

December 26, 2010

Happy Holidays Everyone,

It has been over a year since our last email newsletter from Australia. As most of you know, last December, we made an unexpected trip back to the USA due to the sudden death of Cathie's mother on December 13th. Compounding the sadness, Bill's father passed away on Christmas day after a long illness. Now a year later, the grief is lessened and we continue to miss those two important people now absent from our lives.

Things have settled down a bit and we want to send Holiday greetings and to share some of the sights and adventures we've had here in Australia. We now expect to be in Australia for 3 additional years - Bill's position at work has been converted from temporary to permanent. So come visit!

Spring Time Down Under - September

Spring is a special event in Western Australia -- the wildflowers bloom. It's an incredible blossoming in the countryside of fields of flowers, many of which we have never seen before.

One is a wreath flower, which only blooms where the soil has been disturbed like along a road or railroad track. You can't plant them. They just appear. We were lucky enough to see a few along a railroad track near Morawa, north of Perth. They are beautiful.

Traveling around you also see quite a few kangaroos. Many cars and trucks in Australia have "roo bars" on the front for protection against hitting these animals. Kangaroos aren't too intelligent, and when frightened will hop directly in front of an oncoming car. You see a lot of them dead along the country roads. These two in the picture, a mom and her joey, look like they are checking for traffic before crossing, but that's not likely!



Near Morowa



Wreath Flower



Kangaroos checking for traffic?

Another road hazard in rural Australia are Road Trains - they usually consist of 3 trailers behind a cab. It's an efficient way to deliver 2x or 3x the load of a single tractor trailer. When traveling down the road, the trailers do swing back and forth a bit in a crosswind.



Triple Road Train

The Pinnacles are a natural feature several hours drive north of Perth. These are mysterious stone spires that rise up out of a sandy dune base. They seem to be the petrified remains of a former forest, still standing in place, though not all agree on that.



The Pinnacles

Athletic Activities

Group athletic events are popular here in Australia. We participate in as many as we can. In September 2009, a new 20-mile extension of the main north-south freeway through Perth opened. On the opening morning, before any cars, the freeway was opened to thousands of bike riders. Mother nature baptized the new freeway with an unexpected downpour as we rode along on our tandem bicycle. A nice feature of the new freeway is a continuous paved bike path separate from the traffic that now runs about 60 miles north and south through Perth.



Tandem on Freeway Ride

This October Bill organized a relay team for the Collie Adventure Race. The relay race included a 25km road bike ride, a



"The Steelers" win Medals

10km kayak, a 25km mountain bike ride, a 1km swim and a 10km run. The team of 3 called "The Steelers" came in 3rd in the Super Vets category (over age 50.) The team members received a medal and the inspiration to do it again next year.

We now own a double kayak and use it regularly on the upper Swan River outside of Perth. The Swan River is the training ground for local Adventure Race kayak folk.



Kayak at launch on Swan River

Train Ride Across Australia

In March, we rode the Indian Pacific train from Perth to Adelaide, a distance of 1900 miles. A major attraction of the trip was crossing the Nullarbor Plain (No Tree Plain) in Western Australia. It looks a lot like this for most of the way.

Across the Nullarbor, the rails run perfectly straight for over 300 miles - the longest straight section of track in the world.



Nullarbor Plain

The Indian Pacific rail line is very famous for "once in a lifetime" train trips. It seemed that the shock absorbers on our train car had not been changed in 50 years. It was like being on a covered wagon for 2 ½ days. They are right about once in a lifetime. I know we will not do it again.



Riding the Indian Pacific

The Train stopped at the railroad town of Cook in the eastern Nullarbor Plain. The population consisted of 6 human residents and 5 billion flies! Cathie is using a tree branch fly swatter in this picture.



Swatting Flies at Rest Stop



Rest Stop at Cook. Australia

While in Adelaide at the end of the train ride, we visited the Cleland Wildlife Park and met up with a Kowalik Bear and a frustrated Tasmanian Devil, which was doing laps around it's fenced enclosure.



Posing with Kowalik Bear - Find the Koala

We also saw the elusive Dingo, which is the Australian wild dog equivalent of the North American coyote. Dingos have such a reputation for intelligence and wildness that it is illegal to own one. Aborigines kept them as pets to aid in hunting and protection.



Tasmanian Devil on the Run



Dingo, Yawning

Southern Australia

Esperance is a beautiful beach town on the Southern Coast of Australia. The town is named after the French exploration ship, *Espérance*, which sheltered there during a storm in 1792.

Lucky Bay is absolutely spectacular. And you can drive 20 miles along the beach.



Lucky Bay, Western Australia

We drove with Aussie friends, Lyle and Carole Burgess, the 450 miles from Perth to visit Esperance during Easter break.

The route goes along "Tin Can Alley" a highway noted for large, 15 foot tall, metallic, horse-related, humorous artwork created by landowners and displayed in fields along the highway. It's like a drive through a comedy art museum, with another piece appearing every half-mile for 50 miles.



