

## **Goodbye Seattle**

8/11/08 Seattle

With the clock ticking down on our departure from Seattle the last few weeks have been high stress. So many things to finish for my old job, so many things to begin for my new job. Movers came and took away all our belongings, so we have been living like squatters in an empty apartment. Lydia hasn't been able to savour the pleasure of finishing her job due to the pain of last minute extraction of four wisdom teeth, so the house has been a boiler pot of stress and crankiness. Our amazing friends all showed their love to us throughout the process, providing comfort and smiles. We didn't get everything done of course, but the time to leave has come anyway.

## **Giants in the Mist**

9/11/08 Yosemite

America has some amazing natural sites, and we have only seen a handful in our years here. Before we left the West Coast we wanted the chance to see just a couple more, and the first was Yosemite. So yesterday, having packed up all our bags in Seattle and said our goodbyes to all our wonderful friends, we flew to San Francisco. We had a leisurely

afternoon in the Bay City, saw "Role Models" (which I really enjoyed) and slept in a real bed for the first time in over a week.



Today we were off to see one of the wonders of the natural world, Yosemite. The first thing I learned about Yosemite is that it is not pronounced "Yos-e-mite" like Vegemite. Instead it is pronounced "Yo-sim-it-tee", like the Bugs Bunny character. The name is derived from a Miwoks word, "yohhe'meti" meaning "they are killers" referring to the violent Ahwahneechee who lived in the area.

Yosemite National Park is a World Heritage listed park in the Sierra Nevada mountains. The area is simply spectacular, driving in along the ridge road to see the steep granite cliffs, rugged wilderness and high waterfalls. The park had seen

its first snow that morning and there was still a light covering on the high passes.

We visited Yosemite falls and Bridalveil falls, the Ansel Adams gallery in the park centre and saw an owl, mule deer and white-tailed deer. We then drove to one of the highlights of the day, Tuolumne Grove, home to the Giant Sequoias. Giant sequoias are the largest living organisms in the world. They are not the tallest tree, that title belongs to their cousin the Redwood, but in terms of biomass they are the largest. Their trunks can grow to 17 metres in diameter and 95 metres in height, living up to 3500 years.

The Giant Sequoia in Tuolumne Grove were certainly enormous, but their scale is so large that it confuses perception, and I could not have called them larger or smaller than the enormous [Sitka Spruce and Douglas Fir](#) we saw in northern Oregon.

The setting of the Sequoias was magnificent. Down in the valley and covered in a blanket of heavy fog, they crept up on us and faded up into the sky, the giant ghosts of the forests. At their base, living their life on a time-frame so different, were chipmunks and silver-bellied squirrels, flittering beyond the speed of our eye, their entire life lived among the roots of a single giant who could watch over them for two thousand generations in a single life-time.

### **The tips of the tallest trees**

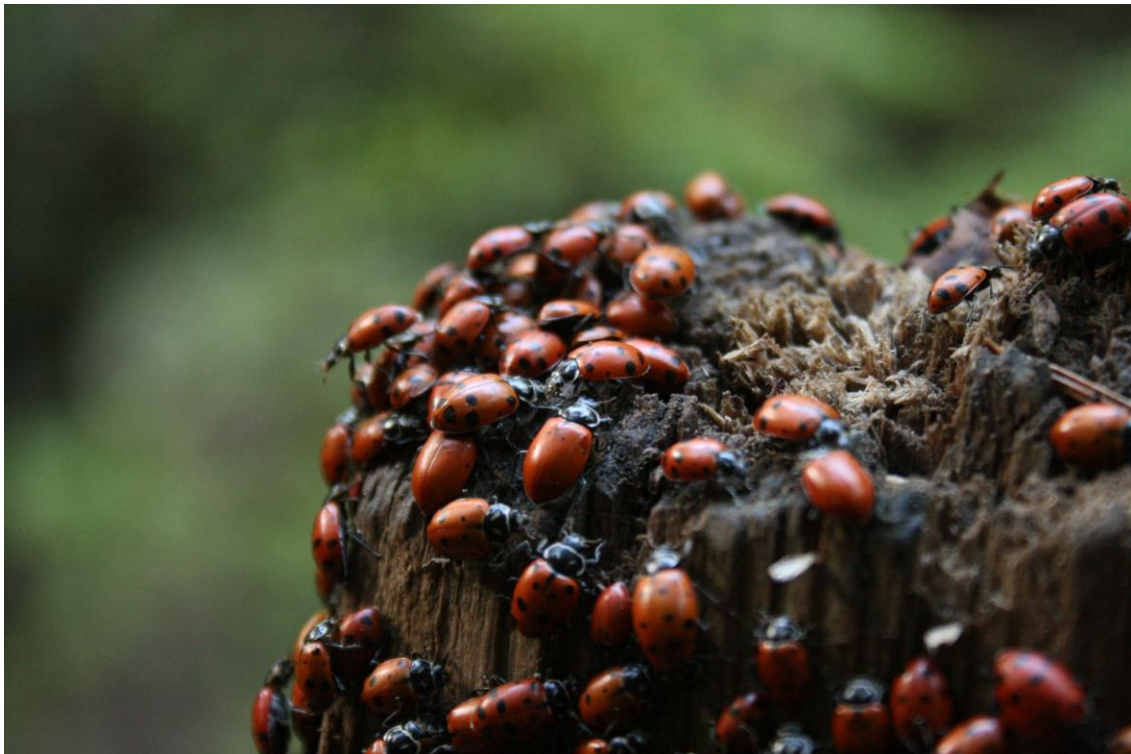
10/11/08 Muir Woods

We spent today in the Muir woods, among the coastal redwoods.

The Muir woods is only minutes from San Francisco, north across the Golden Gate, but it



survived the logging that destroyed 97% of the redwood forest, due to the steep valley sides. The woods were later bought up by William Kent in 1905, and avid out-doors-man. Soon after the water supply utility tried to buy the woods, to log and then turn into a reservoir, and started legal action to force the sale by eminent domain. On advice from his friend Theodore Roosevelt, Kent evaded this law suit by gifting the land to the government and allowing Teddy to proclaim the area a National Monument in 1908 (National Monuments are similar to National Parks but with less protection. The advantage to National Monument status is that it does not have to be approved by Congress, and under the Antiquities Act of 1906 they can be created instantly by the President.



Probably the best action of George W Bush was to use this power to over-ride the Republican Congress and create Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in 2006 to protect 360,000 km<sup>2</sup> of ocean waters around Hawaii). The woods are named after Kent's friend John Muir, a noted geologist, mountaineer, conservationist and author.

The coastal redwoods are the tallest living things on the planet. At their tallest they can grow to 115 metres tall and nearly 7 metres in diameter (a taller and more slender version of the giant sequoia we saw yesterday), although this height is only achieved in the far north of California and our giants were comparative babies at 77 metres tall. They grow only in the thin "fog belt" along the California coast, created by the summer upwelling of the ocean just off the coast due to the closeness of the continental shelf to the coast.

Redwoods need at least 400 000 litres of water a day to survive, and with their shallow root system they draw most of it from the fog.



Logging has been the biggest threat to redwoods, leaving only 3% (and only half of that is protected). The biology of the tree makes it highly attractive. The tallest trees in the world obviously produce a lot of wood, and with tall straight trunks. In order to survive for thousands of years in a moist damp environment, the trees (and hence the wood) are extremely resistant to fungus and insects, with a thick layer of bark and high concentrations of tannic acid. But there are other threats to the redwood. One is fire - the thick bark and moist environment protects redwoods from light fire and allows seedlings to grow, but fire suppression has allowed the tinder to build up in the redwood forests, creating the potential for hot fires beyond the tolerance of redwoods.



The invasion of eucalyptus trees from Australia, supremely adapted to create fire and thrive in the aftermath, make the problem much worse.

We hiked a loop along the ocean view trail, the lost trail, fern creek and the main trail. It was quiet, peaceful and above all beautiful. We came across a loveliness of ladybirds (the official collective noun) on the trail, caused by the convergence of thousands of ladybirds from the inland areas at the start of winter. The ladybirds gather in the warmer coastal areas and become semi-dormant for nine months, in a process called estivation. It is done in clusters for warmth and to ward off predators.

The towering redwoods rose far above us, with chipmonks, squirrels and wrens flittering among the undergrowth. Tranquil and relaxing, another one of the world's natural wonders.

## Lap dancing toy drive

11/11/08 San Francisco

From the Tenderloin:

"Come spend the holidays with Santas favorite helpers and help the SFFD local 798 Toy Drive and fundraiser starting Nov 28 to Dec 17 bring a new toy for free adm or get a 10 dollar table dance all proceeds to to the toy drive"

Isn't that nice? A combined toy drive / strip show. Just donate a toy to see the show or get a discount on your lap dance. That is community spirit.

