

## **Australia**

### **October 27–November 13, 1994**

#### **Thursday, October 27 – Los Angeles to Sydney (via San Francisco)**

It was a gray day in San Francisco as we sat idly in the international terminal waiting to board our 747 bound for Sydney. We could see planes taking off and disappearing into the mist – not exactly encouraging, but I had to believe they knew how to deal with fog here!

We left Los Angeles early; at RAND at 06:30 for our shuttle pickup, 08:30 flight to San Francisco, and a 90 minute layover until our 11:30 flight. As usual, I didn't get much sleep last night, and hoped I could sleep some on the 13.5 hour flight. We left the house so fast that I forgot to grab the Halloween and birthday cards I had for the girls and Luci, too – bummer! So we called Lu from SFO to re-wish her a happy birthday. Her big question for us was, how many meals would we have on the flight to Sydney? I had no idea; all I wanted at that point was a glass of wine!

#### **Friday, October 28 – en route**

12:30 (am) Pacific time, 17:30 Sydney time; 12.5 hours into the flight (groan) with about one hour left to go. The time was passed, after a fashion, by reading, sleeping, and eating; not quite enough sleep and probably too much to eat! We ate a hot dog lunch at SFO around 11:00, a “big” dinner en route at 14:00 (Pacific), a sandwich snack at 18:00 (Pacific), and then finally something brunch-like (crepes) at midnight (Pacific). (My body clock was resolutely on US Pacific time.) I didn't feel much like eating the snack or brunch, but as we're getting to our hotel after 20:00 local time and aren't likely to eat until morning, I figured I should take what I could get.

The view out the window was pretty constant, sunlit cloud cover over ocean. Supposedly we passed over Fiji but I couldn't see much different from where I sat.

#### **Saturday, October 29 – Sydney**

We arrived in Sydney last night at about 18:30 local time, trooped through customs, and found our luggage (hurray! not lost in the plane switch!). After changing some dollars from US to Australian, we got our rental car, a nice automatic mid-size Ford Falcon, for the same price as the compact stick shift we had reserved. A good thing; right-side drive *and* stick would have been a little hard to take. We loaded ourselves up and headed out on our ~10-mile drive to our hotel, the Victoria Court in the Potts Point area of Sydney.

We'd read that driving in Sydney was a mess, and they weren't kidding. Directions that look straightforward aren't if you can't find street signs, and every street curved so it was very easy to get turned around. I felt as if we were in a game of Adventure – in a maze of twisty little passages, all different. 90 minutes and at least one curbside curse-at-the-map session later, we found the hotel, but no parking. I ran inside the hotel and got directions from the proprietor Linda as to where Robert could park (left on Earl to Springfield, to the Hotel New Hampshire) and off he went...not to return for nearly a half hour! I had dire thoughts of bad directions, muggings, etc. and was getting fairly worried when he arrived at the front door. Thankfully we were both able to settle down quickly and get to sleep, with the pleasant gurgle of a courtyard fountain outside our window.

The morning brought us our first two life birds: a Little Raven and Red-whiskered Bulbul. (Unfortunately, my “first bird” really was a Rock Dove.) We heard some tantalizing parakeet-like noises but didn't see who was responsible. Breakfast was a continental in the charming

Laura-Ashley decorated courtyard dining area. Robert tried some Vegemite, a concentrated yeast extract that is rather popular here, on his toast. One book we have described Vegemite as “beer scum”, and after tasting it, that seemed like an apt description. It looked a bit like chocolate, a cruel trick if ever there was one<sup>1</sup>.



*O gude ale comes and gude ale goes;  
Gude ale gars me sell my hose  
Sell my hose, and pawn my shoon –  
Gude ale keeps my heart aboon!*

– Robbie Burns

I’d hoped to have a *gude ale* before or with dinner, but that proved a little problematical in Potts Point, as most of the restaurants seemed to be unlicensed and the bars on nearby Darlinghurst Road in Kings Cross were rather questionable-looking. So we opted for a very quiet dinner in a little Italian bistro, and fortified with mineral water, reflected on a long but productive day.

We had started out after breakfast with a walk through the Royal Botanical Garden, a beautiful large area filled with many plants familiar to us<sup>2</sup>, and birds that weren’t: Crimson Rosellas, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, Common Mynas<sup>3</sup>, Noisy Miners, Superb Blue Wren. We walked through the garden and out the other side to the famed Sydney Opera House and Circular Quay, listened to “music of the Andes” street musicians, and eventually caught a ferry over to the Taronga Zoo. The zoo was great fun, giving us many good looks at Australian species that we were not likely to see on our own, e.g., saltwater crocodile, platypus. We saw our first Laughing Kookaburra roaming about too – uncharacteristically quiet, but free and countable!

Leaving the zoo around 14:30, we ferried back to Circular Quay and trekked back to the hotel. By the time we arrived I was done in – sore foot, tired calves, and generally pooped. A visit to a chemist shop for bandaids was added to the agenda.

### **Sunday, October 30 – Sydney**

Sore back (wrenched trying to fix shower door), aching hip, sore feet, sore calves; I was a mess! But with a full day planned I couldn’t grumble *too* much, and I did get a back rub before breakfast.

