

Australia

We have completed our visit to Australia and want to provide an update on our journey. Australia has a population of just under 25 million with a landmass equivalent to the Lower 48 states in the US. Most of the population lives adjacent to the coasts in eight metropolitan areas. It is a thoroughly modern country undergoing a building boom. It has both a diverse population and history. However, the hot political topic currently is immigration which is very restrictive in terms of applicants proving their potential "value added" to the country... a merit-based system. We would note too that Australia has the largest population of poisonous snakes in the world. Interesting place.

General:

Crossing the Tasman Sea took three days and the second day witnessed the largest waves of our trip. The average wave height was 14-16 feet with several waves over 18 feet. Invigorating in terms of really understanding the power of the ocean. The ship handled the rough water very well with, once again, the stabilizer system making all the difference. They did close the pool and several banks of elevators as well as postpone the evening entertainment but always better safe than sorry. We ate at one of the specialty restaurants on the first deck level and marveled at several waves which reached the top of the windows! Remarkable how well everyone has adjusted to shipboard life. We keep seeing and meeting new couples where in the beginning of the trip people seemed more sequestered by choice.

We too have continued our routine where Lorraine does her exercise class at 8:00 AM and I go to the gym to run. My speed and endurance is improving as I now hold the Viking Sun Gym record for 2.5 miles for males born in NYC on 16 Oct 1945. In fact, I have broken the record twice which is a good thing because we have eaten at the specialty restaurants a lot more lately.

Viking has really stepped up on this trip. The head chefs have rotated off the ship and been replaced by a new group who specialize in French cooking. Previous meals under an Indian head chef were a bit spicy while now the main courses are more nuanced. I watched a cooking demonstration from Chef Julian Pouteau, a young Australian who has worked throughout France and whose specialties included Wagyu Beef Strip Loin, Holy Goat Cheese Tart, and Mango Pavlova (a meringue dessert.) Lorraine actually took an optional 3-hour cooking course. She earned a Viking Cooking School apron which I expect to see often when we get back to Bow, NH.

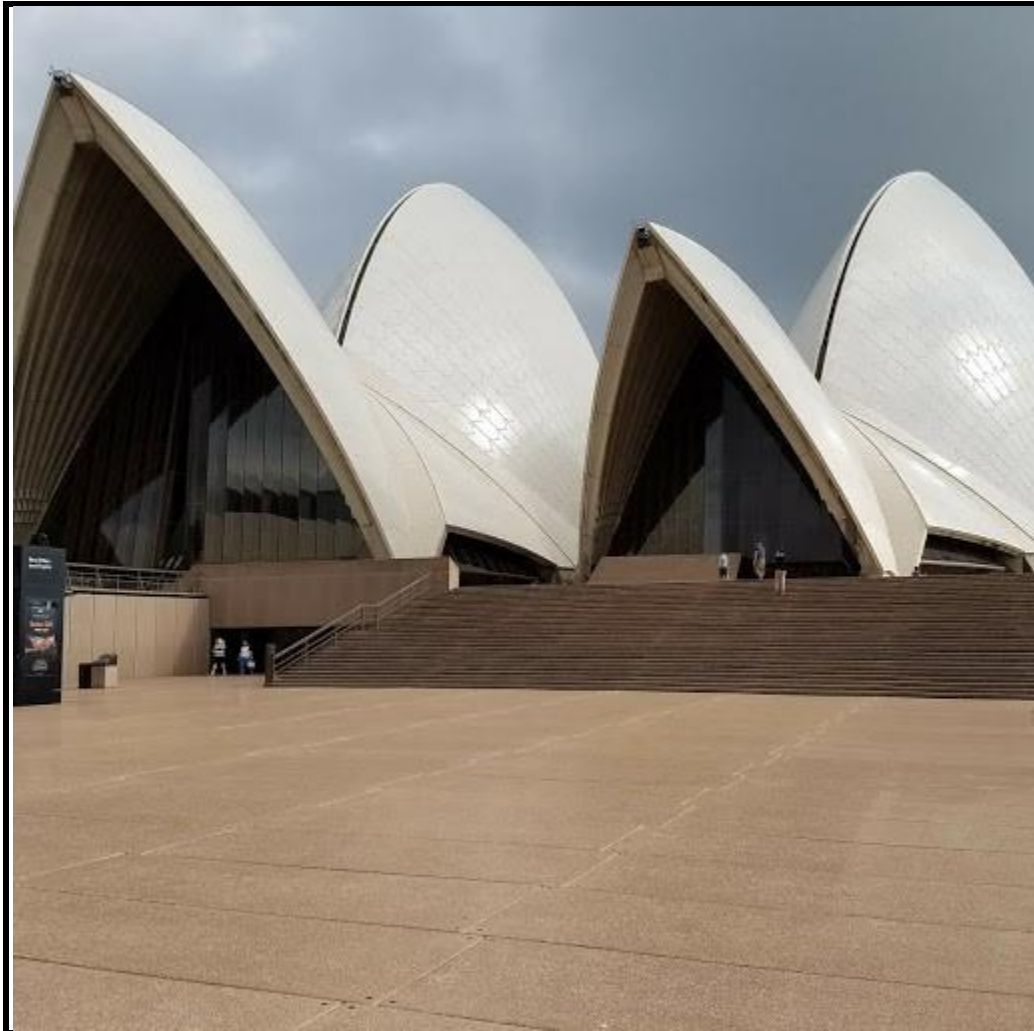
Entertainers also rotated in Australia. We had an excellent singer, Chelsea Gibb, who starred in productions of Chicago, The King and I, and numerous other musicals. We also had Andrew Skrimshire, a violist from the Royal College of Music in London and Richard Gauntlett, a variety show performer whose films included Who Framed Roger Rabbit and A Midsummer Night's Dream and often appears in London's West End productions. A special presentation onboard

