

# Tropical

BRINGING YOU THE LATEST NEWS  
FROM OUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS  
AROUND THE WORLD

*news*

DECEMBER 2006

*We wish you a very  
Happy Christmas*

# Editorial Ramblings

As we look forward to Christmas, we would like to thank all those who helped us during our recent trip to England. Not having a base there any more (Alan's mother passed away last January), made things rather more difficult than would have otherwise been the case. We were able to stay with, and have a lot of help from the following family and friends, whom we thank so much for their assistance and very real friendship:

**Hermie and Theresa**, with whom we stayed in Doha, Qatar, who welcomed us like 'family' and who nursed us through our sickness.

**Shane and Milagros**, for storing many of our things in Doha - and the good food!

**Keith and Valerie**, with whom we stayed for about a week, and received help throughout our stay in England. Without your constant help, many of the tasks we had to attend to would have probably been impossible.

**Terry**, with whom we stayed for several days and who entertained us royally.

**Gerry and Sylvia**, who accommodated us during our visit to Haywards Heath. Family friends for more than 30 years.

**Paul**, whose help in moving our possessions made the task so much quicker.

We also thank God for making this trip possible and keeping us safe throughout our extensive travels.

Back home in Alaminos, our problems continued. We had to fire our housemaid - and, on the farm, the neighbour's dog grabbed the Christmas turkey! Thankfully, Grace's brother managed to grab the poor turkey and, although it was killed in action somewhat prematurely, it's now safely in the freezer. We've also hired another housemaid, who seems to be doing a fine job.

One of our wonderful friends sent us an e-mail this week saying what a *lucky* man Alan is, having a wonderful wife and a great little lad. Whilst he wouldn't dream of arguing with that, it made him think back a few years to when life was rather different. In 1990, he was, in effect, homeless, jobless, car-less, family-less and penniless - living on his credit cards! In 1995 life was all so black that it didn't seem to be worth living. In November 2000, when we got married, he was again unemployed and penniless. On each of these three occasions, instead of going under, Alan has faced the challenge and changed his situation for the better. Is that luck? Certainly Alan would be the first to thank God for his provision, but each time that life has been on the down instead of on the up, he has changed his life, often dramatically, to pull himself up the slope, instead of sliding down any further. Lucky? All our lives have 'highs and lows', but how we cope with the 'lows' is more a measure of our strength of character and determination to make the best of life. Surely, that's not down to '*luck*'. At this time of year, thinking about the birth of Jesus Christ, we can remember many of the good and bad times that He had on Earth - and how He overcame difficulties that most of us can barely imagine.

Since our last 'Tropical News' (September), we've travelled many thousands of miles and had many problems to attend to. Stress levels have been very high! Having only just returned home, this edition has been written rather hurriedly in order to get it e-mailed to you before Christmas, hence some of the regular pages have been omitted. We hope you like the new look to the front cover, as well as the introduction of a new page - this one!

As we write this page, it's Grace's birthday (19 December) and this always tells us that yet another year has passed. It only seems like yesterday that we were with mum in England, celebrating Christmas with her. This year we'll be with our folks in the Philippines, so many thousands of miles from England.

We hope that all of you enjoy a wonderful Christmas with your families and friends. We also thank you for your friendship, often over several decades, and trust God to take care of us all throughout 2007.

*Alan & Grace*

# *Beautiful Dartmoor*



# *'At Home' in Okehampton*

Grace and I paid an extended visit to England recently, returning to Alaminos on 14 December. We'd been away since early October, dropping in to see some of our family and friends in Qatar en-route.

To say we were busy is a considerable understatement. We had so many things to attend to that we didn't have time to visit all our friends - so our sincere apologies if we didn't get to see you. We based ourselves in the Okehampton area of Devon, where we worshipped in All Saints parish church (the church shown on the front cover).

During our time in this beautiful part of England, on the edge of Dartmoor, we were splendidly entertained and even accommodated at times, by our dear friends, Keith and Valerie.

Without Keith and Valerie, our stay in the UK would have been much more difficult. Thank you so much.

When not staying with friends, we were either in 'Bed & Breakfast' or renting a holiday cottage at East Hook Farm, on the outskirts of Okehampton. This was a barn conversion and provided us with a real 'home from home' in 4\* comfort. We stayed here for over 4 weeks. Our hosts were Mary and Ruth Stephens who have been on the farm for several generations. On the last day we were there, the first lamb of the season was born - a beautiful strong and healthy animal which I saw when it was only a hour or so old and rather wobbly on its feet.



