

"We're From Adelaide"

by Joe Mulder

My wife and I decided to take a nice, big, honking vacation together before we started having kids. She suggested Europe. Then, I floated the idea I'd been hoping to promote all along: "What about Australia?"

She'd been to Europe three or four times, I argued, and my family had gone to France when I was 13. We'd get to Europe again eventually; everybody does. But how many people ever go to Australia? I'd always wanted to go to Australia. She let the idea percolate for a week or two and ultimately decided she was game. It helped that a former coworker of hers, an Aussie native, had recently moved back to – and had invited anyone who might find themselves in Australia to visit – her hometown of Byron Bay, a hometown whose natural beauty had caused her, when she saw the gorgeous, world-famous beaches of Malibu, to respond with a hearty "meh."

And then, if you're going to spend a week or so in Australia, you may as well spend it in Sydney, right? That's what we figured, anyway. We booked our trip: ten days in Sydney, with a day or two in Byron Bay if in fact we were able to get a hold of my wife's friend once we got there.

The fifteen-hour flight was wonderful; I would urge everyone to fly Qantas at least once. Each seat had its own TV with several different recent-release movie and TV channels on a continuous 150-minute loop – I got to watch the scene from *Sideways* where Paul Giamatti chickens out and starts talking about riesling instead of kissing Virginia Madsen five or six times, and I could probably still perform from memory the "Mr. Bean" sketch in which he orders steak tartare, decides he doesn't like the look of it, and proceeds to hide it anywhere he can throughout the restaurant (the flight home was somewhat less thrilling, as the first portion took place during the middle of the night, a fact apparently unnoticed by a man and a woman three rows behind us who had what better have been the most interesting conversation in the history of the world while the rest of the passengers tried to sleep).

In any case, after a couple of lovely days in Sydney and were able to contact my wife's friend Mela. We decided to fly up to see her and her family in Byron Bay – just about 90 miles south of Brisbane – one day and fly back the next. We brought along a couple of changes of clothes, our bathing suits, and a tiger toy we'd bought at the Sydney Zoo for Mela's four-year-old son Marley (my wife would later decide – and I would heartily agree – that the tiger toy should be named "Snarley").

Sydney's main train station was a short walk from our hotel. When we got to the train station and I pulled out my wallet to buy tickets to the airport, I noticed that my credit card was missing. I had another, so it wasn't what you'd call an

emergency, but nobody wants to lose any credit card, let alone in a foreign country. I quickly concluded that I must have left my card at the sushi restaurant in the shopping center at Sydney's Darling Harbour the night before, and resolved to call them as soon as we got off the plane in Ballina (which is where you fly into when you're going to Byron Bay, and which, while checking in at the Sydney airport, we amused the ticket agent by pronouncing more like "ballerina." I can't even think how to spell the proper pronunciation phonetically, other than to say that it rhymes with the first three syllables in the newly controversial phrase "pallin' around").

After a short flight to Ballina, a phone call to the shopping center at Darling Harbour confirmed that they had my credit card and that I would have no problem picking it up when we got back to Sydney the following evening.

We had a lovely two days in Byron Bay. Mela and her husband Miles are in fact the two best-looking people in the world, but in spite of that they are very nice. They took us to their favorite bars and restaurants, they hiked with us to a lighthouse representing the easternmost point on the Australian mainland, they attempted to teach us how to surf; a fine time was had by all.

The highlight of the Byron Bay trip, incidentally, may have been when a rowdy group of Australian rugby fans (who could not possibly have more typified the image that would immediately pop into any American's head when he or she hears the words "a rowdy group of Australian rugby fans") came knocking at our hotel room door asking my wife if she had any makeup. They wanted to put it all over their passed-out drunk buddy, of course (some customs apparently know no hemisphere). My wife, not wanting to let strangers in general – and these strangers in particular – to take off with her makeup, volunteered to go along and apply it herself. Me, not wanting to let my wife go off with a group of strangers in general – and most certainly not these strangers in particular – came along.

