

# 2023 Holiday Blog

Starring: Alex J. Llorente

Featuring: Bill O'Connor, Ariel, Adrian, Megan and Aurora ("The California Llorentes")

Introducing: Ames Finn Llorente-O'Connor

Special Canine Guest Stars: Albie, Azabu and Schubert



Once again I hope this letter finds you all well, even though at times it feels that the world is just spinning out of control. As was the case in 2022, this has been a momentous year for us. The "California LLorente" franchise continues to grow with another team expansion; Ames Finn Llorente-O'Connor joined the franchise on December 1, 2023.

The 10-second version: (1) I've continued to travel and spent over 50% of the first 9.5 months of 2023 outside the country. Since retiring I've visited 37 countries, 26 of which were "new" countries that count towards my "bucket list" goal of visiting all 195 U.N. member nations. I also visited Antarctica and Greenland this past year; (2) In addition, to my utterly cute and vivacious granddaughter, Aurora Grace Llorente, I now have a grandson, Ames Finn Llorente-O'Connor. (The pic on the right was taken this morning at 6 hours old.)



*AMES FINN LLORENTE-O'CONNOR Age 6 hrs.*

### December (2022):

I sent last year's blog on December 17<sup>th</sup>, right after Aurora's Jewish naming ceremony and the day before we all left for a trip to Loreto and La Paz in Baja California. Aurora's first passport stamp trip was filled with a bit of misadventure. Our flight back to L.A. on Christmas Eve was cancelled, so we flew to San Francisco, then took an Uber to Oakland to pick-up a rental car. Thanks to Megan carrying a three month infant, we were able to cut a two hour line to pick-up a car. We drove to LAX in 5 hrs. 45 min. in a dense fog to return the rental car and pick-up our cars from the airport parking lot and got home at 4:00 am on Christmas morning. Despite the ordeal it was a fun family trip and we got to briefly swim with whale sharks.



### January:

Ariel & Bill finally went on their honeymoon to Seychelles. Despite the hassles of lost bags, they had a great time. Their trip pics enticed me to add the islands to my itinerary on a volunteer trip I was planning during the summer. After my Caribbean cruise with Ariel in October 2022, I had decided to complete visits to all South American and Caribbean nations by the end of 2023. To this end, I flew alone to Guyana for 3 days, then from there to Barbados where I boarded a Royal Caribbean cruise, which included 4 more "bucket list" nations for me: Trinidad & Tobago, Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Dominica.

### February:

I was home for less than 2 weeks, before departing on my next trip to Fiji, Tuvalu and Tonga with Adrian, Megan and Aurora. Tuvalu and Tonga were on my "bucket list" as first time visits. Tuvalu is the second smallest nation in terms of population (The Vatican is smaller) and is also the least

visited nation on the planet. In fact, since most visitors are missionaries or foreign aid workers from Australia and New Zealand, it is quite possible that Aurora at 4.5 months was the youngest American to ever visit.

### March:

In my holiday blog last year I stated that I had decided to postpone my long anticipated Antarctica expedition cruise until the 2023-24 season to hopefully find someone to share a cabin, since the solo premium for an Antarctica cruise was quite dear. However, the advantages of being retired and able to book last minute trips finally manifested itself. Six weeks prior to departure, I found several deeply discounted "end of season" expedition cruises and decided that I could afford a solo cruise after all, booking passage on the Atlas





Traveler's last cruise for the season. My friend and neighbor, Mike Salzle, mentioned he had always wanted to visit Antarctica too and I ended up sharing the cabin with him, thus the trip cost me only half of what I had budgeted. We had an awesome time and we were lucky to have great weather for most of the landings, although the increasing sea ice compelled the ship's Captain to cancel the last landing and we headed back to Argentina a day early. However, I completed my objective of setting foot on the Antarctic continent and took a

30 second dip in the 0 degree C Antarctic(Southern) Ocean. On route to catch the cruise charter flight from Buenos Aires, we visited both the Brazilian and Argentinian sides of Iguazu Falls, as well as Ciudad del Este and the Itaipu Dam in Paraguay, which was a new "bucket list" country for me.

