

Finally 3 November 2008 beckoned and it was time to travel from London Heathrow to Bangkok a mere 11 hours or so. Bangkok was hot and humid, but at that time the airports were open. The city was preparing for the funeral of its princess (Galyani Vadhana) and she was the 84 year old sister of the king. A funeral pyre was being built in the centre of Bangkok and the princess' body had been kept whilst preparations were made. She had died at the end of 2007. Bangkok has glorious palaces to visit and also the river and the Royal Barges (but not allowed to take photos once near them).



From Bangkok it was a mere eight hours to Sydney and then another 2½ hours to Christchurch. Finally we set foot in New Zealand. It was pretty chilly so out with jumpers and anoraks and when we arrived at the airport it was raining. Christchurch is very civilised and we traveled through many familiar names, Hagley Park (named after one of the Lyttleton family from Hagley Hall), Worcester Street, Hereford Street, Gloucester Street. We felt very at home. The trams had been resurrected and did a circular trip round the city calling at the usual favourite spots, the Botanic Gardens, the bridge where you could take a punt on the River Avon. We traveled out to Lyttleton Bay and heard all about the original founding fathers who came in 1849 and named the city after Christchurch in Oxford. That accounted for the Oxford and Cambridge terrace which bordered the River Avon. Time to have a coffee at Starbucks selling the same merchandise that we would see throughout the southern hemisphere. On 5 November two nights before we had arrived they had had fireworks in Christchurch to celebrate Guy Fawkes.

Time to make our way down to Queenstown, a journey that took us most of the day, with lunch at Stan Taylor's farm. Stan's farm 700 acres and 2,000 sheep. The farm he reckoned was worth about \$2m, but as he said the money was no good when you were down the pub and had not got enough money to afford a beer. Sounds familiar. As ever asset rich cash poor.

Stan's son used the John Deere that was parked up in the shed for contracting, but today it was shearing day and shearing 2,000 sheep was no mean achievement. There was even a Honda bike that looked very familiar parked out the back. Stan's wife and her helpers cooked roast lamb and mint sauce followed by pavlova. There were familiar pictures in the house of weddings set out just like back home. Stan's family had originated from the outer Hebrides and come to find a better life in New Zealand at the end of the 19th Century.

Time to move on into "Lord of the Rings" territory. The sunshine was sharp and intense and it was a beautiful trip overshadowed by Mount Cook and wonderful lakes. We discovered McDonalds dog next to the church. A few more hours and it was time to arrive in Queenstown. Reminiscent of an alpine skiing resort with the beautiful Lake Taupo. There are 120 restaurants which service the ski resort in the winter (our summer) and bungee jumpers, Lord of the Rings fans and all the other people who get to Queenstown in the summer (our winter).

The trip across on the Earnslaw the 1980's steamer that crosses to the governors lodge on the other side, which was originally the home of the Governor. Fortunately there were a few pubs doing happy hours drink as well as food following New Zealand the exchange rate held at around £1 to New Zealand dollars 2.6. The visit to see the bungee jumping was one day before the infamous Hackett was to come back on the 20th anniversary of their first jump off the Kawarau Bridge. The paper reported that schoolchildren had been invited to attend the anniversary jump by the original founders A.J. Hackett and his mate, it commented that parents had been rung somewhat hastily to seek permission for their children to do the jump. After that they could return to their millionaire home in Monte Carlo.

It was hot in Arrowtown and clearly it had been a time of some activity when the Chinese stayed on to seek their fortune in the gold rush. From Queenstown it is a days trip to Milford Fjord. The tunnel that had been built from 1935 to 1953 which was when it opened and gave access to the beautiful fjords. The fjord trip was delightful with penguins, seals.

So it was time to leave Queenstown and slim down those cases to start the first of many domestic flights. A couple of hours later and we are arriving in Rotorua. This is the place where great tectonic plates meet, so the whole town has volcanic activity and the smell of sulphur which permeates the air. I suppose it is New Zealand's version of Droitwich Spa complete with its equivalent brine baths (expensive massage clinics etc) and more mud to be bought in the shops than you normally see. Rotorua is not an attractive town and like all New Zealand towns is built on a grid basis. After all in the late 19th Century why not build things sensibly instead of wiggly.

Travel overland comes next with a visit to see the caves at Waitomo full of all the glow worms. Our tour guide around the caves is as English as you can get and when seeing that there were quite a lot of people to show round his immediate reaction is "Oh blimey all these people how ever are we going to cope and we are shortstaffed..." We chuckle. Another picture joins the gallery of unpurchased pictures after yet another attraction has a camera at its exit.

Across the plains now of the north island and we arrive in country that looks more like Wales than East Anglia, but all the little unkept. Not too long and we are in Auckland and rise to its highest point in order to see where the rugby world cup stadium for 2011. Clearly lots of politics out here just like at home! The hotel in Auckland was formerly the department store of Farmers, huge rooms, balconies and the Sky Tower, the tallest building in the southern hemisphere looming up just round the corner. After the inevitable meal at the Sky Tower with a buffet that you could eat forever the sun drops down on Auckland and all its boats. For every ten Aucklanders four own a boat and there are a lot of boats. Auckland is fairly uneventful and it's time to move off to Australia.