Also, I like the guy wearing a pimp suit who just happened to be walking past at the time.



## Sunset in Hawai'i

12/11/08 Hawai'i

We took a break in our flight across the Pacific back to Australia in Hawai'i. We flew into Honolulu, getting a nice view of Pearl Harbor, and then flew on towards the island of Hawai'i (usually called the Big Island so as to not confuse it with Hawai'i the State name).



Driving from the airport to our resort stay at the Waikola beach I was struck by how much the island looked like the [Galapagos Islands](#). With a similar geology (island chain formation due to continental drift over a volcanic hotspot) I guess it should not have been surprising, but still I had not expected to see a lava desert spreading across the island, with thick glassy black rock and a few tufts of grass. Along the road people had made "Hawaiian graffiti" by writing things in white rocks against the black background - we asked the Taxi driver where they got the white rocks from, and he said there were a few gathered up along the beach, but mostly people just bought them from WallMart.

We ended the evening with a long walk along the beach, watching sunset over the water together.

### **Sea turtles, Hawaiian culture and volcanoes**

13/11/08 Hawai'i

We had a busy day today, full of amazing highlights.

First we started the morning with a sunrise walk along the beach. We had hopes of seeing a Green Turtle, as we had heard they often rested on the beach during sunrise, and had just about given up when we came across a runner on the beach who lead us to a cove where he often sees them, and sure enough we found a beautiful Green Turtle resting halfway up the beach. We watched as it slowly lumbered down the beach, awkward until the first wave gave it space to swim, and then it flew off into the ocean.



On our walk back to the hotel we noticed a small cove where Green Turtles kept on

sticking their heads up out of the water. We came back a few hours later for snorkelling and were delighted to discover that the cove was full of Green Turtles, swimming around and peeling off algae from the underwater rocks with their beaks.



Just metres off-shore we bumped into our first, and then we constantly saw one or more turtles gliding around with skill, completely ignoring our clumsy efforts.

In the early afternoon we took the chance to see some original Hawaiian artefacts. The hotel is built around an ancient series of fish ponds, which are volcanic tidal pools that were highly prized by the Hawaiian tribes, who built fish gates around them to trap and store fish. A short walk away was another type of artefact, this one a series of petroglyphs carved into the volcanic rock. In a small preserve surrounded by golf course is the Waikoloa Petroglyph field. The field was once the border between the Kingdoms of Kohala and Kona, and as a special zone it received attention from generations of Hawaiians, carving the field with sigals which we do not now understand.

While we walked to the petroglyph field, an energetic and talkative lady joined us, and proceeded to babble at us for the next half an hour. One amusing part was when she was telling us that when she went to a church service a few days ago the minister was telling her not to take any volcanic stones with her when she left the island, because she would be cursed by the fire goddess Pele, and everyone who took a stone ended up sending it back with a \$20 note to end the curse. She swallowed this whole and was now telling everyone about it (the myth was actually started relatively recently by Narou Tovley, a ranger at the park). It is interesting how a lot of people are just generally superstitious rather than specifically religious, and just absorb the local superstitions even if they are



completely incompatible with their stated religion, such as astrology or polynesian curses with Christianity.

We had planned to spend the evening up at the observatory, but the vog (volcanic fog) was heavy so the trip was cancelled. Instead we made a last minute booking on a tour of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. We drove from Kona on our side of the island to Hilo on the east side. With the prevailing winds being NE to ENE (70%), the east side of the island gets a lot more rain, and the island rapidly shifted from lava desert to tropical rainforest. The pioneer plant on the lava fields is the 'ōhi'a lehua tree, which is endemic to Hawai'i and is able to secrete acidic compounds from its roots to break down the lava into soil. It is the first to grow on new lava fields and paves the way for its replacement by secondary plants.



The mythology behind the 'ōhi'a lehua tree is that the fire goddess Pele once saw the handsome prince 'Ōhi'a and desired him, but he rebuffed her proposal as he was in love with Lehua. In retaliation she transformed him into a tree, and the other gods, seeing the grief of Lehua, took pity on Lehua and turned her into a flower and placed her on the tree. Plucking a flower from the tree thus represents separating these two lovers once again, and causes the sky to rain with the tears of separated lovers.

In the park at Hilo we saw the Nēnē, the endangered Hawaiian goose which was nearly eradicated by hunting and the introduction of cats and mongooses, and is one of the classic success stories of reintroduction after captive breeding.

From Hilo we drove south to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. We visited the Thurston



lava tube, which was created by a stream of fast lava cooling on the outside (where it is exposed to air) to form the barrel, but with the hot core flowing out to create a tube. The lava tube was set in a beautiful rainforest, full of colourful birds and vibrant green ferns. There is a myth about the ferns and the lava, another one which involves the fire goddess Pele. The god Kamapua'a, who took the form of a warthog (pigs were introduced to Hawai'i with the first wave of polynesian colonisers) or a fern. He was attracted to Pele but she spurned her, and in revenge he took to taunting her at the top of the mountain until she lost her temper and chased him (in pig form) down to the sea. At the last minute he would turn into a fern and hide from her, and she would fall into the sea to cool her temper.

We also saw the sulphur vents steaming up from the side of the road, and looked out over Kilasea Caldera. The wide core of the volcano has been silent for the last few weeks, so we did not see any lava plumes, but we heard the deep groaning of the earth and the venting of steam and sulphur.

### **Flying over the volcano**

14/11/08 Hawai'i

Lydia started our second, and final, morning in Hawai'i with a long phone interview for a biostatistician job in Leuven. Fingers crossed they were as impressed with her as I am. With that out of the way we went for another swim with the sea turtles, and then started our helicopter ride over the Big Island.

We flew over the lava deserts of the west to the rainforest of the east, and then down south to the volcanoes. Flying over the barren lava flows, with steaming vents and magma pits belching blue sulphurous smoke, was an amazing experience. It really did look like we were seeing another planet, a dying planet or perhaps one that was only just becoming hospitable to life. To be able to look down a rent in the earth and see boiling rock, or to fly above the coast and see the ocean roaring in to a lava flow and leaping up into the clouds in an enormous plume of steam is truly surreal.



## **So this is Australia?**

15/11/08 Nadi

In the transit lounge in Fiji, just an hour from flying to Australia, it feels like we are already there. People with strong accents and thongs all around; Chicken Twisties and Cadbury Chocolate for sale at the kiosk; a branch of ANZ for currency exchange; Bryce Courtney books on the shelves of the bookshop; New Idea and Woman's Day on the magazine rack; and WheatBix, meat pies and lamingtons available at the breakfast joint. I feel culture shock coming on...

## **In Brisbane**

17/11/08 Brisbane

We are certainly back in Australia now. Flying into Brisbane we flew over the vast sprawling city. The population of Brisbane is about that of Brussels, but Brisbane is spread out over 5904.8 km<sup>2</sup>, while Brussels is a mere 161.4 km<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the city of Brisbane is 20% of the entire area of Belgium (Sydney is about 50% of the area of Belgium). Such a different way of living together.

We had lunch at Lydia's family's place. Pasties, salad, beetroot, cheese and vegemite on bread and a James Boags in a foam stubby holder. You can't get any more Australian than that. Now outside a tropical storm is raging, enough rain to batter down the trees and thunder and lightning that shakes the house down. It might be much drier than Seattle, but when it rains it really rains. A girl was screaming at her boyfriend and our hotel manager turns to us and says "crazy sheila", and then launches into a tirade that euthanasia should be compulsory for the over sixties, saying he is sixty five but he wouldn't mind going since life was tough and it just made the health service more expensive.

## **All the skinny young things**

19/11/08 Brisbane

We've been in Brisbane for a week now, doing our "health aspects of disasters" course in a city experiencing its own freak weather. Our jet lag is only just fading now, the rest of the week we've been waking up at five - partly because Brisbane doesn't have daylight savings (it was beaten in a referendum on a campaign against the extra hour of sunlight on the grounds that it would "fade the curtains and confuse the cows"). I guess despite my grumbling about technology I am not really a Luddite any more, as the stagnant internet infrastructure in Australia, limiting me to two minutes of net access a day despite living in a wired hotel and working at a university all day, is driving me crazy.

We are certainly in an Australian setting again. Casual swearing in a professional setting, no formality or ceremony, skinny young things everywhere (actually, after thinking all week that the bubbly pretty things were young than me, I found out we were the same age - I guess I am just tired, worn-out and cynical for my age). Once again I was struck by



how similar and yet fundamentally different Australia and America can be: both often exhibit a crude cultural superiority, and yet in Australia it is shrugged off as not being a big deal, while in America that particular segment of society is often militant about it. Likewise, I find certain Americans and Australians to be overly confident for their skill set, yet in Australia it is more often overlying a “she’ll be right, it doesn’t really matter anyway” idea, rather than in the supreme self-confidence some Americans develop.