We headed out to Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park first, about 25 km north of the city. Beautiful eucalyptus forest with some good birds, including Lyrebird and some exasperating Brown Thornbills. Saw a sign warning us to leave the kangaroos alone, but we didn’t see any. Lots of boating and fishing areas within the park; we picnicked at one nice area with various cockatoos and Chestnut Teal eyeing us while some kids played cricket nearby. The West Head portion of the park was pretty, but from the road you could see the extent of last summer’s wildfires; the fires covered an immense area.

Eventually we came back into town, over the Harbour Bridge (A\$2 toll) and back to the hotel. We found it much easier to navigate Sydney streets in the daytime.

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<sup>1</sup>Back at RAND, I induced co-worker Edson Smith into sampling some Vegemite that I’d thoughtfully brought with me; after gagging, he dubbed it “barf extract”.

<sup>2</sup>Bougainvillea, lavender, gums, etc.

<sup>3</sup>Well, ok, we saw Common Mynas in Hawaii.

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Sydney certainly had a lot of charm, and seemed a shame that we had to move on so soon. It was a comfortable place to visit because so many things seemed familiar; it felt like the American West crossed with England, Britain gone cowboy. People were friendly, the food was good (kind of nouvelle or California cuisine). The architecture on Victoria Street reminded me of New Orleans with the intricate wrought-iron balconies and fences, while Ku-Ring-Gai Chase was reminiscent of the Texas hill country. The picnic area of KRGC could have been in any western US national park, except the kids were playing cricket and rugby instead of baseball and football.

Just when things started to seem *too* familiar, though, the sounds would remind you where you were, or more accurately, where you weren't. The infectious laugh of the kookaburra, screech of rosellas, and the raucous screaming of the cockatoos all told you that you were indeed very far from home.

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*Crocodile Dundee II* was on the telly this evening. It really was a bad movie, but worth watching just to hear Paul Hogan's Aussie accent.

### **Monday, October 31 – Sydney to Blackheath (Blue Mountains)**

We wrapped up our Sydney time this morning by adjusting our clocks forward (New South Wales went on Daylight Savings Time this weekend; our going forward at the same time California went back made us 19 hours ahead of Pacific time instead of 17). We then strolled through Kings Cross (seedy still in daylight, but less menacing) to find a chemist, an ATM, and a post office. The post office thoughtfully had stamp packages for sale labelled "Postcards to US", "Letters to US", etc., making it easy to figure out what we needed. The postcard stamps featured wombats.

Settling up our bill, we left the Victoria Court and struggled through the rat's maze of streets downtown before finally popping out and hitting the Great Western Highway. The GWH in turn became the M4 motorway and took us right up into the Blue Mountains. The mountains aren't terribly high – around 1000m – but were very scenic, especially the Three Sisters area. We saw some good birds at the Echo Point visitor's center: Galah, Gang-Gang Cockatoo, King Parrot, Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike, Eastern Spinebill, and New Holland Honeyeater. A Nankeen (Australian) Kestrel, too, and maybe a White Goshawk!

We ate lunch at a charming little cafe called The Hattery<sup>4</sup> in Katoomba (*only 700m from the Three*



*Liza at the Echo Point overlook in the Blue Mountains.*

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<sup>4</sup>Bought a hat here for Lee, an Indiana-Jones type bush hat called a Drizabone. He might not get it...

*Sisters overlook!* proclaimed the flyer on our windshield). Yummy food; I had butternut pumpkin soup, while Robert had creamy bacon pasta or something like that. (Italian food apparently was big; every place had pasta dishes.)

At any rate, we toodled out of Katoomba another 20 minutes or so up the road to Blackheath. We stayed at the Jemby-Rinjah Lodge and had a "tree house" cabin to ourselves, right in the middle of a gum forest. The cabin with loft bedroom and views into the eucalypt canopy reminded us both of our stay in Hawaii in the Hapu'u forest. The vegetation was different to be sure, and in Hawaii one doesn't have Eastern Rosellas and Black-backed Magpies outside the door, but the overall feeling of being away from civilization yet secure and comfortable was the same. We had a kitchen, and planned to cook for ourselves for a few days and save some dollars. There were some shops in nearby "downtown" Blackheath where we picked up some dinner items, ham and cheese for sandwiches, cola and beer, including Sheaf Stout (Brian Medley's suggestion), and Castlereigh XXXX (Lee's recommendation). The Castlereigh was kind of weak, but the stout was particularly good and had me feeling rather loquacious as I sat writing. Robert perused maps while we waited for it to get dark so we could look for some nocturnal creatures, see some southern hemisphere stars, and light our wood stove.

### **Tuesday, November 1 - Blackheath**

We were up early, enjoying the visitors to our verandah (Crimson Rosella, Pied Currawong, Magpie) seeking food while we breakfasted on tea and raisin bread. At 08:30 we trooped out to the bird-feeding area and were rewarded by having rosellas literally eating out of our hands. We also had the epithet "septic" cheerfully explained to us by one of the lodge staff: "Well, you're all *Yanks*, and *Yank* rhymes with *tanks*, and you're not German tanks, but you are rather full of it, aren't you then!" Hmm.

Following the feeding photo op we walked down the road to the Neates Glen track parking area, and headed down the track into the Grand Canyon of the Blue Mountains. Down, down, down we went, from the blue gum forest into a narrow damp fern gully, down to a creek, then down some more. We knew the walk out would be tough, but why quit? The canyon closed in on us, in places we had to bend double to pass beneath the rocky outcroppings. (Good thing the area was not prone to earthquakes.)

