

This guidebook, wrapped in the story of two Americans who flew away to Queensland in 2005, moves from the price of bananas and housing to the costs of being far from family. It celebrates Australia's civility and natural beauty.

MOVING TO AUSTRALIA: Two Texans Down Under

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**MOVING TO AUSTRALIA:**  
Two Texans Down Under

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Cover photo: Wintertime stroller on a Queensland beach near Point Danger.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: Why this book? .....	1
Chapter 1: WE'RE OFF .....	5
Chapter 2: A FORTNIGHT IN QUEENSLAND .....	13
Chapter 3: COUNTING THE COINS .....	27
Chapter 4: SETTLING IN.....	35
Chapter 5: SIGHTSEEING WITHOUT LEAVING THE AREA.....	45
Chapter 6: PRICEY PROPERTIES .....	57
Chapter 7: VISITING MELBOURNE WHILE BUYING A HOUSE.....	67
Chapter 8: SYDNEY AND THE BLUE MOUNTAINS.....	79
Chapter 9: HOME AGAIN .....	97
Chapter 10: HUGE BEACHES NEARBY .....	109
Chapter 11: GREEN BRIDGE, BEER BREAD, JACKFRUIT, AND CIVILITY .....	115
Chapter 12: MOVING TOWARD DUAL CITIZENSHIP?.....	131
Chapter 13: PUMPKIN PIE, CRICKET FLINGS, AND CRITTERS .....	145
Chapter 14: SOUTH OF SUMMER IN AND AROUND HOBART .....	155
Chapter 15: TO THE EDGE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN .....	167
Chapter 16: TWO YEARS AND COUNTING .....	175
REFERENCES, LINKS, NOTES, FURTHER READING.....	193





## INTRODUCTION: Why this book?

On July 10, 2005, we had been in Australia exactly two weeks, a fortnight. Kristi, despite some misgivings on my part, wrote and sent out the first of what would turn out to be quite a few email newsletters to family and friends. Here's how she began:

Greetings! Several of our friends and family members have asked us to email them our adventures in Australia. Therefore, we will be sending out a report about our new home regularly (well, more likely, irregularly). If you would prefer to NOT receive our regular reports, please let us know and we will take you off our list. If you are interested in hearing about our adventures, the best thing to do is to stay on the list.

Two years and a few months have passed since then and we have been amazed at how many people stayed on the list, at how many people have read and, they say, enjoyed our periodic reports. We think that is related to something we noticed when we told people in the United States that we were moving to Australia. **They all smiled.** Some looked for a moment like small children thinking of Santa Claus. They often said, "I've always wanted to visit there." And they seemed genuinely pleased at our good fortune, although, at the time we were not sure whether we were doing something we'd always be glad of or if we were beginning a risky venture that we'd look back on as foolish.

What we knew then was that we were stepping off the edge of the world as we knew it. I was leaving a responsible position with no prospect of a new one. Kristi was leaving a tenure-track university post to become a researcher working with people she knew only by reputation. Neither of us had ever been to Australia. We'd never seen a kangaroo and we didn't know a "billabong" from a "bluey."

But we were going, and not just for a vacation, but to live down under.

We had sold the house we'd just spent months remodeling (new kitchen, new wood flooring, and more). We had held two huge garage sales. We had given or sold loads of leftover possessions to friends, family, and worthy causes and stored in a rental unit what we couldn't part with. We sold our nearly new Prius and Kristi's much beloved 1990 BMW. We said our

*Robert L. Hill*

goodbyes to family members and friends. Our emotions were close to the surface. It wasn't easy for us to leave our home hemisphere.

Nevertheless, on a Friday night, my daughter Lyn drove us to the Dallas-Fort Worth airport and we flew to Los Angeles International and boarded a Qantas flight that took us in a southwesterly direction up over the Pacific for a 14-hour flight. To our surprise, we gave up a whole calendar day, Saturday, because of crossing the International Date Line. When we landed in Brisbane, an Australian Sunday morning was just getting started.

Since then we've been on a learning curve, one that seemed steep, even a little scary, at first. Much that was strange to us then is familiar now, and we know a lot that we wish we'd known when we got here. Or before.

- If you're about to move to Australia, this book may show you ways to make your move go more smoothly than ours did.
- If you're contemplating such a move, learning about what we experienced may give you a better feel for what could be ahead in your life.
- If you're in the pre-contemplation stage, wondering if you want to seriously consider thinking about such a move, this book is for you. It may give you some ideas of what is possible for someone in your situation.
- If you're an Australian curious about how your country and your fellow Australians appear to people moving here with few preconceptions, this book is for you, too, mate.
- And if you like true-life reports of modern-day adventurers of the relatively timid sort who are willing to swap countries but will never plunge into jungles, explore under-sea canyons, skydive, or trek across sun-scorched deserts -- reports that detail the daily-life struggles of a couple of ordinary people in a new culture -- we think you'll enjoy our story.

Memory plays tricks and we adjust quickly to new environments. Remember how the place where you live now looked to you the first time you saw it? You see a different place now, don't you? The new becomes the norm.