Last night we walked into Queen Street mall, in the centre of the city. I was really impressed with how bustling it was. It has been six years since I was in Brisbane last, and the city centre is now really a night spot hub, far more active than night spots in bigger cities than Seattle. Maybe it is because it is the only hub in Brisbane, so people gather in the same place. Or the recent immigration expanding Brisbane has just given an excess of pretty young things. It was also a diverse crowd, with Friday night shopping bringing out all ages. Seeing the same old set of shops in every mall (A Myers Centre, Just Jeans, Dymocks, David Jones, Woolworths, Sportsgirl, Roger David, etc) certainly sparked familiarity, but no more, no deep seated sense that I had come home. In fact, it even felt slightly odd when, after watching *Quantum of Solace*, the audience didn’t applaud the screen (even though I always found that particular American habit slightly irritating).

### **Jimboomba and Mt Tamborine**

29/11/08 Mount Tamborine

We are spending the weekend with Lydia's friends Amy and Jason, who live out at Jimboomba. They have a lovely house on four hectares of land, two horses, two cats, three chickens and two ducks, not counting the resident magpies and butcherbirds that also fly in for a feed. They also have a very cute



baby, so they are busy on every front. It is a very Australian house, with a big shed out the back, watertanks and a veranda with a barbie, where all the meals take place. It is surrounded by gum trees, giving that dark olive brown scenery that is archetypical. We can hear the kookaburras out in the bush, and there are koalas and kangaroos out there too even if we haven't seen them today. The fans go twenty fours to keep the heat at bay and the flies are a pain in the neck. There are only four stations on TV, but that's okay because they are all rubbish anyway.

Today we all went up to Mt Tamborine. From the peak you can see the Miami-like

skyline of the Gold Coast on one side and Brisbane on the other. The farmland and small villages in between are slowly being eaten up by bush galleries, cafes and housing developments. We watched people handglide and parasail from the top of Mt Tamborine and glide on the thermals to the valley floor below. We then went for a short walk into the rainforest of Mt Tamborine National Park and had a stunning lunch sitting out on the veranda of a lodge.

### **Kookaburras and tropical storms**

2/12/08 Caloundra

This week we have been staying with Lydia's mum up in Caloundra, north of Brisbane on the Sunshine Coast.

Life is slow up here, even when spending the day writing papers and essays. The heat makes the middle of the day lazy, lounging around on the veranda, feeding the kookaburras scraps of kangaroo meat and watching the rainbow lorikeets squawk in the trees. Nightly we have been having huge tropical storms, with lightning flashing down followed by a slow rumble of thunder that echoes backwards and forwards off the clouds.

We also saw the movie *Australia*. It was rather clumsy in parts, but overall I thought it was fantastic, showing real emotion in places. Well worth people seeing, both for the magnificent scenery and for our national shame that it highlights.

Aboriginals came to Australia at least 40,000 years ago and possibly 125,000 years ago, and since then they have developed in essentially complete isolation except for the last 200 years. Consider the advances that the Egyptians, Romans, Chinese, Arabs and Europeans made in short spurts of just hundreds of years and expand that over a hundred thousand years in the longest continuous human culture the planet has ever seen. Except, of course, Australia's resources do not conveniently jut out into the landscape, so this

hundreds of thousands of years of cultural evolution focused not on industrial development but rather on social development. They developed the most complex set of familial relationships of any human culture and the elaborate [Tjukurpa](#) which we cheapen as a "creation myth"





featuring animal spirits such as the rainbow serpent, but which in reality were a set of complex interwoven tales that contained the sum of all knowledge within the culture. Tales more complex than any celtic knot, which can be told at multiple different levels in order to impact knowledge on medicine, law, geography, hunting, weather and relationships. The same tale sung in a different way could contain directions on how to cross a desert or which plants to use to stem blood loss.

This amazing edifice of human culture was destroyed by Europeans in just a few decades. Where 250 languages once stood, now only 20 have any chance of survival. The stories that once contained such knowledge have now been stripped to the bare bones. Cultures have, quite frankly, been annihilated. And now these peoples, still managing to cling to an identity we tore away, are treated with patronising paternalism at best, and open racism at worst.

### **Coming home to Canberra**

6/12/08 Canberra

I really enjoyed my first days in Canberra. Canberra was hosting the Australasian Society for Immunology annual meeting, so I didn't just get to see my friends from Canberra, but also all the people I know who work in immunology around Australia, and even a fair few familiar faces from overseas. One of the hard things about being a scientist can be the transient nature of the work, we are always moving around after our PhD or post-doc to find the next position. Even if you are able to stay in one place, your friends graduate or get a new position and leave you behind. The flip side of this is that science leaves you with a large network of wonderful friends scattered around the globe. When we travel through Australia, North America and Europe there are dear friends to catch up with and show us around their new home, and when we have a large conference it is like a reunion.

### **Graduation**

12/12/08 Canberra

It was really important for Lydia to be able to celebrate her PhD graduation with a formal ceremony and surrounded by her class-mates, so even though she got her PhD accepted nearly two years ago she deferred her graduation until we were back in Canberra.



Yesterday they held the ceremony. She got to dress up in her academic attire, walk across the stage and kneel in front of the Chancellor to be hooded, and then received her PhD for the thesis “An essential role for Condensin II in thymocyte development”. Her friends Fleur and Rhianna were also up on stage with her, Fleur for her PhD and Rhianna for her medical degree. We then celebrated with a lunch, a Christmas party and evening drinks at the All Bar Nun. I think for Lydia it was the necessary closure on a chapter of her life.

### **On Christmas**

25/12/08 Newcastle

Christmas creates a vast complex network of expectations that bind family together. There are often unarticulated and usually impossible to fulfil, but they are still enforced, creating bonds of guilt. The religious usually have the worst of it, with an increased sense of importance for the occasion and the creation of a higher power to feel guilty towards, but even the secular create the strange shared unhappiness. People end up spending time not with their friends and closest loved ones, but often running around after the extended family. Of course this may include those truly dear to you, but it also includes those you are indifferent towards and even those you actively dislike. There is guilt about not keeping up with people you should have, last minute angst about whether the present is worthy, family traditions that must be followed even if nobody likes them. There are surges of joy and surges of concealed anger, and yet the entire fabricated network is towards those you are bound to by an accident of birth (sometimes with good luck, other times bad). Many Christmases I have hidden myself away from this morass, but now I find I can enjoy them if I just ignore the invisible bonds others try to tie around you, and just embrace those you willing choose to participate in.

### **The Big Marino**

26/12/08 Goulburn

Paris has the Eiffel Tower, Goulburn has the Big Marino. Small country towns in Australia have a predisposition towards building a [giant concrete replica](#) of what they consider iconic. We have the Big Orange, Big Prawn, Big Banana (distinct from the Big Bunch of Bananas, of course), Big Pineapple, Big Ant, Big Avocado, Big Beer Can (also, there is a Big Stubbie), Big Chook, Big Mosquito, Big Murray Cod, Big Poo, Big Cane Toad, Big Dugong, Big Golden Gumboot, Big Paperclip and Big Cow, among many, many others.

Today though, was just about the Big Marino, built in 1985 at 15 metres tall. Within the Big Marino is the Merino wool museum, which really wants visitors to discover the *facts*





about merino wool.

In order to help them with their mission, I repeat them here:

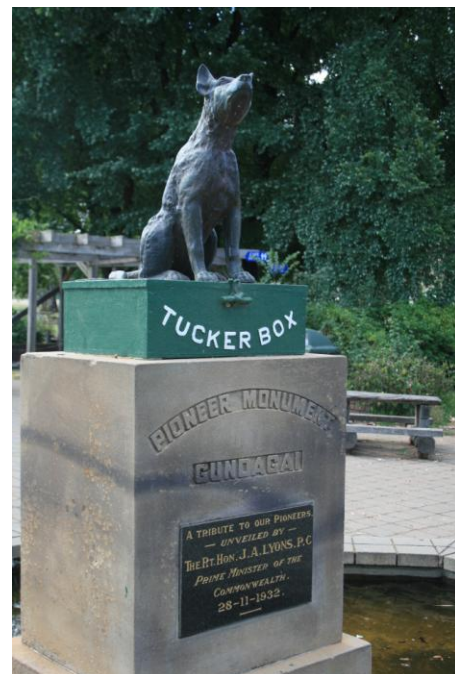
- The Australian Merino wool clip is one of Australia's major agricultural projects
- Australia can be considered the finest wool producer in the world, producing approximately 94% finer wool than its nearest competitor within the 19 and 20 micron range.
- The diameter of a wool fibre is measured in microns (one millionth of a metre), which directly contributes to the subsequent garment attributes such as softness, drape and handle.
- The biggest consumer markets for Australian wool are China, USA, Japan, Italy, Germany, France and UK. In the western world, consumers spend around US\$78 billion each year on wool apparel.
- Australian Merino wool is primarily utilised in the production of knitwear (27% of the clip) and mens and womens wovens (60%).