Luckily the track was well groomed and had handrails in the tougher areas. The dampness at the bottom with dripping rocks and ferns made us feel as if we were back in the rainforest proper of South America. There were a few good birds about, too: Pilot Bird, Rufous Fantail, and Golden Whistler.

The easy walking at the bottom soon came to an end, and fortified with the lunch we'd packed in, up we went towards Evans Lookout. What a tough climb; the only consolation was that way out was certainly a lot easier than if we had gone back the way we had come. And the view from the



*Liza feeding a friendly Crimson Rosella at the Jemby-Rinjah Lodge.*

lookout was spectacular, too! Robert took a photograph while I zombied on the steps, then we slowly walked the 800m back along the road to Jemby-Rinjah. We arrived back at 13:30 – a 4+ hour hike!

We figured we'd rest, shower, then go out for the remainder of the afternoon, maybe taking in the town rhododendron gardens (the following Saturday Blackheath was to have its annual rhododendron festival). But a thunderstorm changed our minds and we lazed about until 16:00, summoning enough energy then only to run to the market for some salami and to mail our postcards. Good thing, too – on our way out we saw a number of Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos right by the entrance, huge black birds with yellow in the tail, and a voice that was louder than thunder. What a treat!

After dinner we struggled to light the wood stove. It was very unsatisfying; it's designed to smoulder all night, slowly, while I'd rather see big leaping flames. Big flames would be nice to contrast to the wind and rain outside whipping the gums about.

I wore the hat today that I'd bought for Lee, and simply have to keep it for myself, it is too fun. I'll have to buy him another.<sup>5</sup>

A Pied Currawong appears to be our friend since I fed him a cracker. He's reappeared at the door several times and even tapped once on the glass to get my attention. An Australian Raven (big guy!) came by too. The magpies were about this morning, one nearly came inside. Rosellas, King Parrots, and a Bowerbird hung out, too. The tameness of all the birds was pretty amazing.

### **Wednesday, November 2 – Blackheath**

It was late afternoon, and the rain drumming on the tin roof was very relaxing and comforting. There's something about listening to rain fall when you're snug and warm in front of a fire. And yes, we *did* achieve fire, courtesy of some flammable-liquid-soaked cubes called "Little Lucifers"<sup>6</sup> that we found in the local market. To heck with newspaper, and all the smoke and ash it produces; the little cubes burned hot enough to engage the logs quite nicely, and the room temperature, at long last, was up to 74.5°F, which is a lot better than the 48°F we fled from this morning!

Despite our early and cold-induced start to the day, we didn't really do too much. We started out with a short drive through Blackheath and out to Govett's Leap<sup>7</sup>. What a view! The incredible panorama of the Blue Mountains stretched before us, with Bridal Veil Falls to one side, a little weak but still flowing. The mountains literally appear blue, not green, the result of sunlight playing off the oils emitted by the blue gum trees. The mountains with the deep gorges must have appeared insurmountable to the early white explorers, and indeed, it wasn't until nearly 40 years after the First Fleet (of convicts) arrived that a route across was found. The aborigines had it figured out long before that, of course: stick to the ridgelines, following the plateaus instead of the arduous up-and-down of trying to maintain a straight-line compass bearing, or worse, trying to follow the river at the bottom (too many boulders clog the narrows).

Of course, that high route seems obvious now, with the benefit of good maps and aerial photography to show one the way. But before the area had been mapped, it must have been difficult indeed.

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<sup>5</sup>As it turns out, the hat I kept didn't fit him anyway.

<sup>6</sup>Almost certainly illegal in the US.

<sup>7</sup>Named for the surveyor who mapped the area around 1830, not for anyone who actually jumped.

We left the Leap and following a brief stop at the park visitor centre, paid a visit to the city gardens to spy some rhododendrons. Not much there, so we shopped a bit (finding our little firebombs, er, Little Lucifers), then took off down the road towards the Megalong Valley. We started to take a short loop walk through the rainforest just off the road, but the intermittent rain drove us back into the car. We then drove a little further to a picnic site. Luckily the rain let up enough for us to poke around, and we found a bunch of Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, a Crested Shriketit, Eastern Yellow Robin, and some Gray Fantails that made it very obvious how they got their name.

We spent the afternoon lazing about and getting the fire established. Robert went off during a lull in the rain to explore the Braeside Creek while I enjoyed coffee and warmth at the lodge. I was pleasantly surprised, when I returned to the cabin, to find smoke still emitting from the chimney; our little fire had taken on a life and was happily glowing in its chamber.

Warm and showered, I should have gotten up to make dinner, but it was so pleasant just sitting. Robert returned, and we fed some crackers to our visiting currawongs and a pair of Satin Bowerbirds. The male bowerbird was a shiny, iridescent black color, and both the male and female had incredible blue-violet Elizabeth-Taylor-eyes. A huge Australian Raven hopped in and drove the others off, but he soon left and the bowerbirds returned. I figured the currawong was about, waiting for me to make dinner. He seemed terribly intelligent. If Alfred Hitchcock had set *The Birds* in Australia, he certainly would have used currawongs, magpies, and the big ravens.

Too soon again it was time to move on; a room awaits us in Canberra. I did my best to remember the Blue Mountains bush, the lovely blue gum canopy that lets so much light through, and the greyish-green cast of the underbrush. The English must have found the vegetation here harsh and forbidding compared to the soft emerald green of their home, but I found it lovely and appealing.

