

**The kangaroos, koalas, and lorikeets,
Dancing white peacocks, penguins, and the coral reef,
The fish and sharks too, did smile.
Driving, diving, and flying,
The trip went by in no time,
It was a wonderful holiday, the best of times!**

The hustle and bustle of Sydney; the rich wine of Hunter Valley; the turquoise gleam of the Blue Mountains; the quaint town of Melbourne; the vivacious Great Barrier Reef at Cairns; and the picturesque Port Douglas - each place majestically contributed to making our journey to down under awe inspiring!

Arrival in Sydney

On December 1, 2011, we flew to Australia for a month's trip. It took us almost 24 hours to reach Sydney from New Delhi. Around 8 pm, the flight attendant announced our arrival at Sydney Airport. As the plane bent southwards heading down, we saw the distinct Opera House on the right just before we landed. Our well wishers had warned us against carrying any food articles, whether packaged or open, on the journey

Australia - A Window to the Animal World





and so we did not. Soon after we de-planed, the endless clearing line and thorough checking had us cribbing and restless. But once we had crossed the exit point, it was relatively convenient to find a cab and get to our hotel. A helpful policeman dutifully instructed the cabbie to take us to our destination, which was a hotel located in the vicinity of Darling Harbour. It was drizzling, and the night was cold and foggy, quite unlike our expectation of an Australian summer. When we approached the hotel (which was an appealing European building with a glass exterior), a terse lady at the reception greeted us and handed us our keys. Fatigued by our journey,

we slept early, but our minds were restless and feet wanting to begin exploring.

A bus and ferry ride

The next morning we were directed to a shop in the nearby market to buy the day's bus and ferry ticket for AUD20 per person. We purchased the tickets and unquestioningly waited for the bus at the nearby stop. The bus came in no time to carry us to Circular Quay - the hub of Sydney Harbour, situated at a small inlet called Sydney Cove.

On the southern side of Circular Quay is a walkway that leads to the Sydney Opera House and Royal Botanical Gardens; while on the northern side, a short walk takes one to the Harbour Bridge and The Rocks market, one of the oldest, most interesting parts of Sydney, offering open stalls and artifacts, local dresses and bags. The Parramatta River is the main tributary of Sydney Harbour and gallantly flows through making its presence felt at Darling Harbour, Circular Quay, Sydney Harbour, and Manly, among other places and renders an outstanding view from the footsteps of Opera House.

The Sydney Opera House boastfully stands in the backdrop of Sydney harbour over the Parramatta

River. It was designed in 1957 by Denmark's Jørn Utzon, who was inspired to create this structure while peeling an orange. Opera House is sprinkled with eating joints and coffee shops. We tried an Italian Pasta that brilliantly complimented the foggy milieu with its sizzling steam and delectable preparation. The Sydney Harbour offers an excellent opportunity to walk leisurely and explore the place, with its attractive shops selling niche curios. After an exciting day at Sydney Harbour and Circular Quay, we caught a ferry to Darling Harbour. The ferry ride was fascinating, with the skyscrapers, and innumerable hotels, on both sides of the river, pacing with the speed of the ferry. Its on-board café provided out of the world, sumptuous muffins! They were enormous in size, but quickly melting in the mouth.

The occasional drizzling outside pulled us out of the cabin onto the open balcony to soak in the fog in sync with the rhythm of splashing water. The ferry silently approached Darling Harbour. The place was overflowing with Christmas celebrations. There were walking Santas approaching the children. Carols were in the air sung by a group of enthusiasts, adding spice to the celebrations. After spending the evening at Darling Harbour and trying some Thai food, we walked back to our hotel.

That night we went to sleep thinking of our agenda for the next day - a trip to the Sydney Wildlife and Sydney Aquarium, both located at Darling Harbour. We had discovered that you can avail a combo pack of entry tickets, including Sydney Wildlife, the Aquarius, and the Sydney Tower.

Some Facts about Koalas

The Sydney Wildlife satiated our quest to see kangaroos, wallaby, koalas, a variety of birds and other insects and innumerable reptiles. The Aquarium, citing some 2000 aquatic habitats offered a splendid view through its glass tunnels.





The Kangaroos at Sydney Wildlife

The Glimmering Blue Mountains

The next day was the trip to the Blue Mountains, for which we had booked a tour. Sharp at 7 am, our minibus arrived at the entrance to our hotel to take us on the trip. Mike, our driver, guide and specialist on the tour came in to greet us. It took just 15 minutes to col-

Mountains, the Three Sisters is essentially an unusual rock formation representing three sisters, who according to Aboriginal legend, were turned to stone. Their names are Meehni (922 m), Wimlah (918 m), and Gunnedoo (906 m).

The Blue Mountains offer the best and most economical collection of Australian artefacts and toys. Another spectacular experience here is the rail ride from the Café to the jungle below, in an open train that slowly takes you down a steep route and brings you back up. It is the steepest rail journey that I have ever undertaken, but was very enjoyable.

At the Sydney Tower Eye

We also gathered courage to climb the Sydney Tower Eye, the tallest free standing structure in Sydney, elevating to a height of 1014 ft above sea level, and located at Sydney Central Business District (CBD), not too far from Darling harbour. We took a train upto Pitt Street and walked to the entrance of the tower. Our tour guide was a young Korean girl who judiciously built up our courage to climb the tower. We were given costumes and a chain. Once on the stairs leading to the tower, our chains were tied to the handles ascending upto the tower. A gust of wind greeted us at the top. We were literally flying, only caught by the chain. On looking down, to our shock, we found that we were standing on glass floors that boldly displayed the height and the distance from the road below. Before we could come to terms with our situation, the floor itself began to move, popping itself out of the building structure. Needless to say, there were screams and shouts in unison.

