids suggestions seriously, they sure got it right this time. There's been a lot of talk of returning to the USA and the words "theme park" have come up regularly. Who knows where or when, but I'll have fun researching and dreaming anyway.

I'll finish this blog with the winners of the Creahan Winter USA Adventure Awards.

**Best hotel** - Hotel Nikko, San Francisco

**Best hike** - Hiking the Hoodoos, Bryce Canyon

**Best restaurants** - Garden Court Buffet, Las Vegas and Bubba Gump Shrimp Company, San Francisco

**Best breakfast** - Hotel Nikko, San Francisco

**Best shop** - Uniqlo, San Francisco

**Best mode of transport** - Snowmobile

**Best drive** - Durango to Silverton, Colorado

**Best viewpoint** - Ooh Aah Point, Grand Canyon

**Best pizza** - Cupola Pizzeria, San Francisco

**Best hotel view** - The View Hotel, Monument Valley (what a surprise!)

**Best Christmas decorations** - Wynn Hotel, Las Vegas

**Best donuts** - Blue Mountain Foods, Monticello

**Best fries** - Lori's Diner

**Best activity** - Skiing