#### **Thursday, November 3 - Canberra**

We left our comfy Blue Mountains hideaway relatively early, winding our way down, cutting south on the Northern Road to the Hume Highway, then on to Canberra. The approach to Canberra was beautiful; rolling hills tinted greenish-brown, dotted with gum trees, very reminiscent of the hill country of Texas. Certainly you would not guess that you were on the road to a nation's capitol; as close as 10 km out we were skirting Lake George, a large, shallow-looking lake whose shore, in non-drought years, probably comes a lot closer to the Federal Highway. About the time we decided Canberra's very existence was a myth, we came across the "Welcome to the Australian Capitol Territory" sign, and started attempting to navigate through the "planned"<sup>8</sup> streets of Canberra.

The streets were wide, at least, but most were not particularly well-marked. The city streets were laid out in sets of concentric circles. Most streets were called crescent, circle, or oval, so without a map, we were basically clueless.<sup>9</sup> We wandered about the Forrest suburb (south Canberra) for nearly 30 minutes before we finally stumbled upon our hotel, the Telopea Park Motel, on New South Wales Crescent, off Manuka Circle. A telopea, by the way, is a gorgeous, spiky flower.

After depositing our stuff in our large but exceedingly weird room (the decor was a mix of Oklahoma Best Western and Teta Dollyesque heavy gilt mirrors and fixtures) we went out to see

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<sup>8</sup>As opposed to the unplanned mess of Sydney!

<sup>9</sup>It occurs to me that one might be able to have a viable business selling good street maps and making reflecting signs in this country.

something of the town. Time was short, so we went to the War Memorial, a fascinating museum set on the slope of Mt. Ainslie. The memorial was at one end of a mall, opposite the Capitol, which itself was an odd structure with purportedly the world's tallest, and certainly the ugliest, flagpole. The Australian flag atop the pole was rumored to be the size of a city bus.

Inside the War Memorial, the history of Australia's armed forces and the various conflicts in which they have participated was depicted through exhibits, maps, dioramas, and other displays. History "begins" with the Colonial war in South Africa, 1899-1902 (the "Boer War"), and progressed through the Great War (World War I), involvement against Bolsheviks in Russia in 1919, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the recent Gulf War. The timeline included two conflicts of which I'd never even heard: the Malayan Emergency (1950-1960), and the Indonesian Confrontation (1965).

The "emergency" arose when communist terrorists (CTs), armed by the British during WWII to fight Japanese insurgents, mostly declined to return their weapons at the end of the war. When the British reasserted their authority, the CTs began a long period of guerilla warfare. Eventually, in 1958, the British pulled out, granting Malaya independence. About the only positive thing that could be said was that the Australian armed forces learned much about jungle warfare, knowledge that they put to use a few years later in Vietnam.

The "confrontation" that followed in 1965 was basically Indonesia's opposition to the formation of Malaysia. Indonesia viewed Malaysia (consisting of Malaya, Sarawok, and Sabek; originally Singapore too, but they withdrew) to be further evidence of British neo-colonialism, and they invaded Sarawok to make their point. Indonesian forces were eventually pushed back and the borders remain today as they were originally. But presumably Aussie relations with Indonesia could be better; Indonesia remains Australia's #1 national defense concern.

A large area was given over to dioramas, maps, and artifacts describing the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps' (ANZAC) ill-fated attempt to take the Gallipoli peninsula from the Turks during WWI. Due to a small navigational error of about a mile, the ANZACs missed their ideal landing spot that might have allowed them to cross and hold the peninsula, and instead wound up dug into trenches on a steep, rocky slope. The ANZACs and Turks, remnants of the once-mighty Ottoman empire, were stalemated for nine months in what were politely described as "appalling conditions"; losses were horrendous on both sides<sup>10</sup>. Whether the ANZACs could have succeeded given a better landing is debatable; the determination of the Turks to keep their empire together was probably underestimated.

Eventually the ANZACs gave up and retreated, rather cleverly; they rigged up weights and pulleys with rifles so that the weapons would fire through the night, making it seem as if the troops were still there, when in fact they were skulking down slopes back to the rescue boats on the beach. Despite the heavy loss of life (both from the enemy and rampant disease), though, the battle served to strengthen Aussie pride, and ANZAC Day is still celebrated each April with as much enthusiasm (or more) than the US has for Memorial Day or even July 4th.

We had to leave before seeing everything due to the memorial closing at 17:00, but decided to go back in the morning to go through the Boer War exhibits.

After leaving the memorial, we found our way (through trial and error) out to the Jerrabomberra wetlands. Several "hides" gave us some protection from the cold and howling wind, allowing

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<sup>10</sup>The Peter Weir movie *Gallipoli*, with a very young Mel Gibson, gives what looks to be a very realistic account of the long and pointless "battle".

good looks at Marsh Harrier, White Pelican, Grey Teal, Red-kneed and Black-fronted Dotterels, Purple Swamphen, and more.

We finished up our day with a nice dinner not far from our hotel. The ritzy Roberto's Italian restaurant required reservations (that, or they simply didn't like the way we looked), so we went to a "bar and grill" a few doors away to enjoy a filling and tasty dinner, with good ale to boot. (Grilled foccacia sandwiches are really yummy.) Then back to the hotel where we laughed our way through episodes of *LA Law* and *NYPD Blue*, on tv and finally to sleep.

