

A Traveler Writes: An Australian Adventure

Bill and Betty wanted to see Australia up close and “ok if we get a bit dirty” No teenage thrills, just an authentic experience with nature and the outback.

Although their journey began in Sydney, this travel log starts at the end- on the Outback Mail Plane north of the Flinders Ranges. Hang on for the ride! All the photos below were taken by Bill & Betty on the trip. A version of this was a feature article in the June 2010 issue of International Travel News.

After departing **Port Augusta**, the mail plane landed on the dirt runway with a few bumps. An old jalopy covered with dust inside and out pulled up. Out stepped a man who'd probably never shaved or had a haircut. His hat was a proud one - sweat stained, cracked rim, with the gritty reminders of good times pasted all over it.

He greeted Tom, the pilot, and we jumped into his car. He raised the hood, fiddled underneath and slammed it down. It only partially latched. Off we went to the tune of zeee zawww zeee zawww - - the sound of a broken door latch trying to close. Soon Tom was slapping his knee keeping time with the latch, singing "I've been everywhere man" but substituting Australian towns for the originals. A few verses later we pulled up in front of a small hotel. The unshaven man went to the front of the car: "Relay. You have to pull the relay out to get the door latch to stop and not run the battery down."

In we went for tea. Half an hour later (during which time we were mistaken for the bar-keep since by now we were behind the counter) Tom said we have to leave, to keep on his mail delivery schedule. The unshaven one was not about to let us go without showing us his hot tub. He was pretty proud of that tub. It consisted of a hole in the ground fed by an irrigation pipe.



We hopped in the car. Up went the hood, in went the relay, and down came the hood. We slammed the doors and now all four door latches took off at the same time. Now we had four-part harmony of zeee, zawww, zeee, zawww. Off we went in a cloud of dust. But rather than drive to the plane, we headed toward the hot tub at a zillion miles an hour, stopping three feet from the hot tub, where a man sat soaking. His eyes were big enough to have eye-to-eye contact with all four of us at the same time as he contemplated his imminent death. Reverse gear and we were off to the plane. Just a wee Aussie joke.

Tom had forgotten to turn something off and after a cuss word or two jumped into the pilot's seat and did something to solve the problem. He asked the unshaven man to stay around to make sure we could get the motors started. Personally I would have liked to see



how you jump start an airplane but that was not to be. A few bumps later and we were off to the next cattle station. The plane was an old Beech twin engine held together partly by duct tape. The gauges were mostly dust catchers.

We had driven to Port Augusta the night before and called Tom to see if there was room for Betty and me on the plane.

When you sign up for the mail run, you don't know until the night before whether there is room for you or not. He said "No room," so I asked if just one of us could go. Thirty minutes later he called and said he'd located a cattle station that could sell him additional fuel so we could both go. "You came all this way and I didn't want to let you down!"

The Outback is vast. It fills 95% of a continent the same size as the lower 40 of the USA. We were there after a very wet year (happens once a decade). Large areas of green dotted the almost barren landscape. Occasionally we passed over a shallow salt lake. Tom would point into the distance: "See that station?" The stations are huge. One of them was until recently some 10,000 square miles -- about the size of Rhode Island -- and it had only one house. On our way to Birdsville, we stopped at about 10-12 such stations.

Birdsville is a man's town – a truck drivers', beer drinkers, dirt bike rider's kind of town. At first we few tourists in the bar felt we looked out of place. The regulars dared us to make it up Big Red, a giant sand dune that was the town's main attraction. We didn't have time to try. But nobody cared who we were --that in itself made you feel good. If you put your money down, you got a drink. Ask and they might have "shouted" you a beer.

This mail plane excursion came near the end of what was probably the best trip we have ever taken. Here are the high points.

We landed **in Sydney** in a pouring rain that continued except for the morning we took the bridge climb. We both really hate heights but neither of us felt any sense of fear on the bridge climb. They outfit you with a special bridge climbing suit and all kinds of gear and latch you to a cable so even if you jumped off you



wouldn't go far. The walk is wide and a gentle slope to the top. The views are fabulous as you look down on the harbor and the famous Opera House.