ship in Sydney was by the group called “Decendance.” These were Aboriginal performers who sang, danced and were accompanied by a Didgeridoo (a unique instrument hollowed from a specific tree species) which makes a sound that is a cross of oboe, bassoon, and electric vibe. Very primal. We also heard Patrick McMahon, a singer/guitarist, who was very energetic (almost too energetic) and did renditions of famous hits from Johnny Cash, Neil Diamond, John Denver, and Kenny Rogers. International pianist Kym Purling who was the music director for Natalie Cole and Engelbert Humperdinck did a show alone and then combined with Patrick McMahon. We had a terrific performance by a trio called Fusion which was composed of two females and one male singer. They did standout selections from Phantom of the Opera and Les Miserables, as well as selections from jazz and opera in both English and French. The two female singers were outstanding singing “The Prayer.” We also had David Copperfield. No, not the magician but a singer/comedian with a number of London musical credits. Another entertainer was Jane Cho who is an “electric violinist” and played music that ranged from Vivaldi to the Beatles, Led Zepplin, AC/DC, and Queen. Really a surprise when you normally think of violins as part of an orchestra. Our next entertainer was Michael Falzon, a singer, who was simply terrific. He was handpicked to star in the band Queen’s hit musical, “We Will Rock You.” He sang “Stars” from Les Miserables and it was as good a rendition as any we have ever heard in a live performance. During a second performance with both Michael Falzon and Jane Cho onstage, it was revealed that they were actually married and celebrating their first wedding anniversary. They were excellent together.

Excursions:

- 1. Melbourne.** Capital of the Australian state of Victoria, Melbourne has a population of approximately 4.25 million making it the second largest city in Australia. It has a very British feel in terms of the Victorian architecture and proliferation of large gardens in the city proper. At the same time there is a building boom with many new commercial and housing properties under construction. Housing is generally very expensive so new rental complexes are proliferating. The main port is outside the city so Viking ran a bus shuttle service. We chose as our excursion “Train, Wine & Wildlife.” The “train” component was Puffing Billy a narrow gauge railway constructed in the early 1900s to open up remote areas in Victoria. The steam locomotive operates between Belgrave and Gembrook about 26 miles from Melbourne. The trip is only 30 minutes long as we travelled only about half its length before meeting the buses to go to the vineyard for wine tasting. The vineyard is called Rochford Winery and is large operation, owned and operated by the Chinese. Our wine guide was Chinese and very knowledgeable as we tasted four different wines (two white, two red). Grape varieties included Chardonnay, Cabernet, Pinot Noir, and Merlot. We also had a very good lunch where we both had salmon ... delicious. “Wildlife” focused on a visit to the Healesville Sanctuary which focuses on native species. We were only there for an hour which was not sufficient time to see more than two varieties of kangaroo, some wombats (hiding from the hot sun),

and some sleeping koalas (more detail on them later.) We enjoyed Melbourne but could have used more time at each site.