#### Friday, November 4 – Canberra to Beechworth

An early start – well, sort of – after watching the Aussie *Today Show* (same format as ours), found us driving up to the top of Mt. Ainslie to get an overall view of Canberra and to scout around for a few birds, too. The view of the city was impressive, especially since you're looking directly down to the War Memorial, mall, and Capitol. The lake bisecting the city (named Burley Griffin, after the architect whose design for a modern capitol "won", sigh) was beautiful, as was the 150-ft Captain Cook fountain. And there was quite a nice view of the Canberra airport, all two runways, too.

What was more impressive from atop the mountain, though, was the vast amount of open space around Canberra. It was literally in the middle of nowhere.

Back to the War Memorial, this time to go through the Boer War exhibit. Fascinating; I really need to reread a history of South Africa to see what happened after the British succeeded in defeating the Dutch/German farmers ("bauers", mutated into "boers"). The exhibit also touched upon the execution of Harry 'Breaker' Morant and James Handcock, by the British, for "murdering" Boer prisoners of war<sup>11</sup>.

We finished up our time in Canberra with a visit to the Australian National Botanic Garden. The Rainforest Gully was quite nice and displayed plants from the many rainforest habitats in Australia. One tree in particular caught my eye: a Silk Oak, a type of *Grevillea*, the tree that Dad planted outside our bedroom window in San Pedro so many years ago! I bet he never knew it was an Australian native.

We finally left Canberra around 13:30 for the ~4 hour drive to Beechworth. It was a nice drive except for the heavy rain in parts. The landscape rolled along in front of us and seemed ever so much like a drive through the California central coast. Beechworth itself was an old goldrush town, very charming. Our bed and breakfast, the Rose Cottage, was a gorgeous Victorian house (over)stuffed with Victorian goodies; my friend Debbie Robin would love it here.

After enjoying a nice dinner this evening, we relaxed in our room and watched *Splendour in the Grass* on television. Too many whiny females in the story, but such good actors: Warren Beatty, Natalie Wood, Sandy Dennis, and Gary Lockwood.

#### Saturday, November 5 – Beechworth

After a comfortable night in our Victorian brass bed (complete with down pillows and comforter), we went to the breakfast room. We knew we were in trouble when another couple, an Aussie woman and her New Zealander mate, said, "Oh dear, they've ordered *cereal*," and went on to explain that the breakfasts at the Rose Cottage were quite large – as vast as the Australian interior!

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<sup>11</sup>Handcock murdered a Boer priest as well, after being goaded by Morant, (this later admitted by a third defendant who was spared and wrote a book about the experience, called "Scapegoats of the Empire"; the book was the basis for the movie). They were acquitted of the priest's murder but found guilty for killing prisoners of war. Killing the POWs was clearly not a very honorable thing to do; on the other hand, it was a pretty common practice among the numerous "unofficial" regiments, including Morant's Bushveldt Cavaliers. Probably the British command decided they needed to distance themselves from the actions of the regiments, and used Morant and Handcock to make their point. A poll conducted among visitors to the War Memorial over the years indicate that the majority of visitors (mostly Australians?) overwhelmingly feel that Morant and Handcock were screwed.

And they weren't kidding. Toast, two eggs, a large piece of bacon, broiled tomato, three large English banger sausages, fruit, juice, and coffee. As Tony McClure, the proprietor, cheerfully proclaimed, "You don't come to a bed and breakfast if you don't want breakfast!" Our companions joked that Tony would admonish anyone who didn't clean his plate, so we did. No lunch for us today. In fact it took hours before we began to feel unstuffed.

By 17:00 we still were not hungry, although that did not keep us from enjoying rum balls and merengues at the nearby Beechworth Bakery.

Our day was a good one, despite damp weather. We drove out through Myrtleford to the Mount Buffalo National Park, about 50 km from Beechworth. The views from the Chalet (4000 ft) were gorgeous; snow gums, "golden tip" trees (of which we bought some seed at the ANBG in Canberra), and the Alpine grasses provided beautiful contrast to the granite rock formations. The cappuccinos we enjoyed at the Chalet tearoom were a pleasant warm touch to the afternoon. And we got some really good birds today: Scarlet and Flame Robins, Red-browed Firetail, Brown Flycatcher ("Jacky Winter"), and Striated Pardalote. I finally saw the Fan-tailed Cuckoo that Robert had spied a few days ago, too. Last, but not least, we had some great luck on the drive back to our B&B, spotting Wedge-tailed Eagles, Sacred Kingfisher, and Leaden Flycatcher. Quite the birding day!

Back in Beechworth, we shopped a bit, picking up lacy gifts at the Canterbury Lace shop, a few interesting food items for Claire and Alla, and the goodies at the bakery. I still needed to find the things that Lu, Steve, and Lee requested, hopefully in Melbourne. I also wanted to look for Kangaroo Tail Soup; wonder if Mom remembered that rusty can in the pantry, courtesy of Dad, all those years? I certainly did.

### **Sunday, November 6 - Beechworth to Melbourne**

Another breakfast feast; a little less than yesterday, no cereal and only one egg, but still more than I wanted. I'd hoped for only toast and jam, but marked sausage and egg for Robert (no spam), and Tony interpreted that to mean we both wanted everything. Oh well - at least we're well fortified for the day.