On our way back we silently descended the tower and when we landed at the bottom of the stairs we found displayed our shock-stricken photographs which we purchased. This was an experience to remember, and hearing our exclamations, expressing both shock and excitement, our guide advised us to climb the Sydney Bridge as our next adventure. Unfortunately, we were running short of both time and courage to attempt this.



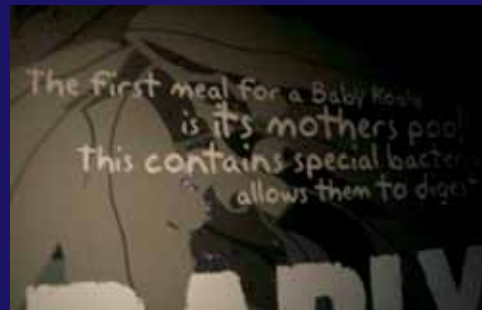
The Koalas at Sydney Wildlife

lect the passengers, 12 in all, and once we were all seated we happily began our journey. Our first stop on the way was the Feather Dale Park, which is near the Blue Mountains. After handing us miniature koala mementos, we were instructed to explore the park, and return to the minibus at a stipulated time. The park is definitely the entrance to the world of natural koalas, kangaroos, dancing white peacocks, hanging bats, penguins, and other species of birds.

We had enough time to talk to every kind and also feed the kangaroos and koalas. We then returned to the bus to resume our journey to the Blue Mountains. On reaching the Blue Mountain region, Mike took us for a walk in the jungle. Huffing and puffing, we must have climbed and then descended some hundreds of stairs and natural elevations. It was green and wet all over, with the drizzle posing challenges. But as we reached the top, we were pleased by the view of the glimmering Blue Mountains. On our way back we went on a cable car ride to the Blue Mountain Café. Along the way we were visited by the uninterrupted view of the Three Sisters, located at Echo Point near Katoomba. One of the best known sites of the Blue

A cruise on Captain Cook!

The end of the trip came with a surprise cruise on board the Captain Cook ship. We were brought to Sydney Harbour, where we boarded the ship and took a relaxing journey to Darling Harbour. The Sydney Bridge looked alluring, but the thought of driving to Hunter Valley the next day, inspired more and we humbly came back to our hotel.



At Hunter Valley

The next morning we checked out of our hotel and took a cab to the airport, where our car which we had taken on hire from the Red Spot rental service was waiting for us. This was our first attempt at international driving, and since any country driving licence, as long as it is in English, is valid in Australia, we set out after a few false starts of the automatic car, straight to New Castle, at Hunter Valley. With the help of the car navigator we completed our journey in three hours.

The Hunter Valley is Australia's oldest, and one of the greatest premier wine growing regions situated in the deep, lush, rolling hills



The Statue of three sisters at Blue Mountains

of Barrington Tops and Pokolbin. We stayed at the Mercure resort, in Pokolbin, just next to the botanical garden. The resort, the undulating hills and petite smoky cafés, can make one feel like Alice in Wonderland. Its ambiance and wine and cheese tasting tours, can soothe the mind for days. We regretted assigning only a night's stay at Hunter Valley. It definitely deserves a week of uninterrupted attention.

At Melbourne

We drove back the next day to Sydney, and in the evening boarded a Jetstar flight to Melbourne where we were greeted by our friend in whose house we stayed for the next three days. During this time we visited the Melbourne Docklands located on the spectacular Victoria Harbour and 3 kilometers of Yarra River frontage. We also went to the Queen Victoria market, and rode in a horse carriage, and to the Phillip Island to watch the Penguin Parade.

The drive on The Great Ocean Road is an incredible experience in the arms of nature. The Great Ocean Road is an Australian Na-



tional Heritage listed 243-kilometre road between the cities of Torquay and Warrnambool. The road is the world's largest war memorial built by returned soldiers dedicated to casualties of World War 1. The journey introduces The Twelve Apostles, a collection of limestone



stacks off the shore of Port Campbell National Park.

The Great Barrier Reef at Cairns

Our Australian adventure would have been incomplete without a visit to the Great Barrier Reef, which saw us boarding our flight to Cairns. The Jetstar flight from Melbourne to Cairns took almost three-and-a-half hours, including a time zone difference of an hour. The weather at Cairns was an absolute contrast to that of Sydney and Melbourne. We were greeted by sultry weather, typical during the monsoons. On reaching, we took a cab to the Galvin Edge Bungalows (an A-rated, bread and breakfast outlet). We were greeted by our genteel hosts Julie and Jesse Lowe, who handed us the keys to a beautiful two-bedroom bungalow, with a swimming pool,

and library. The entire place was ours for the next few days that we were at Cairns.

The next day we took the two-hour Magic Reef cruise to the land of the Great Barrier Reef. I tried my hand at helmet diving and snorkelling, despite not knowing how to swim. With my heart pumping speedily I put on the heavy oxygen filled helmet, and dived in, and the next thing I knew my head was one with fish and coral. The guided snorkelling tour was an amazing sight replete with the coral reef, some species of fish, turtles, and unknown shark-like fish.

A visit to Cairns is incomplete without undertaking a drive to Port Douglas, which is a 60 km straight stretch of road along the sea. It is a treat for driving lovers!

Once at Port Douglas, we enjoyed our Lunch at the Wildlife Café, accompanied by lorikeats and other



bird species.

Completing our stay at Cairns a week later we flew back to India. Australia is a large nation with a small population, and is a window to the world of exotic animals and much besides. Memories of our expedition to Australia will remain with us for a lifetime! ■



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