*Grace, with Keith and Valerie, after yet another splendid feast in their home in Okehampton.*



*Our 'home from home' at East Hook Farm, Okehampton.*

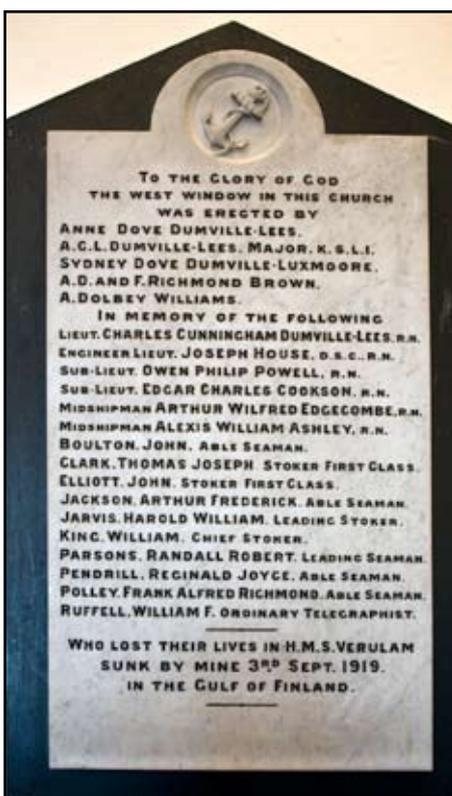
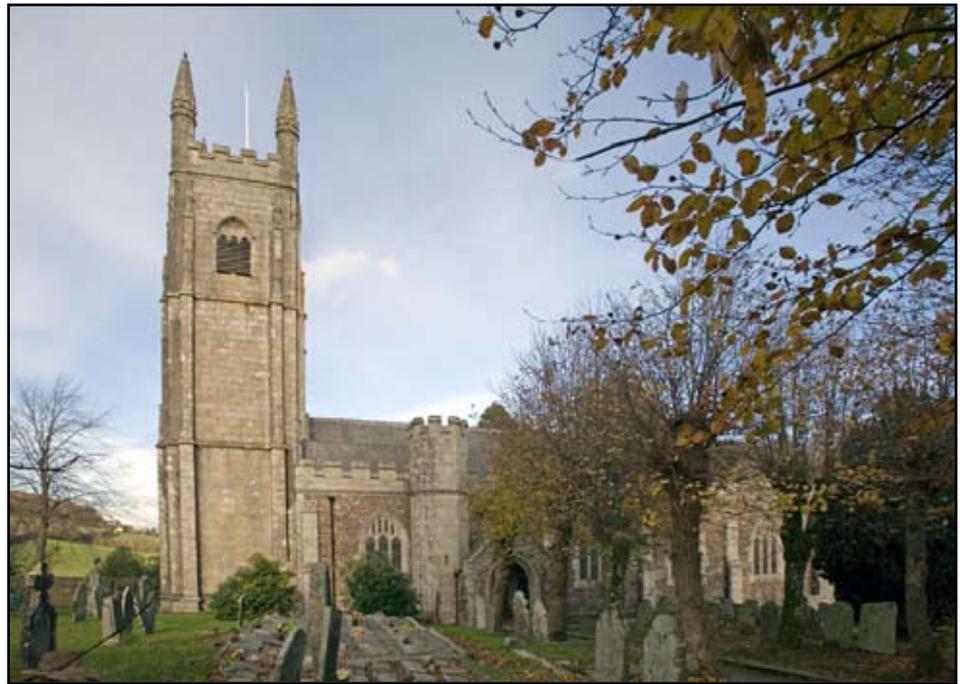


*The stunning view over Okehampton and Dartmoor from 'our' cottage at East Hook Farm.*

# All Saints' Parish Church

During our stay in Okehampton we were welcomed by the clergy and members of All Saints' Parish Church in Okehampton and worshipped there throughout our stay. We would like to thank the Rev'd. Stephen Cook and all the church members for the warmth of their welcome to us. We hope to return to you one day.

Apart from the usual Sunday services, we attended a number of seasonal services including the Remembrance Day Service, the Christingle Service and the Advent Carol Service.



# *A second 'home' in Doha*

On our way to England, we had a stopover in Doha, Qatar, to visit family and friends there. We were so blessed to be able to stay in the delightful home of Hermie and Theresa, who welcomed us like family. Thank you so much. We stayed for about a week - a little longer than expected (sorry guys), due to both of us becoming ill with 'Flu. Very unpleasant, as always, and something that took several weeks and visits to the doctor in England before we could shake it off. Anyway, before the dreaded bug hit us we were royally entertained and had a great time. It was like a non-stop party!