The drive from Beechworth to Melbourne was relatively uneventful. The 300 km trip was punctuated with a couple of brief birding stops near Beechworth (for Rainbow Bee-eater and Restless Flycatcher) and a stop at the Plunkett Winery about 100 km from our destination. We bought a couple of bottles, Gewürtztraminer and Traminer-Riesling, the latter of which we enjoyed after dinner in our room at the Magnolia Court hotel in East Melbourne. East Melbourne is a quiet Victorian section of Melbourne that resembles Sydney's Potts Point area. Dinner was just a few takeaway items from a local deli. A fierce windstorm prevented us from walking further to a restaurant for dinner, and we were loathe to move the car after securing a good parking space at the rear of the hotel. So in we stayed with our munchies, wine, cheese, and chocolate, watching *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* on television. Kevin Costner's accent, or lack thereof, really detracted from the movie.

### **Monday, November 7 - Melbourne**

A much more sane breakfast awaited us this morning in the dining room of the Magnolia Court hotel. Afterwards we extracted the car from the parking area (the proprietor had to move two cars, but he did so quickly and cheerfully), and headed southwest through Geelong. First stop

was You Yangs Forest Park, near Little River<sup>12</sup>. It took us awhile to find the entrance to the park; either the fierce winds had blown the signs about, or some locals were having great fun sending unknowing ecotourists many kilometers out of the way. Not too much to see there, anyway; the wind and rain kept us in the car, mostly. The fields outside the park turned up many Brown Falcons, at least.

We then drove out via Torquay to the Great Ocean Road<sup>13</sup> and beyond, aiming for Port Campbell and the 12 Apostles. Alas, the road was narrow and curvy, and we turned back after three hours with 60 km left to go. We did get a lot of nice ocean views through gaps in the clouds; it was rather fascinating to realize that the water we stared at was all that separated us from Antarctica. And the fields through the hills back to the highway turned up Shelducks and Black Swans, too.

We were back in the city around 19:30, following a quick and very cold stop at Westgate Park (under the Westgate Bridge). Brrrr!

Tried to talk Robert into postponing our return home for three to five days and jaunting up to Cairns. We both thought about it and he was almost swayed, but logistically it seemed too much bother for just a few days. Despite the appeal of just running away, it seemed better to plan a proper trip to Queensland for about two years from now.

*Medicine Man* (Sean Connery) was the evening's television movie; enjoying a fine Malaysian dinner, drinking wine in our room, and watching television rounded out the evening very nicely. That and Robert's fantail imitation.

## **Tuesday, November 8 - Melbourne**

Our last full day in Melbourne started with a White-plumed Honeycreeper outside the breakfast window. We spent all of our day outside the city proper, except for an early stop at Westgate Park where we found White-winged Triller and Clamorous Reed Warbler. The bulk of the morning was spent at Dandenong Ranges National Park (Ferntree Gully). Mostly it was drippy and damp, but we did have a nice short walk on the "Living Bush" track where we heard, and finally saw, an Eastern Whiptail. The bird had a great call - like a whip cracking - but it was hard to see as it crept through the underbrush. We finally crawled up off the track into the bush ourselves and were able to catch a glimpse.

Following DRNP we went on a winding drive on country roads to Yellingbo State Preserve, where the bird activity was slow. (I thought it was deadly dull; Robert said I was just in a bad mood! As usual the truth lay somewhere in between.)

The day wrapped up on Phillip Island at dusk watching the Penguin Parade, a nightly spectacle of Little Penguins trooping ashore to sit in their burrows amid the sand dune vegetation. They were so adorable; a group would be washed up ashore, stand up, and start crossing the beach. But then one or two would turn back towards the water, the group would mill around confusedly, and eventually all would lose their nerve, turn, run back and dive into the surf, with the former leader running frantically on stubby legs after the pack. This would repeat a couple of times before the group would have enough collective courage to charge the beach successfully.

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<sup>12</sup>The Aussie musical group Little River Band *must* be from near here.

<sup>13</sup>Which really ought to be subtitled "Grey Fantail Road of Death"; countless birds wag their butts in the middle of the road, giving them just a few seconds to show off before they get squashed.

We also saw a Pacific Gull on the beach at Phillip Island, and Short-tailed Shearwaters in the parking lot after sunset. (Just about the time we said to each other, "gee, we haven't seen any shearwaters", several flew overhead.)

The 120 km drive back to Melbourne in the rain put us back at our hotel around 22:30. We should have gone to sleep immediately, but *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was on television, and we couldn't resist staying up.

### **Wednesday, November 9 – Melbourne to Bairnsdale (East Gippsland)**

We left Melbourne shortly after breakfast and headed east on the Princes Highway to the Gippsland Lakes area. We kicked around the idea of driving south to Wilson's Promontory, the southernmost tip of the Australian continent, but dismissed it because of time (at least three hours more driving). So Phillip Island was indeed our furthest point south to date, some 34 degrees south.

The drive to Bairnsdale took about three hours and was quite nice; blue skies, fluffy clouds, and beautiful flat to gently rolling landscape with a lot of pastures full of sheep, cattles, emus, etc. We stopped at a farm cheese factory en route and picked up some decadent blue and havarti cheeses for later munching. We arrived in Bairnsdale around 13:00, which seemed a little too early to check in, so we parked and walked up and down the main street to see what Bairnsdale ("The Capitol of the Gippsland Lakes Region") had to offer. One find was a pretty good bookstore; we found an excellent B&B book for Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania, and a couple of smocking books for Luci (finally!). Now we just needed to find a B&B book for Queensland and New South Wales.