#### **April:**

Ariel and Bill invited us to meet them for a family get together near Pismo Beach. Their articulated pretext was that they were attending a wedding there and it would be nice to meet since it was a geographic midpoint. However, I immediately suspected it was a pregnancy announcement. I didn't say anything believing that they were attempting to surprise Adrian and Megan also, but it turns out Ariel & Bill had already told them while I was in Antarctica. We were informed that they wanted the baby's gender to be a surprise, and that although they had decided on names, they were keeping those secret until the baby was born.



#### **May:**

I flew to Manchester, England and then travelled to York and Newcastle Upon Tyne by train before returning to Manchester. From there I departed for a 12 day trip to visit Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, three new "bucket list" countries.



#### **June:**

Ariel, Bill, Megan, Adrian, Aurora and I met in Las Vegas for another family get together during the first week in June. Later in the month, I joined my brother, Oscar and my brother-in-law Gerard Nadeau on a Norwegian Cruise Lines cruise from Iceland to Greenland. Gerard works for NCL in case any of you are looking to book a cruise. My friend and neighbor, Gloria Salzle Martinez, also joined us on the cruise. I had traveled to Iceland with Gloria and Mike previously in 2018. The most economic way to get to Iceland from Orange County for the departure was by taking a flight from BWI, so I left a few days early and spent a few days museum hopping in Washington, DC and Baltimore. The cruise was nice, but lacked the pizzazz of the earlier Antarctica trip. On the route back home, I flew from Iceland to Hamilton, Ontario and visited Niagara Falls. This was my third visit to the falls; the last previous visit was in 2000.



#### **July-August:**

Adrian, Megan and Aurora took a short trip to Maui and stayed with friends. Two weeks after returning from Greenland, I took my longest solo trip to date. The primary

objective was to join a volunteer housing build team in Madagascar. While Habitat for Humanity has not yet resumed international builds, The Fuller Center for Housing (*an offshoot with a slight religious bent*) has resumed projects. The guy that introduced me to Habitat pre-Covid, was leading a build in Madagascar and I joined him, his son and four other volunteers on a ten day build. On I visited Zurich and spent 8 days in the Seychelles hitting three island. The scuba diving was disappointing (due to poor weather conditions), but the beaches there are simply unrivaled in their scenic beauty. I also spent a night in Nairobi and re-visited the National Park there. In Madagascar, the work on the build was hard, but the overall experience was extremely satisfying. If I were younger and in better shape, I would be doing substantially more, but currently will aim for one or two volunteer projects per year. Habitat is supposedly going to resume international projects in 2024, so there should be more options. In addition to the hundreds of pics I took and posted on Facebook and my personal



website, I posted a link on [www.llorente.com](http://www.llorente.com) to those taken by Ueli an advanced amateur/semi-pro photographer from Switzerland who was part of our Madagascar team. After the build I flew to Mauritius (former home of the Dodo) for three days and from there to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia for three nights before returning home.

**September:**  
I drove up to Hayward to see Ariel & Bill and deliver some baby stuff. A couple weeks later, Ariel came down for Aurora's First Birthday Party and her "girls only" SoCal baby shower.

### October:

I flew to Miami and from there took a solo trip to Suriname and then returned to Miami and travelled to the Dominican Republic with my uncle, Felo and his wife. While in Suriname, I took a day trip to visit the prison made famous by Papillon in French Guyana. These trips brought me to 119 countries out of 195. The U.N. divides the list into 6 regions (basically continents); I've now got all of North America, South America and the Caribbean, as well as Europe under my belt. The 76 countries I have left to visit include nine South Pacific island nations and the remaining 67 are in Africa or Asia. I'm hoping to hit about 20 more countries in 2024. I've got about 30 countries left to go that I can visit relatively easily. After that it becomes more dicey due to safety issues, geo-political conflicts and economics, but hopefully I can manage 4 to 5 new countries per year after 2024. At the end of October, we drove up to Hayward for Ariel's & Bill's "Falloween" baby shower, which was attended by almost 70 of Ariel's & Bill's friends and family.



**November:**  
I started putting up Christmas decorations on November 1<sup>st</sup>. It typically takes me 3 to 6 weeks to finish, but this year, I had all the major indoor stuff up in 10 days. Adrian put up the outside lights last weekend. Megan thinks that I've gone all out this year. I really haven't. However, given that Aurora has learned to say "Wow!" when the Christmas trees light up or the trains are running, a greater incentive has been impressed upon me to do

Christmas right than in the recent past. Ariel's and Bill's baby was due on November 27<sup>th</sup>, but apparently strategically bid his time to be born a December baby.