*The eating never stopped! Meals in two of Doha's delightful restaurants and at a beach club (bottom photo.)*



*...and another!*



The home of Shane and Milagros was another of our second 'homes' in Doha, where we enjoyed another splendid meal. Shane and Milagros are also taking care of some of our possessions whilst we are away from Doha, so a big 'thank you' is due. Your kindness and friendship mean so much. Shane and Alan used to share a car to work every day for a considerable time. Shane now drives at 200kph too!

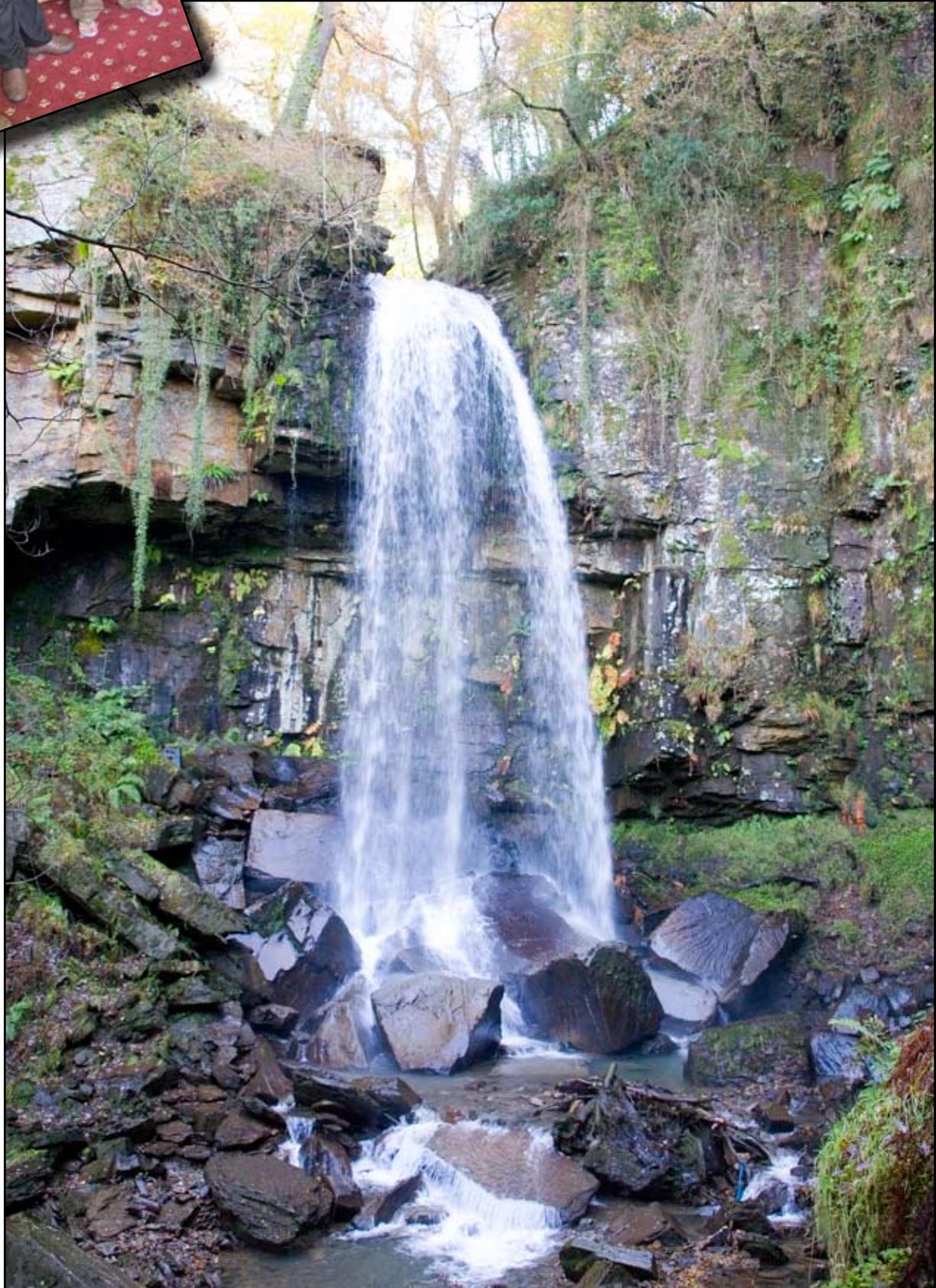
# *Welcome in the Valley*

Another warm welcome we received was from our friend Terry, in the Vale of Neath, South Wales, with whom we stayed for a few days. Thank you, Terry. We first met Terry in a very remote pub in the Brecon Beacons during our visit to Wales in 2003 and have stayed in touch ever since. We were staying in a youth hostel and wandered down the hill to the small hamlet of Ystradfelte where we stopped for a drink at the 'New Inn'. While staying with Terry, we again visited this old haunt. Sadly though, the youth hostel is now closed for good.