We checked into our hotel, the Riversleigh Country Hotel, around 14:00. Nice place! We had a big room with a bay window (adorned with puffy balloon curtains) overlooking the Mitchell River. After dropping off our stuff we took a walk along the river. There were beautiful river gum trees against the blue sky, the weather was warm – it was idyllic! Except beautiful Spring conditions invariably means Attack of the Allergy Monsters on Robert, so we scooted back to the hotel to get him properly medicated, then went on a drive in the late afternoon around Eagle Point. We went into a little preserve and saw some big gray kangaroos. It was so cool to see them hop through the bush; they can really move! We saw an echidna, too, a porcupine-like beastie with an anteater snout.

Dinner was at the hotel restaurant; it was apparently quite well known for miles (oops, km) around. Our meals (ravioli, pizza, pumpkin soup) were excellent, tasty, and light. Whoever said food in Australia wasn't good was very sadly mistaken. Everywhere there is attention to freshness, use of local ingredients, herbs, and spices. California cuisine "done right" and without the goofy pretentiousness that so often accompanies superb cooking. Well, except for that bistro in Sydney; it was very pretentious.

Only one channel on television this evening; tonight's movie was something with James Woods and Brian Dennehy, *Best Seller*. So-so.

### **Thursday, November 10 – Bairnsdale**

Bit of a slow day. We visited the (sort of) nearby Mitchell River National Park, and had a nice bushwalk down the track to the Den of Nargun, a tucked-away pool surrounded by a rocky outcropping, complete with waterfall. There was quite a beautiful reflection in the pool. We followed the track toward the Mitchell River and came up and out on the hot side back to the car.

A drive out to Lakes National Park followed, but it was relatively uneventful. Scenic, but quiet.

We wrapped up the day with a yummy seafood pizza in our room, and polished off our bottle of Plunkett Blackwood Ridge Gewürtztraminer. And watched *LA Law* and *NYPD Blue* on tv again.

### **Friday, November 11 – Bairnsdale to Thredbo**

We enjoyed a quiet morning in our room at the Riversleigh, looking out the bay windows towards the river and listening to Brown Thornbills chirping outside in the grevillea trees. Ian Botham was on tv again; he's a retired cricket player making the rounds of talk shows to promote his autobiography. Oh well, better than OJ! And his resemblance to Andrew Clarke, the actor who plays Matt McGregor on *Snowy River: The McGregor Saga* was remarkable.

This day turned out to be one of the best that we have had, but then again, compared to yesterday, almost anything would have looked good! Following our lazy morning, we found ourselves at Lake Tyers Forest Park, north of Lakes Entrance, where we went on a nice walk along Toorloo Arm. There were good birds on the track: Scarlet Honeycreeper, a very noisy colony of Bell Miners, Shining Bronze Cuckoo, Musk Lorikeets, and a White-bellied Sea Eagle who soared overhead. The miners were particularly amusing; their call is much like the ringing of a little bell.

After that productive walk, we drove on towards Thredbo. We skipped the Buchan-Jindabyne road, figuring it was likely to be "unsealed"<sup>14</sup> and slow going, so instead we went along the Cann River Highway<sup>15</sup> and then up highway 23 from there. The road we took off the highway to Jindabyne turned out to be mostly gravel as well, but it had the winning features of multiple Skylarks and a sheep roadblock. We soon got past the sheep and continued on our bumpy way to Jindabyne. We stopped at one forest patch after Robert thought he saw a Dollarbird, but instead they turned out to be Wood-swallows – White-browed and Dusky – along with a Rufous Songlark and Fuscous Honeycreeper. A great stop overall, plus the scenery was so beautiful: big open spaces, rolling alpine meadows, few trees.

We made it to the Lake Crackenback resort, in the Snowy Mountains midway between Thredbo and Jindabyne, a little after 17:00. A true ski resort, it seemed so nice during the off-season that I was surprised there weren't more people about. We had a big two-story condo to ourselves, and the windows in the living room and bedroom faced the lake (we were cantilevered right over it, actually) and provided us with an excellent view of the snow-capped mountains and eucalypt forest.

We indulged ourselves with a swim in the nearby indoor pool and baked ourselves in the sauna; completely relaxed and refreshed, we came back to our abode and lazed around a bit. Robert found an Australian Hobby in the tree outside near our car – what a find! Similar to a Peregrine Falcon but much more rusty in color. A great bird to end the birding day; Robert thought it was the best day so far. But to me they've nearly all been good.

Dinner was at the Duffers Ridge restaurant, also overlooking the lake. And what an incredible meal, too. Robert had a wonderful roast tomato and eggplant soup, followed by roast kangaroo. I thought the kangaroo would taste like venison (if not chicken), but instead it was like very tender beef. I had roast pumpkin gnocchi and smoked trout to start (heavenly) and blue cod in

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<sup>14</sup>Unpaved.

<sup>15</sup>Also known as "Dead Kangaroos and One Dead Wombat Road".

butter. We both sampled the beers, too – Toohey’s Blue, Old, and Classic. The Old is a “black ale” that was dark yet not heavy.

We wound up the day watching tv in front of the fire. (Yes, we used some of those Little Lucifers firebombs.)