### **On the road to Gundagai**

26/12/08 Gundagai

If Australia has a foundation mythology, the dog on a tuckerbox on the road to Gundagai must be a central tenant.

"The Dog on the Tuckerbox memorial is supposedly based on an incident that occurred to a teamster named Bill the Bullocky on the road to Gundagai in the 1850s. While leading his bullock team and wagon across a creek five or nine miles from Gundagai, Bill's wagon became hopelessly bogged in the creek. Trying to drag the wagon out of the bog, one of his bullocks then broke the wagon's yoke. Thereupon, Bill gave up the job and went to have his lunch. But here, to top off his run of bad luck, he found his dog sitting - or worse - on his tuckerbox. The other bullockies thought the incident a great joke and one of them supposedly wrote a poem about it. In several versions, the poem spread the story of Bill's bad luck far and wide."



### **The RAAF**

26/12/08 Wagga Wagga

On the drive through Wagga Wagga (with nearly 50,000 people, Wagga Wagga is the fifth largest inland city in Australia), we stopped off at the RAAF museum. The Royal Australian Air Force is the second oldest air force in the world. The museum was closed,

but on display outside they had several old planes, including the English Electric Canberra. The Canberra was designed in the UK by the English Electric Company. The Australian Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, named the type The Canberra on the 19th of January 1953, and 48 were built in Australia for the RAAF. They could fly at 541 miles/hour with a ceiling of 48,000 feet. The planes fought in Malaya and Vietnam (dropping 76,389 bombs during 11,696 missions in Vietnam alone). The aircrafts were finally retired in 1982.

### **On the road**

26/12/08 Narrandera

It has been a long day in the driving seat. We drove back from Lydia's family Christmas in Newcastle to Canberra, via Goulburn to see the [Big Marino](#). In Canberra we dropped off Lydia's mum, and picked up Lina for our new road trip. We drove up to Yass, and visited Lydia's childhood home, and then through to [Dog on a Tuckerbox](#) in Gundagai. We then hit the road once again, driving through Gumly Gumly and Wagga Wagga (including a brief stop-over at the [RAAF museum](#), and a futile search through the city for dinner, before settling for Hungry Jacks). We paused between Wagga Wagga and Narrandera to watch a flock of sheep, who seemed positively startled to have someone stop their car to look at them. They nervously backed off and then the entire flock stood there and starred at us, perplexed. Now we are settled in for the night in our family apartment, capable of sleeping seven, at Narrandera. We are going to go via Australia's best bakery in the morning, and (if it is open before we continue our travels) visit the Big Playable Guitar.

### **The Shearer's Hall of Fame**

27/12/08 Hay

We woke up early in Narrandera and drove for hours across the featureless Hay plains (although we did stop to take photos of a Wedgetail Eagle) to Hay. Normally I've just driven past Hay, but this time we stopped to visit the Shearers' Hall of Fame, which was a surprisingly good museum.

We learnt about wool production in Australia, which has been steadily declining since its peak of 180 million sheep and 900 million kilos of wool in 1969. The exhibit was interactive, allowing us to try shearing a dummy sheep and to sniff sheep urine. They also gave us a glossary, to learn the lingo. Here are some examples of shearers' talk:

- Crutching - removal of wool from the sheep's crutch
- Dag - wool around a sheep's bum





- Jackie Howe - sleeveless singlet
- Lambing down - when a pub owner cheated a drunk shearer out of his pay check
- Pink'em - very close, high quality shearing. "I've pinked 'em with the Wolseleys"
- Pizzle - the penis of a sheep
- Snagger, snob or tomahawker - a rough untalented shearer
- Sweat extractor - contractor (rhyming slang)
- Sweatlocks - frizzy ends of a fleece around the shoulder and crutch, carrying a lot of grease and lanolin
- Gun - an extremely fast, competent shearer

We learnt about the heroes of the shearing world, such as Kevin Sarre (1935-1995), who won 67 shearing titles and was Australian champion in 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957 and 1961. He also developed a standard method of shearing for the Australian Wool Corporation in 1963, the "Tally-hi" technique, which reduced shearing times by up to 30 seconds. On the 26th of October 1965, Kevin set an Australian record tally of 346 sheep.

Another hero was Julian Stuart (1866-1929), not so much for his ability to shear, but for being a union activist after a series of harsh new contracts were forced on the workers. He was imprisoned for leading a strike - guilty on the charge of "conspiracy", and given three years hard labour in goal. And, of course, the greatest hero of them all - Jackie Howe (1861-1920). Jackie Howe not only set a blade shearing record of 321 sheep in seven hours 40 minutes on the 10th of October 1892 (which still stands today), but he also invented the shearers' uniform. By removing the sleeves from his flannel shirt (they impeded his biceps) he created the "Jackie Howe" blue singlet. Of course good shearing takes energy - the average shearers had to eat 6000 Calories a day just to keep up with expenditure.

And Lydia's favourite part was getting a watch a sheep being clipped, she couldn't stop giggling and grinning as the sheep calmly got its full-body haircut, got a pat on its bare bottom and ran back to the other sheep.

## **Lake Mungo**

27/12/08 Mungo National Park



After the [Shearers' Hall of Fame](#) Lina took over the driving and drove us to Balranald, where we had a surprisingly good lunch in a petrol station (I had a magnificent steak sandwich without the steak). We then went off the beaten path to visit Lake Mungo, in the World Heritage Listed Willandra Lakes Region. It is odd that, while Australia only has 17 World Heritage areas, very few people (including myself) have heard of Lake Mungo. "Mungo Man" usually sparks a response, because of the famous fossil discovery.



Mungo Man was discovered by Dr Jim Bowler on the 26th of February, 1974. The importance of the discovery was two-fold. Firstly, Mungo Man is 40,000 years old, a discovery which doubled the length of time Aborigines had been thought to have lived in Australia.

In fact, rather than being considered a recent arrival, it is the second oldest hominid fossil found outside of Africa (and with the subsequent discovery of additional fossils, it is the oldest *Homo sapiens sapiens* fossil community discovered in the world). The second important facet was that Mungo Man had been deliberately buried and covered with red ochre, making it the oldest burial discovery anywhere in the world and (as the burial method was used by contemporary Aborigines) demonstrating that Australian Aboriginal culture was the longest continuous cultural practise known in the world. This is reinforced by the discovery at the site of traded stone tools and sophisticated hunting techniques.

It is not only human fossils for which Lake Mungo is so important. It is also an important site for Pleistocene period megafauna fossils.

Among the fossils that have been found there are *Zygomaturus trilobus* (a giant wombat the size of a car), *Genyornis newtoni* (a flightless bird four times the size of an emu) and *Procoptodon goliah* (a giant kangaroo, 3m tall).

There is actually a third reason why Lake Mungo is World Heritage listed. In addition to the human and Pleistocene fossils, investigation of baked sediment from ancient fireplaces discovered that 31,000 years ago the Earth's magnetic field moved 120 degrees and only returned back to normal over several thousand years.



Today the Willandra is the traditional lands of the Paakantji, the Mutthi Mutthi and the Ngiyampaa. The area is made up of five large dry lake basins, which went through wet and dry periods until permanently drying up 15,000 years ago.

We drove the long dirt roads into the area, seeing lizards basking on the road, a herd of wild goats, kangaroos, emus and countless small birds. The desert in the region is as beautiful as anywhere else in central Australia, with the central feature being the "Walls of China", a lunette (sand and clay dune) marking the boundaries of the ancient lake. We didn't spend too long walking around Lake Mungo, because despite being late afternoon it was 41 degrees (106 degrees Fahrenheit).

After Lake Mungo we drove to Mildura, where we had to drive from NSW to Victoria backwards and forwards looking for our hotel, which (despite being called the Mildura Riverside Motel) was not actually in Mildura, and was on the NSW side of the river, in Gol Gol. We finished up our long day with good food and cold drinks at the Gol Gol hotel, overlooking the River Murray.



## **The Big Dunlop Tyre**

28/12/08 Renmark

On reaching Yamba, we cross over from Victoria to South Australia. In the effort to Keep South Australia Fruit Fly Free, there is more border protection between these two states than between any two countries in the European Union. The border officials pull over every car at the Big Dunlop Tyre (which spans the road) and search the glove-



box and boot for any fruit. We then drove under the Big Tyre, with its sign "Dunlop Welcomes you to the Phylloxera free Riverland and South Australia", whereupon Lina pulls out a packet of "Forbidden Fruit" (the lollies, not actual fruit). We were now in South Australia.