To keep us in touch with our first days here when everything was far from ordinary to our eyes, we'll use portions of our "Brisbane Chronicles" newsletter to remind us of the wild freshness of this place. Sometimes the words will be mine, sometimes they'll be Kristi's, and sometimes they'll belong to both of us. We'll emphasize facts, feelings, and insights from our experience. Wanting to tell a good yarn, we'll write about things in

*Moving to Australia*

chronological order as much as we can, but sometimes we'll pull together our comments from various times in order to make logical connections.

We hope this book based on our experiences can fill in some of what Bill Bryson omitted from *In a Sunburned Country*. Bryson's wonderful book is about traveling while ours is about moving, and he reports that he ran short of time on a trip to Brisbane, getting only as far into Queensland as the Gold Coast, a resort area that disappointed him. Soon he was back in his car headed south toward Sydney, where some people, he'd been told, think folks who live up here are "madder than cut snakes."

Not so. And, despite what local folk like to say, Brisbane is no longer "just a big country town." It's a city and Australia is – from the perspective of two Texans who have lived in New England, Oklahoma, and other places but never, until now, down under – a whole new country, a new continent, a new culture where people are at once just like us and significantly different.

Getting to move here *was* good fortune. We know that now. We love this place and we want to tell you why.



## Chapter 1

### WE'RE OFF

#### The 8,333-mile leap

Los Angeles airport was a madhouse. From a carousel in the domestic terminal, we retrieved our four brand-new, fully stuffed bags and began looking for signs to the international terminal. We thought we should have enough time to find and get on board our Qantas flight, but we were not sure, and we were hoping to find, somewhere in that Friday night LAX mob scene, Kristi's best friend, Scottie. She was living in Los Angeles and she'd driven to the airport to see us off. Normally, finding each other would not have been much of a problem since she always carried a cell phone and we did, too. Told ours wouldn't work in Australia, though, we'd left it behind.

With one very large and one medium-sized suitcase rolling along behind each of us and with our carry-on bags strapped to our backs, Kristi and I walked to the international terminal. The taxis and buses in the streets were just creeping along anyway and we were in a hurry.

#### **Packing: how big? how heavy?**

Kristi: Maybe this is a good time to tell you about bag size and weight limits. Qantas allows (as we write this, anyway) two checked bags per passenger with a maximum weight per bag of 70 pounds. Flying in economy class, we were allowed one checked bag with total dimensions (height plus width plus thickness) of up to 62 inches (158cm) but the two together could not have dimensions adding up to more than 106 inches (270cm).

If you begin your flight with a US airline, though, the rules of that company will determine the size and weight of your checked luggage. American Airlines passengers, for example, can have two checked bags with total dimensions of 62 inches each, but each one can weigh only 50 pounds, 20 less than the Qantas limit.

Before you start packing, though, check with the **first**

**TIP:** We didn't know it at the time, but American Airlines would have let us check an overweight bag, provided it was between their 50-pound limit and the Qantas limit of 70 pounds, for US\$25. Check with your airline.

**airline** you'll be boarding. The carry-on and checked-baggage regulations change from time to time and vary depending on what country you're flying to. If you show up with one over-weight bag and one under-weight bag, and if the desk clerk isn't too busy, you can transfer your carefully packed stuff from one to the other.

Returning to the US from Australia, if you check your bags with Qantas all the way through to your destination, we found, the heavier weight is accepted by connecting flights on American or Delta or Continental, even though you'll have to retrieve your bags at your first US stop, take them through customs, and re-check them. Again, the rules of the country of origin or the original airline seem to rule.

We'd packed to the limit in weight, but we were pretty sure we were not over because I'd weighed each bag on the bathroom scale. I did that by weighing myself and then weighing myself holding each bag. Kristi had to read the scale. We did the math and shifted items until we were about a pound under limit in the heaviest bags. At the DFW ticket counter, we crossed our fingers and then breathed a sigh of relief when our suitcases passed their weight test. There was nothing in any one of the four bags that we wanted to be without.

Kristi: We were also afraid that our largest bags might be rejected because, if you put a tape measure on them, they are a fraction of an inch wider than regulation limits. That made me nervous, but the check-in counter folk we have encountered so far seem happy with eyeball measurements and the little bit of extra width didn't hang us up. May that always be the case.

We used every square inch and nearly every ounce of what the airline allowed us, knowing that we'd be living out of those suitcases for a little while or a long time. The things we had movers transfer for us could take months to reach us, we were told. (They did: two and a half months.) So, we had struggled with two hard questions.

**1. What goods should we spend lots of money having shipped?** We got rid of our television and other electronic entertainment gear, but I wanted to bring about 50 music CDs and to store a couple of hundred more. A few special cooking tools, including our bread machine, went into our "ship this" collection. We also decided to ship our nice, firm mattress, which we'd just bought although a Qantas employee I talked to on the phone while we were making these decisions told me with frost in her tone, "We have bedding in Australia." Since we'd be arriving in winter, we shipped out lightweight summer clothes. But since we'd learned that Brisbane winters are mild we

took the chance of shipping, not packing, a couple of heavy coats we thought we might need sometime. (We did, but not until our second full winter.) Into our bags, we put only a couple of light jackets.

