

20 Things I Learned on My Australian Vacation

1. Australians have a fear of paper towels and napkins. It is a continent of wet-handed people exiting public restrooms with that classic wave-the-hands-around-to-dry-them movement. Some public health agency has put the fear of god into the restroom regulators, and you won't find those unhygienic paper towels, potentially seething with SARS or Ebola, within continental shelf distance of Australia.

Neither will your food come attended by any such thing, unless it's been decoratively placed under your sandwich so as to be already bearing a tracing of melted cheese or dressing. The distinct impression given is that it's not to be used, but merely gazed upon to remind yourself how delightfully it directs the eye to your grilled tomato and swiss.

I wandered Australia with wet hands and mustard on my chin.

2. Australians, unlike Americans it would seem, have fully faced up to the fact that eating and drinking are associated with food and drink seeking exit from the body. Therefore, in even the most remote of stations, there are bright, spacious, welcoming public bathrooms. Australians WANT you to feel secure in the knowledge that there is a bathroom waiting for any emergency--they're huge and clean and big and obvious, with signs and encouragement and everything but but a neon walkway to the door. I can appreciate this, even with the inevitability of wet hands. Not once in my travels did I experience that growing feeling of desperation we all know so well. Good on ya, Oz.

3. I have now known a country in which public transportation is more than a sepia-tinged memory or a dream of the chrome and steel future, and I am a changed woman. Buses, trains, options, and drivers who are helpful and friendly. So this is what civilization IS. Tell me again which nation leads the world?

4. Australians are reproducing and babies rule the sidewalks. Motherhood is still revered, and by this I mean that the newspapers are full of articles either concerning the virtuous qualities of motherhood (mumhood) or assisting a baby boom along with helpful homemaker advice. One of the government ministers even suggested, in the press, that women today "have a baby for themselves, a baby for their husbands, and one for the country". Interesting public policy for a largely arid land that may have already exceeded ideal carrying capacity as far as self-sufficiency goes. I mentioned this striking quote to a young Aussie woman, and she indicated her belief that this is public

policy as long as the unspoken expectation is that the babies will come out white.

5. Aboriginal art blows my mind six ways to Sunday. The canvases in the fine arts museums of Sydney and Brisbane were some of the most riveting, thought-provoking and GORGEOUS paintings I've ever seen or will see. Even small, local pieces leap with life. How did I go this long without knowing?

6. The backpacking industry is gigantic, and must surely prop up a significant section of the Aussie gross national product numbers. I've never seen such a hive on the move-- in every city and at every junction. There are millions and millions of young people from every famous and obscure quadrant of this world walking around all over it, and they give me hope. By virtue of their travels and experiences they have very broad perspectives and tolerant opinions, and when the day comes that all these starry-eyed, Teva-wearing 20-somethings morph into the 40-somethings that are in charge of Big Things, they will not fall back on small-scale thinking. And the young women absolutely shine in every way. Strong, independent, openhearted and open-eyed, they were a joy to talk to and a hopeful light in a darkening world.

7. Australia = 1950's era America. There's the sense of room, optimism, youth, privilege. This is a country that's not yet come up against its limitations or at least does not recognize the ones on the horizon. The demographic I saw seems young, busy, relatively wealthy by world standards. This induced in me such a Happy Days flashback feeling that I wouldn't have been surprised to see poodle skirts and posters for sock hops.

8. Sexism is alive and well in Australia. There are magazines for men (cars, breasty women), and magazines for women (recipes, the latest updates on Brad/Jennifer or Posh/Becks), and that's about it for publications. Women in the workplace are still referred to as "girls", and Hooters seems to be doing brisk business without much protest from feminists. That being said, Australian men wear the shortest shorts I've ever seen on any straight men. Road crews, stockmen, park rangers--all carouse around comfortably with not much to impede the swing of their legs.

And paradoxically, Aussie women have a core of steel in them. The stone-cold ice queen who ran the "guesthouse" I suffered in Cairns had this to say to a tourist who wanted to know if it might be safe, this late in jellyfish season, to swim outside the jellyfish nets. Fixing him with her little watery eyes, she replied that it was a free country, mate, and that no-one would stop him from doing anything he wanted. Yike.

9. The nation is obsessed with feeding animals. Every animal park nearly begs you to stuff kibble down the dozing wallabies and catatonic kangaroos, and birds in such places are so habituated to handouts that they routinely flew over and sat on my head, awaiting the inevitable. Where I found this most startling was in listed World Heritage Areas and National Parks, where signs in restrooms and around camp grounds would sternly advise you against the temptation to slide a carrot to the big-eyed marsupials grazing around the tents and tables. Meanwhile, 50 feet away there would be a publicized 2:00pm bird feeding for the purpose of getting good pictures to take home with you, or a fish-feeding festival so that snorkelers could get good shots with their disposable plastic cameras. Schizophrenic.