### **December:**

Ames Finn Llorente-O'Connor was born this morning, December 1, 2023, at 4:32 a.m. !!! It wasn't easy, but both the baby and Ariel are doing well. I'm not sure if Bill realizes that he will never sleep-in on a Saturday morning again.

\* \* \*

A close friend told me last week that I was the luckiest person she knew. This past year, I've been lauded for having garnered good karma through life and repeatedly told that I am blessed. From my perspective, at present, life is objectively good. However, the innate cynic in me is wary that I might be riding the flood current and at some point, I will have to face the tide's ebb. I also feel a bit guilty contrasting my life with the suffering of others in this troubled world. My daughter, Ariel, would say that "I'm overthinking it"; she recently commented that "Boomers" tend to do that. My retort is that overthinking is less of a problem than not thinking at all, which millennials seem to embrace. The irony of finding myself on the "old folks" side of an intergenerational argument does not escape me, given the role I've played most of my life.

My health is generally good. I was under 200 lbs. when I got back from Madagascar at the end of August. Unfortunately, I've gained back almost 9 pounds in the last three months. Ironically, I find it easier to exercise, eat right and stick to my medications schedule when I travel than when I'm at home.

The kids are all doing well:

- (i) Adrian continues to work for Valta Energy and is now the Director of Accounting and Financial Reporting. Four years out of college and his salary is higher than my ending base salary when I retired as a college professor with 38 years of tenure.
- (ii) Bill was promoted to Senior Manager for Marketing Operations at Alation. Derreck his longtime little bro from the Big Brothers Program graduated high school in May and is in his first year of college at SFSU studying criminal justice.
- (iii) Megan was accepted into the Nurse Practitioner's program at UCLA and enrolled in September. She commuted the arduous 65 miles each way, 2 days a week this past quarter. She anticipates graduating in the Summer of 2025.
- (iv) Ariel hit a sweet deal at the local library a little more than a month before giving birth. She applied to work there more than 2 years ago and of course they reached out in her third trimester of pregnancy. She accepted as a Per Diem Library Assistant and loves it. They are allowing her to take the time she needs and then return when she's ready, and have already encouraged her to apply for a full-time role. She also still works part-time at Seek Collective as their Director of Operations. She started as full-time but with the downturn of the economy, she had to go part-time. She will return back to both when she's ready.

Aurora is 14 months old now. She seems to be at the cusp of walking. Her verbal communication skills are currently limited so we haven't started on integral calculus yet, but she's utterly cute and relatively good natured.

Not much to say about Ames, since he was just born 13 hours ago. I am driving up early in the morning and will meet him tomorrow.

Ariel's posting announcement was:



*Welcome to the world, Ames Finn Llorente-O'Connor (male).*

*Joined us at 4:35am after 2 hours and 35 minutes of active labor on December 1st.*

*6 lbs, 12 ounces (Ariel guessed this on the spot!) and 18 inches long.*

*Was a vaginal birth with a 2nd degree tear. In a lot of pain but will be okay.*



I'm hoping to hit 21 new countries in 2024, but the only thing I have booked so far is a month long trip to South Africa and cruise on NCL from Cape Town to Barcelona where I will visit 7 new West African nations. I'm also planning to do Mongolia, Kazakhstan and some of the other "stans" in the summer but haven't made any specific plans for that yet. In the Fall, I'm planning a trip to Italy with my college roommate and his wife; I will probably visit a couple of North African countries before or after that trip. I am also looking into a possible volunteer build in Nepal, but presently waiting to see what Habitat for Humanity is going to do in 2024. I will be updating my personal website with travel plans for anyone interested.

I've been trying to avoid staying away more than 3 or 4 weeks at a time to be able to bond with Aurora, I think I've successfully accomplished that, although at the ripe age of one, she can forget about me in the blink of an eye. The challenge now facing me is how to bond with Ames, who will be 400 miles away, along with Aurora, and still get some overseas trips under my belt.

Once again, our best wishes for an awesome Christmas and fabulous New Year!!!

Love,  
Alex J. Llorente

Dec-1-2023