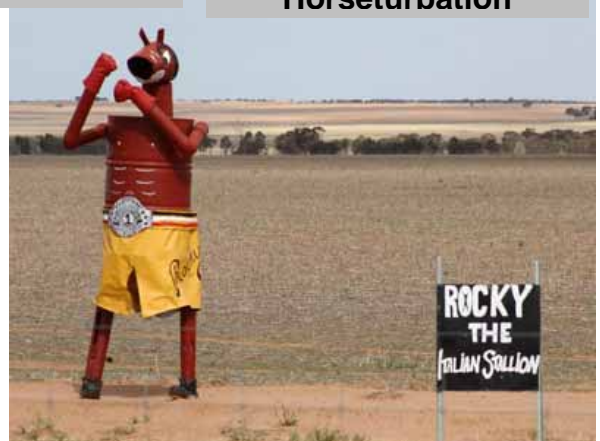
Ballerina



Horseturbation



Ben Horse, A Charlton Horseton Epic



Rocky, The Italian Stallion

The drive from Perth to Esperance also passes through the town of Corrigin, which is known for its Dog Cemetery. We had to stop! We don't have a dog yet, but plan to get one soon :-)



Corrigin Dog Cemetery



Graves for Trigger, Sally and Grizzles

Wave Rock is another interesting stop on the way to Esperance. It's a sheer bedrock outcrop eroded into the shape of a frozen wave.



Wave Rock

The Kimberley

For our big vacation this year we visited The Kimberley, a remote wilderness area in northwestern Australia. This area became popular after a National Geographic special in the late 1980's. The unusual rounded sandstone rock outcrop patterns, known as the Bungle Bungles, are quite distinct. The dark layers have more clay than the red layers, retain more moisture as a result, and support a surface growth of algae - a geology lesson!



The Bungle Bungles

The area is also known for boab trees, which provided food, medicine and shelter for the Aborigines.

We traveled for two days with a tour group in a 4WD, which turned out to be a Monty Python, low budget style operation. Their vehicles kept breaking down and the heroic trip leaders were responsible for repairs while keeping a good Aussie humor going. We also rode a helicopter and a 4-seater plane, which were not the low budget options, to get an overhead perspective on this part of Down Under.

On the last part of our Kimberley trip, we took a boat ride down the crocodile-infested Ord River. The several thousand fresh water crocodiles on the 20 mile long river are actually not too hazardous to people. The salt-water cousins are very dangerous. Our guide figured that there were maybe 3 or 4 salt-water crocs among all the "freshies"



Boab Tree

in the Ord River. The crocs rest on the river bank with their mouths open to help



Fresh Water Crocodile

cool their bodies. There are no alligators in Australia.

The down river trip amongst the crocodiles ended with nice late afternoon light.



Late Afternoon Light in the Ord River Valley

Friendship Force

We belong to the Friendship Force, which connects us with people visiting from all over the world. The Perth club held a “Global Exchange” event this year with people coming from Canada, the USA, England, Belgium, New Zealand and Singapore. Perth Friendship Force families hosted the 32 visiting ambassadors. We showed them the local sights, took them to an Aussie Bush Dance, put on dinners and entertainment shows.

One event was an Aboriginal tour in the Perth Hills by an Aboriginal guide. The tour included spear practice and trying on Aboriginal clothing.



Cathie plays Aborigine

Visitors

In October of this year our friends, Sharon and Larry Lavenberg visited from Los Angeles. We had a great time showing them around Western Australia and sharing our lives.



Perth from King's Park



Night Lights of Perth

We visited the Calgardup Cave in the Margaret River area south of Perth. This is a self-guided commercial cave tour. The helmets turned out to be useful!



Preparing to Enter Calgardup Cave

At Pemberton on the way to Albany, Larry and Bill climbed a forest fire lookout, known as the Gloucester Tree. Australians are a practical people, and one early solution to the shortage of forest fire lookout towers was to find a tall tree, lop off some limbs and insert step rods in a spiral climb up the tree. These are now tourist sites, and all are welcome to brave the climb. This tree is 72m tall (236 feet) and the tallest look out tree in the world. It's a Karri tree, which is a species of gum tree. Karri wood is quite hard -- in fact, it's about 1/3 harder than white oak wood.



Climbing the Gloucester Tree

On our drive back to Perth on this trip with Larry and Sharon we visited the Stirling Range and climbed the highest peak, Bluff Knoll. The climb is 3000 ft up on a steep trail. Considering that most of Western Australia is pretty flat, this Range is quite surprising. The view was excellent. The descent was more difficult than the climb up.



On top of Bluff Knoll, Stirling Range

We do enjoy having visitors. So please consider a visit. We've been here for two years, and expect to be here for three more.

Three years seems like a long time, but the first two years have flown past. So come on Down soon, we'd like to see you!

Happy Holidays,

Cathie & Bill