10. Walk into a bakery, deli or cafe and attempt to order a coffee. Go ahead, I dare you. The big boards above the counters will offer you the chance to order a Flat White and other mystifying oddities. I had tea.

11. Australia is now a multicultural nation, and this is demonstrated wonderfully by the profusion of cuisine from hither and yon. I munched my way through representative meals from nearly every country on this good green earth, but I must say that there is not a decent enchilada to be found in all the land. Mexicans have shunned Australia to date. Sadly.

12. Tasmania has such nice people that it makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. If you want to be disoriented by unfailingly pleasant, helpful people who have all the time in the world for you, by all means head to Tasmania. It is also the place where I was sniffed and chewed by a wild wombat in a twilit field full of grey kangaroos, and so it will always have a special place in my heart. Honestly, though. It kind of makes you wonder what's in the water.

13. The cities of the East Coast are booming. BOOMING. Fabulously-coiffed, tastefully black-clad city denizens swarm along smartly in the shiny streets of these cities of the New Millennium, and they're doing pretty well for themselves. The technology sector must be a large part of this, as the big city papers had two burgeoning sections devoted entirely to Information Technology--eclipsing even the fat sections devoted to cars (and motherhood/housemaking).

14. In America, when one is visiting a National Park and wishes to hike the trails, one can usually assume that the estimated time for completing a hike as given is based on the demographics of the ancient and/or the rotund. If the trail to Mt. Lookout is recommended as requiring 3 hours to complete, one can pretty much assure oneself that one could

walk that trail at least twice, lollygag for photos, stop for lunch, and take time out for a post-lunch nap in that three hours. Or drag a broken limb along and come out with plenty of time to spare. This is because Americans are fat and lazy.

In Australia they expect you to get a move on. Many Aussie hikes were completed unexpectedly under the stars, and I automatically began to pack my headlamp for hikes, even if we started out at 10 am. These are not people who waste time on the trail. If the hike to Mt. Lookout is recommended to take 3 hours, well then, get your butt in gear. Also, elevation changes are not a factor. Mt. Lookout might rise straight up from the trailhead sign, and a kilometer on the flats gets the same treatment as a kilometer up a series of rope ladders.

15. Australians are pissed about Iraq and they hope G.W. goes away really soon. From their perspective we look a scary and heartless big bully of a nation. The PM's association with G.W. on the war issue may cost him, like it looks likely to cost Tony Blair, the next election. Which is interesting, really, as his social perspective is much like G.W.'s own Christian conservatism. For example, he not only opposes gay marriage, but also refuses to allow gay couples to adopt--and please don't bring it up again. Life in those Australian orphanages must be pretty plush to look better to him than a life with two attentive, caring parents of non-specified gender. Even white ones, if they insist on being GAY parents.

16. Baby koalas make human babies look like warts and kittens like dryer lint. They're off the Cute-o-meter scale. I can't get over them. Go see.

17. Oahu-based singer/songwriter Jack Johnson and reggae superstar Lucky Dube are apparently the only people to have ever recorded music. They emitted from every bus, cab, boat sound system, shop speaker, boombox, restaurant and club that I had anything to do with. Oh, and also Tracy Chapman, who's song FAST CAR must have a rabid following consisting virtually of the entire human population of eastern Australia, not counting the Aboriginal communities...who were into Lucky Dube, mostly.

18. Note to Self: next time, try to wait until you are out of the National Park of exceptional wildness, beauty and ecological quality before you break up with your partner. Try not to do it early in the evening in a cramped camper van full of heat and mosquitos. This will allow you to not only skip the long and miserable sleepless night practically on top of each other but NOT touching in the seething, sweltering dark, but will also avoid the 4-hour drive back to civilization the next morning in the dreaded Quiet Vehicle. When possible, move heaven and earth to return on

your own time to Kakadu National Park and the rest of the jaw-dropping area south of Darwin. It's as if the sea of grass called Everglades washed up against the feet of the red rock canyons of the American west, and all the birds in the world are there. Priceless, stunning, otherworldly. I ached to leave it.

19. In all those photos in books and on postcards of endless stretches of white sand beaches curvaceously cradling the turquoise sea, they never mention that the chances are really good of dying a horrible heart-strangling death by deadly, neurotoxic jellyfish if you get in the water. For about 8 months of the year.

20. This is a lovely, young, optimistic country with a tragic past that it seems to want to outpace. Keep an eye on it, and with the other eye read Tim Flannery's THE FUTURE EATERS for some concepts you've not thought about. And keep your fingers crossed for Australia.