## **Orange World**

28/12/08 Mildura

We started day three of our drive by visiting Orange World in Mildura. Orange World has the only fully operational citrus tractor tour in Australia, with over forty varieties of citrus! We weren't going to wait around until the tour at 10:30 though (we had a "big" day planned, with all our South Australian big things), so once Lydia was finished playing with the over-sized fruit we nipped down to a bakery for breakfast and hit the long straight road from Mildura, through Victoria and to the South Australian border.

## **The Black Stump**

28/12/08 Paringa

The middle of nowhere in Australia - woop woop, the back o' Bourke, beyond the black stump. Oddly, at least four towns in Australia claim to be the location of the original Black Stump - Coolah, Merriwagga, Blackall and Paringa. We saw the Black Stump in Paringa, which was allegedly ridden down the Murray River to its current location. More likely than any actual location, the black stump which marks the limits of Australian civilisation is not a single item, but rather refers to the use of fire-blackened tree stumps that were once used as trail markers. Certainly there are a lot of places in Australia further off the beaten path than Paringa.

## **The Big Orange**

28/12/08 Berri

Not to be mistaken with our start of the day in Mildura at Orange World, our next stop was the Big Orange in Berri. Another of the famous [Big Things](#) which litter the Australian country side, the Big Orange is the defining vision of the town of Berri. The 85 tonne Big Orange is 15 metres high and 12 metres wide, making it the biggest of the big fruit in Australia (which is, oddly enough, saying something, with competition from the Big Mushroom, five Big Apples, Big Avocado, three Big Bananas, Big Bunch of Bananas, Big Cherries, Big Potato, Big Macadamia Nut, Big Mandarin, Big Mango, Big Peanut, two Big Pineapples, Big Pumpkin, Big Strawberry, Big Watermelon and three additional Big Oranges in Tenterfield, Harvey and Gayndah). Since the Berri by-pass, the Big Orange has struggled to stay open, and upon our visit was still closed even after a new owner had taken over the landmark.

## **A disappointing Big Ram**

28/12/08 Karoonda

The next stop on our journey was also home to one of Australia's [Big Things](#), this time the Big Ram at Karoonda. They wanted to build a Big Thing in order to attract the tourists, but their attempt at a Big Thing just failed. I'm sorry, but a Big Ram should be an enormous statue towering over the town with a gift shop next door and possibly a viewing platform at the top. Goulburn managed nicely with the [Big Marino](#), so why did Karoonda just build a slightly larger than real life statue of a ram and try to pass it off as a Big Thing? Regardless, we stopped there for a decent lunch and a Farmer's Union Ice Coffee (just to prove that we were back in South Australia).

## **The Bunyip**

28/12/08 Murray Bridge

I remember being taken to Murray Bridge when I was very young, led up to the deep dark cave where the bunyip lived and to be scared out of my wits when the bunyip rose screaming from the water (the bunyip is a creature of Aboriginal mythology who lives in billabongs and takes the unwary). When we drove a hundred kilometres out of the way to show Lydia and Lina the crabby little mechanical bunyip, I think we would have been heartily disappointed even if it hadn't been jammed underneath the water. Ah well, I guess they can't all be winners and over the course of twenty years our expectations for entertainment have risen. I just feel sorry for the eight years old who visited that day and missed out on a scare.

## **Vintage Cars and the Largest Mobile Phone in the world**

28/12/08 Birdwood

Luckily, after the rather crummy bunyip, I had a brainwave and remembered the Big Rockinghorse. Surely that childhood experience would live up to adult revisiting! We

called Dad (I couldn't remember where it was) and found out we just had to drive from Murray Bridge up towards Pallamanna and Palmer, then turn off away from Mt Pleasant, through Birdwood and it would be waiting for us there at Gumeracha. What was an extra 50 km after the 2000 we had driven in the past three days?

Oh, and on the way we stopped at the National Motor Museum in Birdwood, which had a whole lot of vintage cars and a really patronising "Shades of Green" exhibit which said that maybe global warming was occurring and some people said it might be anthropogenic and that if on the odd chance it was then motor vehicles would only play a minor part of it, and besides alternative cars sucked. I was pretty impressed to see the original Leyland Brothers truck, in which Mike, Mal and Laraine (with dogs) drove around Australia in "Ask the Leyland Brothers". Lydia was more impressed by the largest mobile phone in the world, which was a car built by Telecom for the Brisbane World Fair in 1988 and which actually functioned as a mobile phone.

### **The Big Rockinghorse**

28/12/08 Gumeracha

The Big Rockinghorse in Gumeracha was even better than in my memories. This small town in the Adelaide Hills houses an enormous Rockinghorse, built from 25 tonnes of wood anchored into 80 tonnes of concrete. It is more than 18 metres tall and 10 metres long, with three observation platforms built into it. As a nice touch they have the model rockinghorse set out in front of it, so you can see the attention to detail they went to. On this trip we had seen many Big Things. The [Big Marino](#), the [Big Dunlop Tyre](#), the [Big Orange](#), the [Big Ram](#) and now the Big Rockinghorse. The Big Rockinghorse was easily the best in our opinion (although the Big Ram is also quite good). And it is not just us, wotif.com recently judged the best Big Things and ranked them:

9. The Big Gumboot, Tully QLD
8. The Big Easel, Emerald, QLD
7. The Big Ned Kelly, Glenrowan, VIC
6. The Big Merino, Goulbourn,





NSW

5. The Big Earthword, Bass, VIC
4. The Big Buffalo, Adelaide River, NT
3. The Big Pineapple, Nambour, QLD
2. The Big Banana, Coffs Harbour, NSW
- and best of all...
1. The Big Rockinghorse, Gumeracha, SA

The Big Rockinghorse was built by the toy factory to stir up business, and they got some from us - we loved the wooden toys they carved so much that we bought a bunch for the nieces and nephews we would see soon in Adelaide.

### **Fairytale village**

28/12/08 Lobethal

Our final stop on our epic drive was Lobethal. It was practically on the way after going via Gumeracha and I vaguely remembered visiting a Fairy Tale Village there in my youth. We reached Lobethal, couldn't find the village and weren't going to wait until it got dark to see the famous Lobethal lights, but luckily on our drive out we passed the Fairly Tale Village. It was only twenty minutes before closing but we bought our tickets anyway and visited the village. The small huts are nicely set up inside, with attention to detail in recreating a scene from different fairy tales, but the attempts at animatronics were pretty poor to be perfectly honest, and it didn't look like anyone had done any work on the site since I last visited twenty years prior. The highlights were Lydia breaking Humpty Dumpty and the cockatoo who said hello when we passed and kept on shouting out to us on our exit "see ya, bye!".

### **Back to Adelaide**

29/12/08 Adelaide

On reaching Adelaide, our journey was complete. Despite how I would never be able to return to Adelaide on a permanent basis, it is actually quite a nice city. It is large, with over a million people, and has all the cultural capital - major museums, universities and galleries. The centre of the city is quite pretty, with nice old buildings, the River Torrens running along the north edge and a curtain of parklands surrounding it. There is a nice pedestrian mall, Rundle Mall, for shopping. We spent



our first day in Adelaide getting re-acquainted with the major landmarks - Beehive Corner (a nice neo-gothic building built in 1895 by John Rundle), the Malls Balls (two silver spheres standing vertically, built in 1977 for Adelaide's centenary) and the Pigs (Horatio, Truffles, Augusta and Oliver).

With Christmas just past we saw the Big Santa still on David Jones and nipped in to see the Magic Cave. It had just closed, but we were able to peak through the curtains to see Nipper and Nimble (the horses that boys and girls got to ride). We also drove past Scotties Motel, so that Lydia was able to see one last Big Thing - the Big Scotsman, and Lina was successful in her shoe shopping.

We spent the afternoon catching up with my family. I found out that my brother had earned a commendation as an ambulance officer for professionalism, by calmly treating the man who had just assaulted him and broken his nose. I met my newest niece for the first time, and saw the rest of the gaggle for the first time in two years. We had a family dinner out, which the kids wildly enjoyed, where Lydia met everyone for essentially the first time. And we bought a telescope with some present money, so that Lydia will be able to see her star.

### **Weird weather**

30/12/08 Adelaide

Adelaide is hot and dry over the summer. Having months without rain and long stretches over 35 degrees (and occasionally over 40 degrees - 104 Fahrenheit) is pretty much the standard weather. But this year the weather is screwy. Not only was Autumn really hot (two weeks over 33 degrees) but summer has been cold and wet - so far in December not a single day over 35 degrees (95 Fahrenheit) and it even rained today. Such a weird



summer all over Australia - just on our visit we have experienced tropical storms in Brisbane and Caloundra, downpours in Canberra and Newcastle and rain in Adelaide. I guess it won't sound weird to people in Europe or North America - but this is seriously weird weather.