From there we headed north to Cairns, got our rental car and headed north to **Port Douglas**. Our hotel, The Mantra Portsea, was a short walk from town. It would have been a little shorter but we stopped to watch the fruit bats (flying foxes) taking off for the night and probably fifty of them flew over head.

Port Douglas is a tourist town, almost exclusively. We ate at the Ironbar Restaurant. I had kangaroo (sorry Skippy) and Betty had a steak. Both were excellent and set us back about \$25 each which was about what we paid for most of our evening meals. We didn't stay for the cane toad races they have in the bar each evening. That was probably a mistake!

A word about the **beaches**. They are like postcards. Long, wide, flat, and ringed by palms and trees. Several were in flower. Some beaches were completely empty and we could have walked for a mile or more in either direction without meeting a soul. You need an IMAX camera or something from the Space Shuttle to capture them properly.

The next morning we boarded a large catamaran (**Synergy**) and headed out of the harbor to the **Great Barrier Reef**, and motored the 20 miles out to the buoy on the Reef. There were only six passengers, and everybody headed out a different direction. We practically had the Reef to ourselves the entire time. The Reef is a World Heritage Site. The water is relatively clear and you see thousands of fish, but the big attraction is the coral. You can swim along the edge of the reef, moving out of the little bays and inlets. Giant clams (and some of them were really giant) were common.



The next day we drove to the **World Heritage Daintree Rainforest**, crossing the river on a ferry on the way. The Daintree is a tropical rain forest – and appropriately it gets about 15 feet of rain per year. We left the main road and turned onto a dirt road to a farm house. The place is so wet and warm the owners live outside in a huge covered patio. Only when there is a cyclone do they move their furniture inside. Pru, the owner of the Cooper Creek Wilderness Tours, immediately made us feel like friends. Our guide for the day, Murray Antill then took us off into the jungle. He loves what he does and wants to show you every piece of the area he can.



The jungle has a fairly rocky floor, so it was spared the axe for logging or clearing for pasture. It is now a World Heritage site because it is one of the few remaining places in the world that go back 250 million years. Plants, new to science, were found there just a few years ago. When you stand there under an almost complete canopy of palms, you are in the same forest the dinosaurs walked. It was a humbling feeling to know the seed pod I

was holding could trace its lineage back hundreds of millions of years and we, humans, could only go back a million or so.

We never thought we would see a **Cassowary** but a large female, whose name was Big Bertha by the way, walked within 20 feet of us and didn't seem too concerned.



That evening we took a night walk in the same forest. It is a different place at night! There were birds sleeping on the ends of thin branches about eye height. They look like little puff-balls and did not wake up as long as we did not actually touch the branch.

From the Daintree we drove over the **Great Dividing Range** and into the **Atherton Tablelands**, to the **Jabiru Safari Lodge**. The Jabiru is a stork but, but the manager, Cook, said "Would ever stay here if we called it Stork Safari Lodge?" This place is worth going if just to meet Chook and his wife Tracey. He is what you picture when you think of an original Australian bloke: shorts, hiking boots, sock covers to keep the twisting seeds from burrowing into his ankles, a shirt and hat. And the birds there!



About those seeds that get into your socks: when they get wet they go through this strange twisting and latterly screw themselves into the ground. If you happen to have one in your sock and you sweat a little it will start to screw into the closest thing at hand which is probably you. Apparently it takes a couple weeks to recover from the infection. We checked our socks after we got back. No seeds.

On the walk from the dining area to our tent, we passed an emu that had come to drink. That night we slept in a fixed tent, listening to the sounds of a couple little animals running back and forth on the roof. The attached bathroom sides are partially open and I wished I had gotten up to see what was rattling around in the dishes we had washed from the night before.



From there we headed south, deeper into the Atherton Tablelands. It looks like Ireland without the rock fences. The hill sides were vibrant green and full of livestock. We drove to several waterfalls. We met a man by one waterfall, and then saw him again in town next to a farmer's market. We must have talked for a good thirty minutes. Australians are just that way.