- 2. Sydney (two days.)** This is the largest city in Australia with a population of 4.6 million. It is located in the state of New South Wales and purportedly has the second greatest number of construction cranes in the world (Dubai is first.) Its history dates to 1788 when it was established as a penal colony. The original “convicts” are better understood when you realize they were men, women and children ranging in age from 8-62. Their “crimes” under British law were typically simple theft (7 years), aggravated theft (14 years), and forgery (21 years). For aristocrats guilty of “high crimes and misdemeanors” their death sentences were sometimes commuted to life imprisonment in Australia. Thus, while there were hardened criminals among the population, more often than not the convicts could actually bring family members with them (at their own expense) and have hope for a life after their sentences were complete. In fact, the governor could also reduce sentences for good behavior and he did so as he used the often educated convicts to run projects and design and build infrastructure. Repeat

offenders were kept in separate, harsher prisons and/or sent to other Australian settlements (Melbourne and Brisbane.) On the first day in Sydney we did the “Sidney Opera House, Harbor & Bondi Beach” tour. The Opera House is simply amazing. The design, inside and out, is breathtaking and holds the record for the youngest building (31 years) ever designated as a UNESCO Heritage Site. It took 14 years to build (original estimate was three years) and cost over ten times the original bid. The architect was Joern Utzon, a Dane, who won a design contest for the project. The Opera House which actually comprises six theater venues has no interior support columns but is made up of reinforced concrete and steel “shells.” Utzon reportedly solved the engineering challenges by thinking about the construction as a deconstructed sphere based on segmenting an orange! Pretty clever guy. There were a number of trials and tribulations associated with the project that would take too long to cover here. But, the end result is one of the most iconic buildings in the world. The tour took us behind the scenes in the building to all the venues and we had an excellent guide. The second day in Sydney we took a walking tour of the city which was also well narrated by a guide who spoke extensively about the “convict” roots and showed us some of the original convict family housing. Very primitive with only basic living conditions for families of 4-6 people. However, as noted previously, many of the former convicts and their heirs became very wealthy and prominent in the community. We also walked extensively around Sidney Harbor a bustling center of tourism and witnessed a constant stream of fast ferry boats coming in and out. The Viking Sun actually officially “arrived” in Sydney by passing under the Sydney Harbor Bridge and doing a 360 degree transit. Accompanied by a news helicopter, it was pretty spectacular. That night we fell asleep in our cabin looking at the Sydney Opera House some three hundred yards away. Very, very cool.

3. **Brisbane.** The capital of the state of Queensland, the city has a population of about 2.2 million and while the city proper has a very metropolitan feel, the suburbs are much more rural. The geography near the city is generally flat. The cruise ship port is 45 minutes from the city and the immediate area is being extensively reconfigured for commercial and housing interests. As noted in Australia’s other large cities, individual houses are very, very expensive so large rental, high-rise developments are ongoing. Also, repeat penal offenders were sent to Brisbane as labor long after the practice stopped in other parts of Australia. Brisbane also served as the headquarters for General Douglas MacArthur during World War II and over 75,000 American servicemen were stationed nearby the city. We took the “Brisbane and Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary” excursion which we thoroughly enjoyed. The city tour was informative and stopped at numerous lookouts over Brisbane and the Brisbane River which courses through the city proper. The Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary was a major hit! While holding a koala is illegal in most Australian states, one can do so in Queensland. Lorraine held a 17 lb koala for an official photo which we will post to her Facebook account. Absolutely adorable and

the koala was cute too. We fed kangaroos and saw a duck billed platypus as well as a tremendous range of birds. The coloring on the birds and their calls were mesmerizing.



4. **Hamilton Island (Whitsunday Islands).** Composed of 74 islands, Captain Cook discovered the archipelago in 1770. With a population of only 1,570 in the islands, tourists have totaled over 700,000 in the past year. Hamilton Island is the largest settlement at about 1,350. Incredibly, the island is owned by one family, the Oatleys, who purchased the island in 2003. Australian winemakers, the Oatleys have continued to develop the island as a major resort destination to include a yacht club, golf course, and beach/pool complex. There are no cars on the island and just a few tourist buses as the primary mode of transport is golf carts or simply walking. Our excursion was essentially a beach day which we really liked because we could snorkel and generally relax after long days at previous stops. Lorraine snorkeled and I floated around talking to other cruise mates. We also took a 20-minute bus tour around the island which offered nice 360 degree views of the other islands. We were only on Hamilton Island in the morning before the ship sailed to its next port.