We got to their room and found several more drunken, rowdy Australian rugby fans surrounding one of their number who had passed out on the hotel bed. They'd done what little cosmetic damage they could manage to do to him while waiting for reinforcements, in the form of my wife's makeup kit, to arrive, and they'd also done him the favor of stripping his of his pants and underwear, leaving his floppy Australian wang out for the world to see. At this point my wife and I felt very much like Wesley and Buttercup shortly after entering the fireswamp: we realized that as dangerous as the situation had become, our best chance for survival was to push on through rather than to flee back in the direction we'd just come.

We managed to get back to Sydney unharmed and unhazed and, as the sun set, it was time for me to go pick up my credit card. Without knowing it at the time, I had booked us in a

POOP READING

hotel that was right next door to a Sydney monorail stop, and the monorail ran right to the Darling Harbour shopping center as well. Easy enough. I got there, and was made to feel a little better about myself upon seeing a large binder in which tens, maybe even hundreds, of lost credit cards were filed in see-through plastic sleeves. See, I wasn't the only one. I got my card and I headed for the monorail stop.

I got in the monorail car, and my guard went up. Not a lot; just a little. The car was filled with six or seven teenage boys, well-dressed and well-kempt enough that I didn't immediately assume they were troublemakers, but lacking any adult supervision. They were shouting, singing, and climbing all about the car. It didn't take me long to discern that they posed no threat to my personal safety, but I wasn't sure I was looking forward to the rest of the ride.

Before long I was chatting with the one sitting next to me; I forget just how we got to talking, because normally in such a situation I would say nothing, refuse to lock eyes with anyone and pray that it would be over soon so I could go and be by myself (which is, incidentally, how I conduct myself in public almost all of the time). Some way or another we got to talking, though, and I asked him where he and his friends were from.

"We're from Adelaide," he said, referring to the capital of South Australia.

"Oh," I replied. "I've never been there."

"Don't go. It's shit."

"I like this kid," I thought to myself.

He asked me where I was from.

"Los Angeles," I told him.

"Oh, isn't that where the Crips and the Bloods are?"

I assured him that as long as one stayed away from the neighborhoods where the Crips and the Bloods tend to congregate, they weren't much of a problem.

He asked me if I'd been to New York, which I had. He seemed amazed that any person could have seen so much of the world in one lifetime.

Then a few of his friends launched into an impromptu, off-key, hollering version of Aerosmith's 1998 hit "Don't Want to Miss a Thing." This was in the summer of 2005, mind you. If it weren't for their age and the fact that I didn't smell any alcohol whatsoever, I would have been convinced that they were drunk.

"You guys are obviously in town for some sort of choir convention, then?" I asked, with an irony that was either lost

upon, or unappreciated by, my young friend.

"No, we're a rowing team," he told me. They were in town for a competition.

The youthful exuberance made sense in context; Adelaide doesn't exactly qualify as the sticks – it's the fifth-largest city in Australia, and has a population of over one million people – but anyone who's amazed by the fact that you've been to New York is undoubtedly excited to be anywhere away from home. And for some of these kids it was probably their first trip to the big city, the city that everyone in every country knows about, the city with the world famous Opera House, the city that hosted the Olympics... I could dig it. And, for the duration of a fifteen-minute monorail ride, I could certainly tolerate it.

And so it was, as the monorail sped on through the Sydney night, that the young rowers sang, louder and louder: "I don't want to close my eyes, I don't want to FAAAAAALLL asleep, 'cause I'd miss you baby, and I don't want to miss a thing." One of them swung like a monkey on a railing inside the monorail car. As his teammates shouted, sang, dangled, and made harmless asses of themselves, my new young friend turned to me. He looked me in the eyes and, in a tone of voice identical to the one you'd use to explain to a nearby stranger that an inappropriately behaving special-needs acquaintance of yours has his good days and his bad days, he told me again:

"We're from Adelaide."