### **Down to Victor Harbour and Granite Island**

31/12/08 Victor Harbour

Today Lydia, Lina, my Mum and me drove down to Victor Harbour. We drove up to the Bluff, where some of the best whale watching in Australia takes place (Victor Harbour was originally a whaling town, now it is about whale tourism) and then had a round of mini-golf (Mum got gold and Lydia silver, while Lina managed two hole-in-ones). We then caught the horse-drawn tram over the Causeway to Granite Island. The tram has been running since

1894 and is drawn by beautiful Clydesdale horses. Granite Island is one of the best places to see Fairy Penguins (the smallest species of penguin in the world), so we visited the rescue and rehabilitation centre and watched the odd little fellows trundle around, and then walked around the island. It was a very pleasant day.

As an interesting aside, technically Victor Harbor should be spelt Victor Habor, because the Surveyor General of South Australia made a spelling mistake.

### **Beer and Fritz**

1/1/09 Adelaide

Australian culture and language is a fair bit different from American or English (as I previously commented [here](#) and [here](#)), but within Australia we are boringly homogenous. Oh, there are subtle differences in accent that locals can pick (with South Australia a hint more British, eastern Australia a tad more American and Queensland a touch slower) and there is a strong city/country divide, but there are very few ways to reliably pick which region someone is from. The two most noticeable are the words people use for processed pork and the words they use for beer glasses. I'm from South Australia, so I call processed pork "fritz", but Lydia (from the ACT/NSW) calls it "devon", Tasmania calls it Belgium sausage, Victoria calls it German sausage, Western Australia calls it polony and the Northern Territory calls it round meat. Beer glasses are even more complex. Just to take the three sizes of 200ml, 285ml, 425ml and 570ml glasses, in Adelaide I call them a butcher, schooner, pint and imperial pint, respectively, while in Canberra I had to refer to them as a seven, middy, schooner and pint. In Melbourne they are a glass, pot, schooner and pint, while in Hobart they are a seven, ten, fifteen and pint. Brisbane calls them a seven, ten, schooner and pint, while Perth calls them a glass, middy, schooner and pint. Possibly it says something that it is only in the area of alcohol that we have a more expansive and varied vocab.

### **The Barossa Valley**

3/1/09 Barossa Valley

Today we drove out of Adelaide into the Barossa Valley, one of the major wine-producing regions of Australia. We drove out to Lyndoch (which was named after Lord Lynedoch, but sadly encountered a spelling mistake). We had lunch at Lavender Farm and then took a short helicopter flight over the Barossa Valley, seeing the small towns





and extensive wineries in the region. After our flight we took the kids to the Whispering Wall, more officially known as the Barossa Reservoir dam. The dam was built in 1902 as one of the first concrete arch dams in the world and is recognised as a National Engineering Landmark. The reason we went there though was because its shape perfectly carries whispers 140 metres across the dam. I'm not sure that the kids understood the point of this, as they just shouted at one end and then ran across the dam to shout at the other, but they had a good time and that is the important thing.

### **A Canberra Weekend**

11/1/09 Canberra

Another week of work in Canberra followed by a relaxing weekend. On Sunday we decided to fully indulge Lydia in her favourite past-times of Canberra - we had both lunch and dinner at her favourite restaurant, the Pancake Parlour, with two different sets of good friends, we visited the National Museum of Australia and we went to the movies (we saw Seven Pounds). The National Museum had two excellent special exhibits, one on the best political cartoons of 2008 and one to celebrate Charles Darwin's publication of "On the Origin of Species". What I enjoyed most about the Charles Darwin exhibit was his notebooks from when he fell in love with Emma Wedgewood. He drew up two lists, one called "Marry" and one called "Not marry". After weighing up the pros and cons he decided that a constant companion and a friend in old age out-weighed less money for books and the terrible loss of time. Also interesting was just how close he came to dying when he visited Australia. He had no idea of how venomous our reptiles were and calmly picked up even incredibly dangerous ones like the tiger snake saying "appears quite inoffensive and has no idea of biting".

### **Walking around Sydney Harbour**

19/1/09 Sydney

We said our goodbyes to Canberra and caught a bus up to Sydney to meet our dear friend [John](#), who has flown over to Australia to join us on the last trek. We meet up near Sydney Central Railway station and then wandered together down to Sydney Harbour, to see the Opera House and Harbour Bridge, but cocktails overlooking the harbour and then walked to Darling Harbour for a nice dinner. Sydney is always such a pleasant place to spend the day...



## Darwin, fishbowls and crocodiles

20/1/09 Darwin

We flew from Sydney to Darwin, once the homeland of the Larrakia people and now the small town capital of the Northern Territory. We settled into our hostel and then visited the main tourist attraction in the city - Crocosaurus Cove. Crocosaurus Cove has a great reptile house, some aquariums with local fish and pig-nosed turtles and, of course, lots and lots of crocodiles. Most are juveniles on loan from the Crocodile Farm (they are butchered for meat and skin when they grow to 1.8 metres long), but there are seven big crocs there, that were either captured from the wild or expelled from the farm due to bad behaviour. There was Denzel, who is 5.2 metres and 670kg, and was so aggressive that he had to be removed from the crocodile farm. There was Burt, who is 80 years old, 5.2 metres and 700kg, and was captured at Reynold River in 1981 after many cattle attacks. Burt is most famous for starring in Crocodile Dundee. There was Snowey McArthur, who is 4.6m and 680kg, and a beautiful golden colour due to the lack of black pigment in his scales. He was captured in 1986 on McArthur River after a fatal human attack.



We learnt some interesting stuff about crocodiles. Despite local myth, they cannot run faster than humans, with their top speed being only 17kph (compared to 25kph for humans). Their bite force is, however, astounding compared to other animals. Humans have a bite force of 85lbs (380 Newtons), African wild dogs can bite 300lbs (1,300 Newtons), African lions and Great White Sharks can bite 600lbs (2,700 Newtons), American Alligators can bite 2,900lbs (12,900 Newtons), Tyranosaurus Rex is predicted to have had a bite force of 4,100lbs (18,200 Newtons), but a big Saltwater Crocodile tops them all at 7,600lbs (33,800 Newtons).

We also got to hold a juvenile crocodile, and the keeper showed us the numbering system they used. Crocodiles do not get individual tags but instead all siblings get a nest tag,

and by cutting off scales at the tip of the tail (hundreds), on the left-hand side (tens) and right-hand side (singles) any number between 1 and 999 can be permanently left on them.

After Crocosaurus Cove we walked down the Esplanade and to the water, and then had drinks (including Fishbowl cocktails oof Illusions) at Tap with Luke from across the road.

## **Termites**

21/1/09 Litchfield National Park

We started with a 6:30am drive to Litchfield National Park. Our group was almost all Europeans, with one Canadian and we were the only Australians. We asked the tour organiser and only 25% of the tourists they get in the NT are from Australia.

The land up here is beautiful. Oddly enough, it looks a lot like the Red Centre, but coated with a layer of verdant green grasses and ferns for the wet season. How strange to see fire-blackened gum trees in a landscape as green as European fields, instead of surrounded by the olive greens and innumerable shades of brown of the South Australian landscape. The termite mounds were beautiful. In addition to the small mounds we get around Adelaide there were Cathedral mounds and Magnetic mounds. The Cathedral mounds are built by a species that needs well drained soils, and they keep the colony cool by building towering chimneys up to five metres tall.

The Magnetic mounds are built by a species that lives on the flood plains, and can



tolerate the water. This species of termite is able to sense the magnetic field, and they build very tall, wide and thin mounds, aligned on the north-south axis, to reduce the amount of light heating the mound. Depending on the local conditions, slight deviations from the north-south axis are more suited, but the termites are genetically programmed for a particular degree deviation, so that natural selection wipes out the unsuited colonies and only leaves those with the degree of deviation suited for the local conditions. With the flood plain bare of trees and hundreds of termite slabs standing, it looked like an overgrown graveyard.

We have been seeing a lot of wildlife, Short-eared Rock Wallabies, Agile Wallabies, Kangaroos, Kites, emus, waterbuffalo, Owls, frogs, goannas, geese, wrens, Blue-winged Kookaburra, Blue-faced Honeyeaters, and many more we can't name.