We stayed at the **Atherton Blue Gum B&B**, a huge house on top of a hill with a porch overlooking the nearby town. We had bought a bottle of wine and a pizza in town, so watched the sun set over the mountains. As it set about 10 Bush Turkeys which are about the size of chickens came out of the brush looking for a handout on the way to their perch for the night.



Early the next morning drove a bit to a bridge that Chook had told us about. The mist had barely lifted from the fields. A spider web hung between the strands of barbed wire glistening with dew -- a thousand diamonds in the early morning sun. On the right down a 10 foot bank was a narrow stream. The path was overgrown with small bushes and grass, but there was a smallish open area of water connecting larger clear areas largely free

from grass. It was peaceful, cool and still. We were the only people on the bank and there were few cars on the road that early. We walked as quietly as possible and there, all of a sudden, was a platypus. Chook had told us to go to the river by the bridge, that's where you will see them. Don't go to the places they show on the map. The best viewing is early in the morning by the bridge. He was right.

The platypus swam up the stream darting into the weeds and then back out into the open water. All in all, we saw four or five of them that morning. An hour into our walk people, first joggers, started to appear. That, combined with the later hour probably drove the animals into their burrows because they were gone although we searched for another hour or so.

We dropped the car off in Cairns and caught a plane to **Adelaide** where we met up with our old friend Julie, whom we had met on another trip. What we remember most is the pouring rain and 115km winds, strong enough to break large branches out of trees and uproot some, all while she was trying to walk us around the city. Mostly it was scampers from one bus shelter to another to try to stay dry but the fun was seeing her again and it didn't really matter.

The next day we rented a car and drove **to Port Augusta** which is where I started this piece. Now, back from the mail plane trip to the Outback we boarded another plane to **Kangaroo Island**. Until now we had not seen a single kangaroo! I think the Australians ate them all. Did you know they are the only nation that eats their national symbol? Personally, I thought it was kinda cool. Can you imagine what would happen if you chowed down on a Bald Eagle? It boggles the mind.

Kangaroo Island is a place you need to see to believe. It is about 50X100 miles long and as green a place as I have ever seen. It is full of kangaroos, wallabies, and now koalas. In fact it has so many koalas they have started a population control program.



We were met at the plane by Peter Morris, with **Kangaroo Island Wilderness Tours**. You need a guided tour if you have only a couple of days. The island is big and the places you want to see are far apart, so it is better to have somebody drive and tell you about the place on the way than do it yourself. Peter took us to his farm to look for black swans among the cattle. Peter didn't have to take us there, but he did! We couldn't have done that without a guide.





On one beach we watched New Zealand fur seals dozing on the rocks as huge waves came in and crashed against the shore. For somebody like me who likes the ocean, this was about as close to heaven as I could get. The other side of the island had Australian sea lions and, if you have a guide, you can go down on the beach. Still you have to stay 7 meters away from them. They, on the other hand don't know the rules, and don't have to stay 7 meters away from you. A one

year-old pup came up to us only a few feet away and sat there for several minutes looking us over with one eye and then the next. Peter said we were very lucky since that does not happen very often.

We also had walks through the eucalyptus, finding koalas as well as the hundreds of kangaroos, wallabies, and one huge ant.



This was an absolutely wonderful trip. **Karolyn Wrightson of Essential Down Under Travel** and my wife Betty talked many times before arriving at an itinerary and they got it right. We like to start early, end late, get wet, cold, and tired and we did all these things. It would be hard to overstate the warm interactions we had with people we met at front desks, on the walking trails, or on the beach.

If you decide to go I would **call Karolyn first**. Her selections were exactly what we wanted to do and her choice of accommodations was just what we wanted. She knew we wanted to see as much of Australia as possible in a little over two weeks and she was able to do it. We had been to the cold, populated south, the hot humid north forests, the Reef, Highlands, and Outback. We have been to Kangaroo Island. We have seen storms, dazzling rainbows, ancient forest canopies, and the immense outback and we did it all in two weeks. Am I glad to be home? No, not at all.