Here we are in Sydney with its two icons the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House. Both we visit and photograph to excess. The first evening is somewhat wet and we wander around the rocks and up to the Harbour Hotel wondering where all the people are. An interesting chain of Goossens seems to have built up in Australia and The Rocks is just the place where you would site one. Cannot resist a Dame Blanche.... All too many calories! All the sights of Sydney await us, Bondi Beach, the cliff. Of course throughout this we are closely reminded of the sterling dropping against the Euro and our pound buy less Australian dollars by the day. Thank goodness this trip was accounted for months ago when the pound was strong.

Inevitably the challenge is on, "if you'll do it, I'll do it" and off we set to climb the Sydney Bridge. Our group of ten are all strapped together and we set off with the skies looking a little uncertain. When we are on top of the bridge, is when the thunder and lightning start in earnest. The whole bridge is electrified and our guide and the supervisor who is sent up to check whether it is safe for us to be on the bridge are both a little worried. However, we weathered the storm and descend in one piece. We have climbed 1,437 steps and we can recount the whole of the history of building the bridge in 1923. Apparently it was guaranteed for 80 years... Oops hopefully that is not to be taken literally.

So another flight finds us in Cairns. At 36°C it is pretty hot. Another town laid out in a grid. Interesting to hear a band and bagpipes playing on the riverfront, otherwise loads of restaurants

stocking Mud Crab and the fish Barracuda. All the things you'd expect when you are on the coast of a great ocean. However the Barrier Reef beckons and on the hottest day for 30 years we traveled up to Port Douglas and out to see all the fishes. Snorkeling and boats under the water to look at the reef are a must. The other "must do" in Cairns is the Kuranda rainforest, cable car and train. The exploits of earlier pioneers building dams are all fascinating as is the rainforest itself (yes I have seen on "I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out Here").

The temperatures rising and the next port of call is Alice Springs (immortalised by Nevil Shute and A Town Like Alice). Remarkably Alice Springs had had a lot of rain which seemed a paradox as Rough Guides definition of a local in Alice Springs was someone who had seen the rains three times. The Alice Springs area had lots of water in it and so again reading of the outback and early colonisation was fascinating not to mention the CD of the man who tested the atomic bomb in the outback. That was good listening on the 300 mile journey to Uluru (Ayers Rock), both the rock itself and the resort were fascinating. The economics of the resort were as interesting as the dynamics that surrounded the launch of the film Australia which happened at the beginning of our stay "down under". Fortunately the flies kept away from Uluru for our visit, so the third fly net proved unnecessary. The sunset was a beautiful experience.. Not to be missed and not quite captured on camera.

So it was time for the final internal flight to Perth. Perth really was a gem. The view from the Botanical Gardens was beautiful and the experience at Annalakshmi where wholesome vegetarian food - cooked not by chefs, but lovingly prepared by volunteering mothers, grandparents, sisters and brothers who have learned from their ancestors the art of creating food for the soul and then in the beautiful surroundings of Perth harbour one can dine without paying (save for a donation... which of course is equivalent to eating out). A very interesting evening with a couple from Melbourne not surprisingly of Greek descent with a Welsh grandmother called Thomas thrown in!

Fremantle was very interesting and the buildings that had been saved kept a wonderful backdrop. Even nice scarves to be bought in the Fremantle market. Also the Maritime Museum with the 18,000 names of those Ten Pound Poms and their predecessors who had settled in Perth and taken the trouble to pay the \$66 to get their names on the walls of fame. There were around a dozen Adamses found and one Lewis. However, quite possible that neither Adamses or Lewises ever ventured to these far climes from the Welsh marshes and the Teme Valley.

In Perth business, harbours all merge into one and there was not much talk of recession. The east coast Bondi Beach was a treat, but as everywhere in Australia and New Zealand there is always a "fish and chips" sign not too far away and the inevitable Starbucks and McDonalds and

Subway. It was interesting to travel south from Perth on the newly completed railway line that runs in the middle of the road for a lot of the way and get off the train in the middle of a motorway. This enabled us to visit Mandurah trying to emulate Venice with a “Bridge of Sighs” and inland canals and a number of very expensive houses along the side for the canals including the town museum benefactor and winner of America’s cup in 1967.

So it was time to bid farewell to Australia and travel to Singapore. High rise hotels, shopping malls and the inevitable Raffles... Raffles Hotel which was earmarked for demolition in 1987 was a memorable occasion. A nonalcoholic sling in the Long Bar and plenty of peanuts on the floor. As it was now December, Christmas carols played out throughout Singapore’s shopping malls and on the boat trips and even in the new Singapore Christmas decoration to adorn each cubicle. Other than that it was beautiful to see the orchids and witness the building of a new Botanic Gardens. This must have made the sixth Botanical Gardens visited and still reinventing the wheel! Wonderful hot stone massages all round before the 11 hour flight back to London Heathrow.