*(Small Photo)  
Terry (centre) with  
two of his friends,  
Glyn and Rhian in his  
home in Neath.*

*(Main Photo)  
Melincourt Falls*

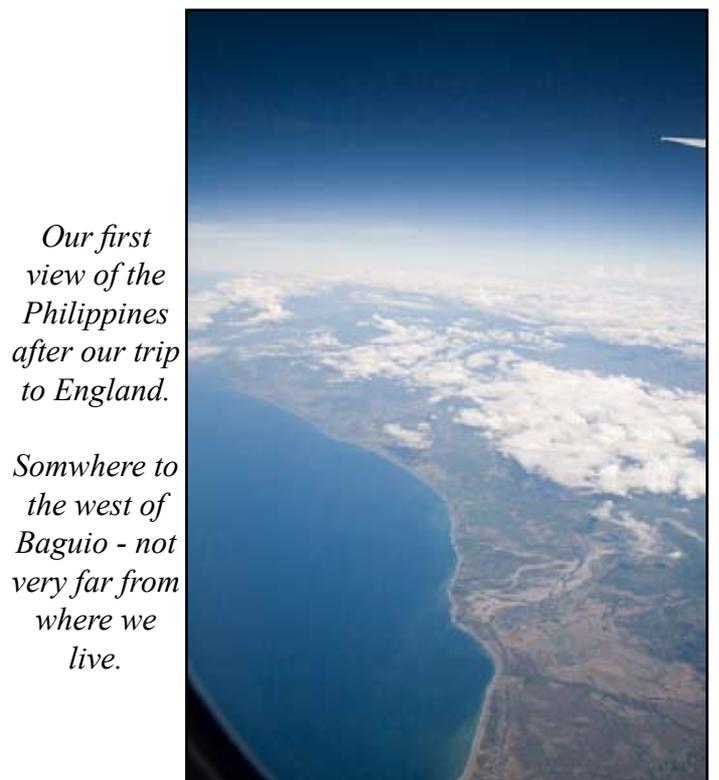


# Our trip from England

We were away so long that our little lad didn't really recognise us when we returned! We could see he was quite puzzled by these new arrivals, although he knew he'd seen us before somewhere, he just couldn't work out where! Nearly 3 months is a long time when you're only about a year and a half old. It was all the more puzzling for him because Grace and I arrived separately. In fact we nearly didn't arrive at all! Not knowing how long we would need to attend to everything in the UK made it impossible to plan our departure. Grace had to fly with Qatar Airways to use the return half of her ticket from the Philippines. I had no flight booked at all, and couldn't leave until Grace had departed. At this time of the year it seems that every Filipino who works overseas wants to return home for Christmas - and there are millions of them! Even though the airlines arrange extra flights, there is a shortage of seats. We tried to book a flight for Grace during the first week of December but were told there was nothing until January 2007! After much pleading we got her put on the waiting list, hoping and praying that there would be a cancellation for a flight on Monday 11 December. The days passed and by the weekend (9 and 10 December) we'd still heard nothing. It was around 1030 hrs. on Monday that we got a message to call Qatar Airways about a flight that evening - from Heathrow (her ticket was from Gatwick) - and we were still in Okehampton. A call to National Express buses got Grace booked on the bus to Heathrow. We hurriedly her things and off we went, calling at Keith and Valeries' home to ask Valerie to go with us to show us the way to the bus station in Exeter. We just made it in time for Grace to grab a hot sausage sandwich from the cafeteria at the bus station while I loaded her bags onto the bus, and she was away. Now it was my turn. After lunch at Keith and Valeries', I tried to get a ticket. Trailfinders could get me a flight for the next morning! It was the only seat available before 2007 but the airline couldn't or wouldn't hold the ticket and didn't have electronic ticketing facilities. So Trailfinders couldn't get the ticket to me in time. I cancelled my booking and called this new (to me) airline, ETIHAD - The National Airline of the United Arab Emirates. Anyway, they booked me the one and only seat, and at £918.60 it should have been gold plated. Talk about a rip-off! But I still had to get to the airport (Gatwick this time). By now it was after 1800 hrs. and I'm nowhere near ready to go. I got away at 2030 hrs. At 2330 hrs. I arrived at Eunice and Jeff's in Reading where I was, as always, royally received. After sustenance and a quick wash of the car (at 0100hrs in the dark!), I was once more on my way to Crawley, to return the hire car, then onto Gatwick to get the flight. While queuing for the 'plane in Abu Dhabi, I got talking to some Filipina's who asked me where I was staying. I said Tanaytay. Someone replied "Tagaytay?" I said "No, Tanaytay." One lady (Emelyn) pricked up her ears at that and asked me where it was. I said it was in Alaminos. "Yes," she said, "I thought you might say that. I'm from Alaminos." I asked her how