5. **Cairns.** The city is Queensland's fifth largest (about 147,000) and very popular as the seacoast entry point to the Great Barrier Reef. The reef itself is one of the seven natural wonders of the world and stretches for over 1,400 miles. Diving on The Great Barrier Reef has been at the top of our bucket list forever. Lorraine did a sixth grade project on the reef and, as scuba divers, we have always wanted to add the reef to our experiences in the Caribbean and Red Sea. Our excursion was billed as a snorkeling tour but it turned out to be much, much more. Over 500 people went on the tour and one would think this number would be a disaster in the making. Not so. We went on three very large fast catamarans operated by Sunlover Cruises, for 90 minutes out to separate sites. At our site we docked with a floating, tent covered, specially configured pontoon barge. On it were separate sections for those snorkeling, certified divers, wannabe divers (resort course), glass bottom boat folks, helicopter rides, and something called "Seawalker" which allows one to done a helmet linked to air compressors and walk on the bottom of the ocean. We presented our 1984 PADI dive instructor certifications and, along with two other divers, went on a 40-minute dive with a dive master. Visibility was about 25 feet due to rains in the area in the past week but the very experience of getting back in the water on The Great Barrier Reef!!! made it worthwhile. Lorraine and I had a very nice lunch back on the catamaran and then Lorraine went snorkeling for an hour. Had to drag her out of the water but she loved every minute of it. It was 95 degrees and very humid so the water was the best excursion for us although other passengers took a train and gondola car over through and over dense forests on another tour and loved it. Although the ship did not leave Cairns until 10:00 PM, we did not go into town as the temperature stayed in the high 80s and so did the humidity.
6. **Thursday Island.** The island is part of the Torres Strait Islands and is very small measuring only 1.4 square miles. The population is just over 2,600 and is historically significant as a World War II defense facility. Much of the history of the island dates to the 19th Century pearl trade where both oyster shells and, of course, pearls themselves brought in many foreign divers, especially Japanese and Malaysians, to the island. The discovery of plastics and manufacturing killed the pearl shell industry but "pearling" is still carried on to this day. We took a self-guided walking tour of the island but it was 90 degrees and humid so our sojourn there was only a few hours. Back on the ship we went to the aft infinity pool, jumped in and watched the ship leave the island and proceed into the Torres Straits (a notoriously dangerous place for shipping) headed to Darwin.
7. **Darwin.** The city is the capital of the Northern Territory and has a population of about 146,000. Established in 1869 it is named after Charles Darwin, the naturalist and explorer. Notably, the city has been destroyed four times; once by the Japanese in World War II and three times by cyclones. The last, in 1974, is detailed in exhibits at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. The city sits on a bluff overlooking

Darwin Harbor but the surrounding area is flat and generally low-lying thus the vulnerability to cyclones. The city outskirts and urban areas are similar to Florida but the only high rise buildings are clustered in the city. We took an included excursion around the city which included the museum. There are also several military museums but we simply did not have enough time as the ship arrived at 7:00 AM and left at 1:30 PM. There was another very large cruise ship in the main port area so that our vessel was outside the city in a merchant port thus there was a lot of bus travel just to get to the city and then return to the ship. We only had a bus driver without a tour guide so we missed a lot of the usual tour commentary. One other note is that the local waters are full of jelly fish, snakes and crocodiles so not a swimmer's paradise.

On a very sad note, the island of Tonga was hit by Category 4 cyclone Gita on 12-13 February, the worst in their history. Over 40% of the homes were destroyed as power lines were downed, churches were smashed, and the Tongan Parliament building was levelled. We have the "before" pictures of the building and it was simply beautiful. Constructed of wood, it is simply gone. Fruit trees and crops critical to the local economy were lost and the concern now is disease from standing water. All in all a sobering reminder of nature's power made more vivid by our recent visit there. The cyclone hit Sydney and Brisbane on 19 February with torrential rain and huge ocean swells (10-12 feet at the beaches). 30,000 without power but not the high winds experienced in Tonga.

We are heading toward Komodo Island so the adventure continues. Hope all the cyclones stay behind us.