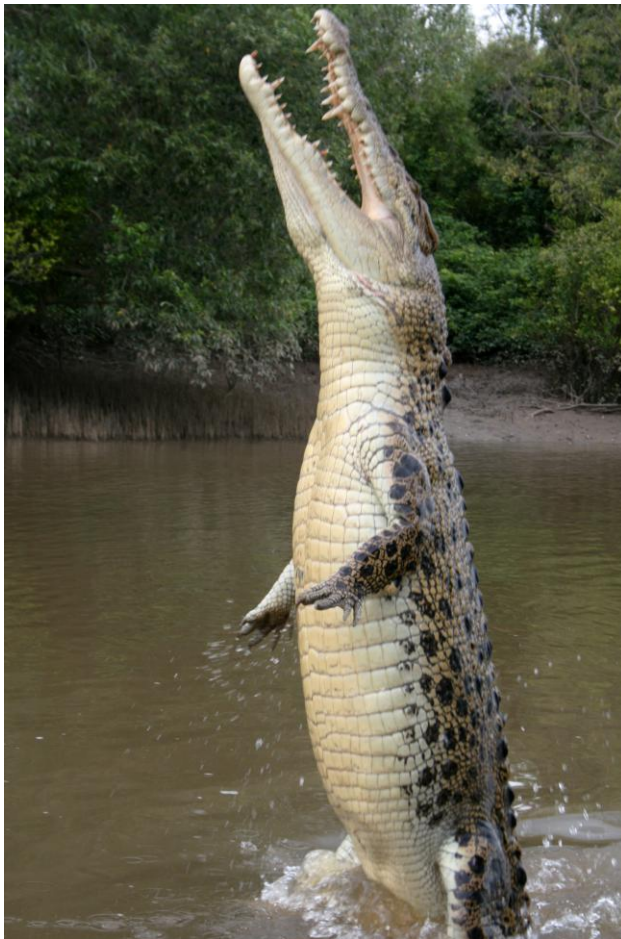


We drove down to Florence Falls, where we swam in the pool at the bottom of the falls. It was such an iconic Northern Territory moment - after the humid heat sapping our strength we were able to relax in the deliciously cool water, surrounded by ferns and with a light mist falling on us from the falls. We also drove to, and swam at, Buley Rockhole, and then looked out over Tolmer Falls. We didn't swim there, because Tolmer is home to one of the most important colonies of the very rare Orange Horseshoe bat. This species of bat is very bad at thermoregulation when at rest, and therefore only a few caves in northern Australia are at just the right temperature and humidity for it.

### **No alcohol, no pornography, but jumping crocodiles!**

21/1/09 Adelaide River

After leaving Litchfield National Park we visited an Aboriginal Art Gallery, where we got to hold an adorable Agile Wallaby joey, which I think Lydia wanted to take home. We were driving up to the Adelaide River to see Crocodiles jump in the wild.



Along the road were highly visible signs of Howard's legacy - "No Alcohol, No pornography". It did not apply to us, but only to the Aborigines. In 2006, with the election approaching, Howard (after ten years of inaction) decided to suddenly act on a decades old plight - the fate of young children in indigenous communities. With crippling poverty and systematic destruction of their culture, remote communities of Aborigines live in conditions unimaginable to most Australians. An indigenous child will be born with a life expectancy twenty years shorter than other Australians, with fewer education and employment prospects and the certainty of experiencing diseases that white Australian children never will.

Like many times in the past, this was voiced as being completely unacceptable in a Northern Territory report "Little Children are Sacred", which also including a whole host of

health, legal and educational approaches to reverse the situation. Howard, however, chose to ignore all the policy advice in the report, and instead seized on ill-disguised racism in segments of Australian culture which portray Aborigines as drunk and violent (in reality alcohol use among Aborigines is lower than among white Australians, and domestic



violence is probably around the same for the socio-economic status, but Aborigines have an outdoor communal culture, so all the nasty aspects that in white Australian culture are hidden behind closed doors are instead visible to all).

So, in a culture shattered by disempowerment, Howard shredded every last vestige of independence and personal dignity. He took away land rights and the right to refuse white Australians entry into indigenous land. He sent in the Army to forcibly check Aboriginal children for sexual abuse (they found only a single case - a lower rate than white Australia). He banned all alcohol and pornography for Aborigines in remote communities (but not whites in the same communities), under the uneducated myth that pornography promotes sexual abuse - Howard was all about conservative ideology rather than evidence-based policy.

Howard also took away the freedom of Aborigines to spend welfare cheques at their own discretion, replacing the payment with a card that could only be used for certain items in certain places.

Regardless of the paternalistic racism (and it clearly is racism - the government had to repeal the Racial Discrimination Act in order to pass the race-based law), policy was both naive and stupid. Only large regional stores could participate, so the local community stores became unavailable. Instead Indigenous women are now spending hundreds of scarce dollars on taxis to the regional town centre, the only place they can spend their money. Great business for Woolsworth and Coles, but terrible policy for indigenous people. But Howard loved the idea of controlling indigenous welfare cheques so much that he cancelled a successful government work scheme (where the government employed indigenous people to do community work) just to force the people onto welfare so that he could control their pay.

Unfortunately, treating Aborigines as a one





dimensional political point is bipartisan, so much of this counter-productive rubbish has been continued even after Howard was booted out of office, and no one has tackled the underlying problem of poverty and hopelessness.

On Adelaide River we went on a Jumping Crocodile Tour, where they taunt large saltwater crocodiles to jump up next to your boat with hunks of dead brumby (wild horse). It is such a stupid idea - this top lever predator is very shy about contact with humans - thanks to years of hunting. Instead of encouraging this status quo, the tour teaches crocodiles that boats mean food, and to jump up along the side of boats to seize any meat it can grab. Obviously they really mean it when they tell you on this trip not to put any lands over the edge of the boat.



National Parks has realised that making crocs jump is a bad idea, so now only five companies are allowed and only on the Adelaide tour. Regardless of the idiocy of provoking a lethal creature to attack us, the trip was amazing, one of the best travel experiences I have ever had. Seeing a crocodile in the water, eyes and nose just breaking the surface as it effortlessly follows you and then disappears, is one thing. Seeing the shear power of these animals as they leap up out of the water, using a few twists of their powerful tail to thrust themselves metres out of the water and then hearing the hideous slap of their jaws snapping shut - that is something else all together. These creatures are just a tonne of muscle under armour plating with a walnut-sized brain focussed only on the kill.

Our guide on the boat was telling us about his closest call, when he was living on a small island in the middle of the Adelaide River. He had a small shed that he used as a kitchen and came back after a successful fishing trip to cook up his 85lb Barramundi (a large Australian river fish). Up one end of the kitchen he heard something and turned around -



a large croc had walked into the only entrance and was staring at him. He backed back until he burnt his bum on the hot plate (he "was caught between a croc and a hot place"), without turning around he reached behind searching for a knife - his gun was at the other end of the kitchen behind the croc. Instead he grabbed the fish, and intending to throw it out the kitchen to get the croc to leave, he threw it forward.

In the worst throw of his life, the fish went only a metre and landed right in front of him and in the blink of an eye the croc leapt forward, grabbed the fish and ran out. Our guide said after that he made a promise and a bargain. The promise was that he would never let his gun get that far out of his reach. The bargain was that he would never shoot a croc unless it entered his kitchen but in return the crocs would not enter the kitchen if he feed them outside.

### **Into the heart of Kakadu**

23/1/09 Kakadu National Park

We have spent the last two days traveling around in a 4WD and camping in Kakadu National Park. Kakadu is an enormous wilderness that (together with Arnhem Land, the Aboriginal-owned wilderness to the east) makes up almost the entire "Top End" of the Northern Territory. Once all monsoonal forest, the area is now largely flood plains and tropical scrublands, thanks to 50,000 years of fire-stick farming by the Aborigines changing the ecosystem. Most of the area is protected within Arnhem Land and Kakadu National Park, but some is leased for uranium mining. Actually, the land here is so rich in uranium that certain sites were known as sickness sites, due to the high frequency of mutated and sick animals there.

The Aborigines of Kakadu and Arnhem Land are the oldest continuous culture in the



world, the Bininj.

At the time of European settlement there were 2,000 Aborigines speaking twelve dialects living in the area, with a sophisticated trade network extending down to the desert tribes of the Red Centre and up to the Malays of the Indonesian archipelago. Land theft, introduced diseases, missionaries and deliberate armed incursions dropped the population down to only 200 and left only three languages viable - Gagudju (Kakadu is a distortion of Gagudju), Gun-djeihmi and Jawoyn. Now the population has risen back up to 5,000 and the traditional lifestyle has been kept alive with more success than most other places in Australia. Perhaps this is because they are so isolated (to get permission to visit Arnhem Land is extremely difficult and there are no large population centres), or because they had a slower integration into modern life (with trading and contact with Malays and Chinese occurring for hundreds of years, maybe even a thousand, prior to European contact), or maybe the rich lands of the coastal north are more forgiving than the desert, making traditional culture more attractive and allowing a higher population density). I would love to find out one day their opinion on how they are keeping the traditional lifestyle alive.