she was getting home. She told me that she was getting picked up from Manila airport by her family in a mini-bus. In the same breath she said I could travel with her - just as long as I didn't mind waiting for her to do some shopping in the duty-free shop. Of course, I didn't mind and very much appreciated her kindness in taking me home. I arranged to meet her again once we got off the 'plane. We met up after passing through immigration and waiting for our baggage to arrive on the carousel. Her family were waiting and after loading her 5 shopping trollies full of stuff from the duty-free shop into the mini-bus, we got going. The photograph above shows Emelyn (3rd from right) and her family waiting for the meal we shared in the Pizza Hut. I got home at 0100hrs on Wednesday. Grace got home about 13 hours later after getting a free upgrade to Business Class from Doha to Manila (it never happens to me!). From getting up on Monday morning, my next trip to bed was on Thursday night (I didn't bother with Wednesday, I was too wide awake and had a lot of work to do getting my photographs onto the computer).



*Our first view of the Philippines after our trip to England.*

*Somewhere to the west of Baguio - not very far from where we live.*

# Alan's Reflections

Obsessed as many folks are, with keeping up to date - or up with the Jones's - is a human characteristic that often rears its ugly head at this time of year. Credit cards go into overload (or overdraft!) and bank balances drop like stones falling down a lift-shaft. In the rich 'West', the party usually extends from Christmas Eve until New Years Day - a whole week of eating and drinking, giving expensive presents and making merry with scant regard for what Christmas should really be about: A celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Here in the Philippines, one is reminded of the Christmas season from the beginning of September! The reality is that the actual celebrations only last a few hours - from late on Christmas Eve until Christmas Day. 'Boxing Day' doesn't exist as such and the 26 December is a normal working day. Few could afford the cost of partying for a whole week! But is all the 'new' stuff really required, or is it 'marketing gone mad?' Certainly the excesses of too much eating and drinking can be done without, but what about the expensive new presents? Are they really necessary?

An expensive Christmas present for me to receive would be a special macro lens to fit my camera. For some time, I've hankered after a new macro lens, that I require to take photographs of the fabulous butterflies here in the Philippines, but being desperately short of cash at this time, I carried out an experiment using a lens that I bought at least 30 years ago, which I've just brought back from England. For those who are interested in such things it's a Tamron SP 70-210mm with a 1:2 macro capability. Today, I connected it to my Canon digital camera (albeit it that the lens only works in fully manual mode), perched a very old flash gun on an extended flash shoe, and walked to an old housing lot overgrown with a variety of plant life - a haven for insects. I took several photographs of various insects and flowers and was well pleased with the results - see the butterfly photographs (*right*) and make your own assessment. They aren't great photographs by any standard, but I was more interested in the technical feasibility of using this old equipment than aesthetics. I doubt that there would be much, if any, improvement with a modern lens, although the handling and automatic functions would be better and it would certainly weigh less, but I'm sure the difference in image quality would be difficult to measure outside an optical laboratory. Any lack of sharpness was down to the main difficulties of holding the camera steady and getting the subject in focus - difficulties that would arise with any lens; old or new.



*Using my 30+ year old lens for this photograph of a butterfly, the complete frame is shown below; a magnified view at left.*



Last Christmas we were celebrating in England, although it was not quite the celebration it might have been as we knew my mother wouldn't be with us for much longer and that it would be her last Christmas here on Earth. This year we're celebrating with our family in the Philippines. Sadly, Grace's sisters, Nadia and Michelle will be in Doha, Qatar and we will be thinking of them and wishing they were with us.

Many of our family and friends are scattered around the world this Christmas and we will be remembering them all at this special time of year.

*Grace and I wish you all a very happy Christmas and a peaceful 2007.*

*Alan*

*Taken on 26 September 2006*



*Taken on 19 December 2006*