### **Saturday, November 12 – Thredbo (Lake Crackenback)**

Our last full day in Australia! As most really good travels go, this holiday has come to a close too soon, and we're both eager to return and explore more of this country. Queensland, the Northern Territory, the Outback – all await us! Over dinner last night we discussed our options; we may well return in April or May of 1996.

The morning here at the lake was quiet, with the sun peeking out to illuminate the water and mountains. A scrumptious breakfast was delivered to our door – scrambled eggs with smoked salmon, croissants, cereal, coffee, juice, yogurt – and we watched a White-faced Heron pick his way across the opposite shore. We should have been up packing, but neither of us wanted to leave.



Our longest day of driving, over six hours, ended with us happily ensconced at the Kingsway Cronulla Hotel, right on Cronulla Beach, which itself was a very nice bay south of Sydney. We could just glimpse nearby Botany Bay (and the airport) from our beach-facing room on the tenth floor of the hotel, along with numerous surfers enjoying themselves in the big waves. We took a quick drive out to Botany Bay National Park (Captain Cook's Landing Place) before dinner, where we walked along the beach to the Cook obelisk monument and landing place marker. Cook, aboard the *Endeavour*, landed on "the fatal shore" in 1770; after selling the idea of dumping convicts there to the Brits (it would get the scum off the hulks parked in the Thames, out of sight of the upper classes), the first convicts arrived in 1788. The little cove on Botany Bay seemed somewhat forlorn and insignificant now, and made me wonder just how the shore appeared when Cook and his crew arrived.

Dinner was not the fish and chips we had hoped for, but instead was a very good Indian dinner at a local restaurant. Good hot lamb madras and beef vindaloo; it was easily the best Indian food we'd had since London.

### **Sunday, November 13 – Sydney to Los Angeles**

A really long day – literally, as we crossed the international date line and repeated time. The day began nicely with a last-gasp birding visit to the Botany Bay shore not far from the airport. We snagged a few more life birds in the shadow of the runway and the "real" Sydney harbour<sup>16</sup>, specifically, Red-necked Stint, Bar-tailed Godwit, Pied Cormorant, Red-capped Plover, and Pied Oystercatcher. Also had either a Grey or Lesser Golden Plover, but we couldn't quite ID him. It was a great finish to the birding/nature aspect of our trip, even if it was in industrialized surroundings!

We got to the airport about noon, paid our hefty departure tax (A\$25 each), bought a donut, coffee, and coke, and deposited the rest of our Australian dollars (save for a shiny A\$1 coin and 5¢) at a bookstore in the international terminal. We picked up some maps for our next trip (Queensland and Northern Territory), and a big all-Australia accommodation guide. Ok, so an "all-Australian" guide by necessity can't possibly provide in-depth coverage of any particular area, and probably focuses more on the well-traveled areas – but it did include some of the B&Bs/country hotels we visited on this trip, plus it included the Daintree Lodge near Cairns. So among this, our other B&B guide at home, one we picked up in Bairnsdale, and many travel

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<sup>16</sup>The port, that is, with huge cranes stamped "Australian Stevedores".

books, we should have more than enough info for future trip planning! And plan we will, for Australia is a great country<sup>17</sup>, and we'll be counting down the days until our next visit.

### **Lasting Impressions**

- Drive-thru bottle shops (liquor stores); this would seem to be a singularly Bad Idea.
- Little Penguins on Phillip Island; almost like Monty Pythoners screaming "run away!".
- Signs: great on highways and motorways, but once you're off the main roads, good luck.
- Variable weather = definition of Melbourne's climate. We experienced Melbourne's coldest November day in 30 years; they've had more rain this week than all year; and let's not forget the gale force winds.
- More Diana news, less OJ Simpson.
- "Right Turn From Left Lane Only" method of driving in Melbourne.
- Sydney streets: a twisty little maze of passages, all different.
- Canberra is a monument city. Robert said it reminded him of East Berlin, lots of impressive buildings and statues, but no people.
- Rice Crispies are called Rice Bubbles here; Raisin Bran is Sultana Bran.
- Unlike the British, Australians know how to make coffee.
- According to a New Zealander we met at the Rose Cottage, New Zealand identifies more with the UK, while Australia identifies with the US. We'll have to visit NZ to find out.
- "Western" ranch houses with pretty little English gardens.
- Old Victorian sections of Sydney (Potts Point), Melbourne (East), with lots of fancy, delicate wrought iron, much like the French Quarter of New Orleans.
- "Tidy Towns". Cleanliness in general. Even Kings Cross, seedy as it may be, was clean in that there was no trash in the streets, not too much graffiti, etc. The national parks had signs at the entrances that said "Please Take Your Rubbish Home", and lo and behold, most people did, because there was almost a complete lack of trash along the roads and walking tracks.
- The Giant Worm Attraction ("Up to 3 meters long!") near Phillip Island. (No, we didn't go there.)
- "Toohey's - Too Right!" Old (Black Ale), Blue (Classic Bitter) were particularly good.
- Billabong = an oxbow.
- From *The Aussie Dictionary*:

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<sup>17</sup>Why does that sound like Otto in *A Fish Called Wanda*?

"He's gone troppo" = someone has gone nuts in a tropical or sub-tropical environment.  
(Often used lightly in the way Americans would say they're "crazy" for something.)

"Bush" = scraggly, barren land covered with useless gum trees.

"No worries" = you really need to worry!