We spent the two days hiking to waterfalls and Djang (Bininj dreaming sites). With the topical heat the pools and waterfalls were a delightful reward after a long hike, we were quite happy to share the water with freshwater crocodiles just to soak in the refreshing coolness surrounded by such beauty. Of particular pleasure were the Aboriginal artwork at the Djang we visited (Burrunggui and Anbangbang), where stone ledges had been painted and repainted for tens of thousands of years in a variety of art styles. The paintings depicted the animals of the area, in a respectful acknowledgement of their sacrifice, "contact art" of European items (such as rifles), Nayuhyunggi (the first spirits

and ancestors, who shaped the land, such as Namarrgon, lightning man, and Nabalwinbulwinj, a dangerous spirit who kills women after striking them with yams) and cultural dances and traditions.

The Bininj had (and in some cases, still have) a very complex network of laws, traditions and relationships that all needed to be taught to the next generation through song, ceremony and art. Among the Bininj all people (and animals, songs, dances, land and ceremonies) are divided into two moiety - Duwa and Yirridja. This is inherited from the father, while four skin groups are inherited from the mother. Actually even more complicated and there are 16 possible categories into which someone can fit, circumscribing what they can do and who they can marry - it takes four generations for each cycle to complete.

My favourite wildlife encounter in Kakadu was being woken up in the middle of the night by the howls of dingos, and finding them prowl around our campsite in the morning.



My least favourite were the hundreds of cane toad that infested the park. Cane toads were stupidly introduced into Australia from Hawai'i in 1935 to control the Cane Beetle in sugar cane plantations around Cairns. They have spread in a horrible wave since then, reaching the Northern Territory in 1984, and have now penetrated into this last pristine habitat. The 200 million cane toads are a problem for the native frogs and lizards they eat, and also for the native birds and snakes that attempt to eat them and die from the poison they carry.



## **Into the Daintree**

25/1/09 Daintree

Another day, another magnificent World Heritage-listed site. We spent today on a day tour to Cape Tribulation and the Daintree Rainforest, the oldest rainforest in the world, having existed for 100 million years. We drove through the sugar cane plantations, where Australians both introduced the noxious cane toad and also experimented in slavery under the guise of "[blackbirding](#)". We took a cruise along the Daintree River, where we saw a large juvenile crocodile hiding under the mangroves to cool down and White-lipped Green Tree Frogs. We then walked through the Daintree rainforest/mangrove forest along the Marrdja boardwalk, seeing the ancient plants and insects of the forest. We had lunch at Cape Tribulation after a walk along the beach, and stopped off at Alexandria look-out, Mossman Gorge and Port Douglas. The tour was soured slightly by our guides, who seemed quite nice but acted like complete stoners trying to film "Bill and Ted's Excellent Rainforest Adventure", just spouting urban legends rather than anything informative. Luckily the tour was saved by sheer chance when, on the drive back to Cairns through the rainforest, two Cassowaries stepped out of the rainforest in front of us and calmly walked across the road in front of the truck. I had never thought we would have a chance of seeing this magnificent, rare, beautiful and dangerous bird in the wild.



## **Diving on the Great Barrier Reef**

28/1/09 Great Barrier Reef

We just spent three glorious days diving on the Great Barrier Reef, living aboard the Reef Encounter. John had planned to take his Open water course, but a cold he had picked up

scuttled those plans so he went snorkling instead. Lydia and I had a bonanza of diving - we did ten dives in our three days. It was the most luxurious way of diving, the water was so warm I didn't bother with a wet-suit, and the staff on the boat kept our tanks full and the scuba outfit set up, so we could just strap it on and set off the boat. When the water was choppy they even lowered us and picked us up using the boat lift. Except for our two night dives, we did all the dives by ourselves, the first time I have ever dived without a guide. It went surprisingly well, despite not diving for a year we had our buoyancy and diving skills fairly polished and we even navigated fairly well, especially on our second and third dives of a site.

I certainly felt more competent under the water than I ever had before, and the sting was taken off by being able to hop into the hot tub afterwards.

As well as being easy, the diving was fantastic. We saw giant clams (with flesh that glowed and sparkled in colours you would not expect), green sea turtles, white-tipped reef sharks, lion fish, clown fish and sting rays, not to mention the innumerable tropical reef fish in their spectacular colours, and the enchanting corals. Most spectacular to me were the two night dives (my first under the ocean at night). Being under the water at night must be one of the most alien experiences possible. Gravity and direction are weakened, replaced instead by the pressure of water in every direction. Your senses are distorted, sound becomes bizarre and light is absent, save for the sparks of bioluminescence created by your every movement.

In the first the reef seemed abandoned, with the small fish almost absent. A glance at the corals instead revealed a plethora of tiny orange lights, with our torchlight reflecting back on the eyes of the delicate cleaner shrimp. Our second night dive explained the absence of small fish in the first. We jumped into the water only to be surrounded by a pack of hundreds of Giant Travelli, each around a metre long and armed with savage jaws. They prowled around the reef like a hunting wolf pack, taking full advantage of our weak torch light to seize any small fish that wandered out from safety, with half a dozen Giant Travelli darting in from all directions whenever we spotted a fish. The swarm of GTs in hunt were much more intimidating than the solitary sharks we saw. As a final pleasure, at the very end we came across a sleeping green turtle, resting on the reef floor.

We spent around five hours under the sea during our three day stay, with the rest of the trip being spent with pleasant company. We talked to John and Gavin, our new chatty and cheerful British friend, spent time in the hot tub, watched the bottle-nose dolphins follow our boat, took abundant naps and played board games, a most relaxing interlude to our hectic travels.

### **Our final days**

30/1/09 Sydney

We have had a fun couple of final days in Sydney, walking around in the beautiful weather and meeting dear friends, including a partial reunion of the [Trans-Siberian railway](#), with John, Angela and myself.

## A world of shopping

1/2/09 Dubai

I probably spent more time shopping today than I did in all of 2008. We are in Dubai, a pit-stop visit on our flight from Sydney to Brussels, and our final day before reaching our destination.

Dubai is surprisingly beautiful. On the drive from Abu Dhabi to Dubai, Dubai stretches out as 40km of glass and steel along a narrow strip between the desert and the sea. It is a city unlike any I have seen before, with towering sky-rise after sky-rise for kilometre after kilometre. Unlike cities like New York, where the buildings block out the light, in Dubai they reflect and colour the light, as each towering building is only a few years old and is sheathed in blue, green, silver or gold glass. The city is narrow, only a few blocks in depth, so even in a city of sky-scrappers the horizon can always be seen and the desert light filters through.



Many of the buildings are still being constructed, waiting for their glass sheath, as Dubai is a work still in progress. It has grown from a city of 150,000 in the 70s to 1.5 million today, and with annual 7% population growth it will hit 2 or 3 million in the near future. The growth of the city is so fast that a third of all the cranes on the planet are in Dubai, to feed the rapid construction. 90% of this population is due to foreign immigration, with many single men coming to Dubai to find work. This influx of men massively distorts the gender balance of the city, with 75% of the population being male (and this skewing was even greater in public places).

While most of Dubai is new and sparkling, the biggest and the best, parts of old Dubai are still to be found. We



stayed in Deira, the old town on the north-east bank of the Creek. Deira is renowned for its old markets, the Souks. We spent a morning wandering through the Deira Covered Souq, the Perfume Souk, the Gold Souk (where we ate magnificent food in a tiny Indian cafe) and the Spice Souk. We visited Heritage House (built in 1890) and Al-Ahmadiya School (built in 1912), allowing us to see the beautiful architecture of the traditional Arabic building style, built from coral and gypsum around a central courtyard. We caught an Abra from Deira Old Souq Abra station, the rickety old wooden boats that are still used as public transport to cross over the creek from Deira to Bur Dubai, the old town on the south-west bank of the Creek. Such a striking contrast to be bobbing on the river in traditional boats used for hundreds of years, but being surrounded by towering glass and steel, a monument to modernity.

In Bur Dubai we walked through the Bur Dubai Souk, past the Grand Mosque, and visited Dubai Museum, where once again the city showed its love of using individually moulded mannequins to display its history in a surprising underground exhibit. In the Bastakia quarter beautiful old houses had been restored and the grey cooling towers made a beautiful contrast to the blue sky.



For every passenger taking a rickety boat across the creek, many more waited for buses in air-conditioned hermetically sealed bus shelters or sped along the main highway at breakneck speeds, so in the afternoon we visited modern Dubai. We saw the famed Burj al Arab, the seven star hotel built on its own artificial island, rising out of the sea just beyond Madinat Jumeirah, a luxury resort and shopping mall built like a Disneyland version of Arabic souks.

Just in case the monstrous mall was missing some luxury we caught a taxi to the Mall of the Emirates - still the largest shopping mall in the world while Dubai Mall is still being built under Burj Dubai (which will also become the tallest building in the world), although it could soon fall to third place as the Mall of Arabia (also being built in Dubai) would outstrip both the Mall of the Emirates and Dubai Mall.

### **In Belgium**

2/2/09 Leuven

Our new home.