**2. What should we be sure to fit into our luggage?** For an undetermined number of months we'd have to live with what we'd packed or we'd have to buy replacements in Australia at prices about which we had no clue. Would our favorite products be available down under? (Answer: Some, yes; some, no. More on this later.) We played a guessing game with less than complete information and I'm not sure we made the best decisions in all cases.

Plugging an appliance from the US into an electrical outlet here requires two items. One is a transformer to let a gadget built for 110 current use the 220-240 current that is standard here. (Some have this flexibility built in: my Mac laptop, for example, and my Panasonic camera's battery re-charger work perfectly with either current.) The other is an adapter. US plugs have up and down prongs; Aussie plugs have slanted ones.

If we had these decisions to make again, we would ship less and buy more replacement goods here. Strangely enough, I'm still happy that I brought an eight-pound lump of metal in my suitcase, a **transformer** I'd bought on eBay so I could use our US-built appliances with Australian electrical current. A smaller one would have worked, but this was what I had, and it let me use my electric toothbrush right off, and, as soon as they arrived, our bread machine, espresso coffee maker, and scanner, too. I haven't seen these transformers for sale in Australian stores.

I'd still want our music CDs with us here and we needed most all of the clothes we packed or shipped. Clothing, by the way, seems awfully expensive here. Still, I now think that traveling light is generally a good policy even when you're moving. Ship some things that'll help you feel more at home, yes, but don't be too generous with your choices. Australians do make good bedding.

By the way, please note that the name of Australia's main airline contains no "u." It's an acronym for "Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Services," and it drives some Aussies nuts to see it written as "Quantas," as I invariably spelled it at first.



**Meanwhile, back at LAX...**

Kristi: When we finally got to the international terminal, we kept our eyes out for Scottie, but the crowds were so large we had little hope of spotting her and we needed to be in line at the Qantas check-in as soon as possible. It was a good thing we went straight there because we hit a snag with Bob's visa.

Since my passport was due to expire in a few months, I had acquired a new one while we were still in Oklahoma. Although I didn't notice the difference at the time, my new passport arrived with my middle initial omitted, listing me just as Robert Hill. The paperwork Australia had sent us listed me the way my old passport had, as Robert L. Hill.

That, the Qantas worker at the ticket counter said, would not do. As she frowned at the passport and the visa, my mind raced ahead to visions of saying goodbye to Kristi at the gate, finding a hotel room, waiting until the appropriate offices opened on Monday, and then catching a later flight across the ocean. Before I could get to even worse fantasies about being barred from Australia forever because of one missing initial, the woman behind the counter smiled ever so slightly and said there might be a solution. After conferring with someone by phone, she produced a form for us to fill out and, with that and **an extra \$50** payment, we were able to check in. We were free to go. To the next long line.

Save yourself time, trouble, and money: be sure your name on your passport matches with all your other documents before you start your trip.

By the time we'd made our way through the security checkpoint and found the gate for our Qantas flight, we were approaching boarding time. All Kristi could do was find a pay phone and call Scottie's cell phone. They talked for a while and I'm sure they shed a few tears of disappointment.

We'd been looking forward to seeing Scottie and it would have been cool to have her send us on our way. As it was, she had a nighttime trip to LAX for nothing.

**On board**

But we made it, and at 11:20 p.m., Friday, June 24, I wrote in my notebook, "We're on our Qantas flight and our mood is improving. We just had a conversation with a stewardess who was standing behind our seat and I agree with Kristi that it is fun to hear her talk. We think we're going to like Australian accents."

### *Moving to Australia*

We lucked out with seating on this flight. Since we were in the back row of a section, there were no knees pressing into the back of our seats, and because we had a three-seat section to ourselves, Kristi could sleep with her head in my lap for much of the long night's flight. It's easy for me to sleep sitting up, so I did some of that, but I also read, watched television, and enjoyed knowing that our long-anticipated move was actually happening.

So much uncertainty and preparation had gone into the months, week, and days before this flight that it was a relief to know that, important or not, anything we'd omitted from our lists couldn't be attended to now. Here is just one such list, which we'd put together three months earlier:

- Finish negotiating possible house sale.
- Weigh merits of renting our house instead. Furnished, unfurnished?
- Arrange for movers.
- Choose and contract for a storage unit.
- Clean out garage and office.
- Mow the lawn.
- Plan garage sales.
- Advertise garage sales in paper.
- Sort things to sell, give away, discard.
- Follow up on visas.
- Get appointments with authorized doctors.
- Bob: get new passport.
- Sell both cars.
- Check on reserving a Prius in Australia.
- Get motel reservation for first week in Brisbane.
- Announce our decision to move to those who don't know.
- Find out about airline luggage limits, size, weight.
- Buy luggage.

Both Kristi and I had even longer to-do lists related to our jobs, but now, as we sat in the plane on the LAX runway, every item was either checked off or abandoned forever.

And we had said our goodbyes during the previous weeks to families, friends, and colleagues. While Kristi had spent a couple of days in Houston with her parents, two of my brothers, Mike and Ronald, had visited me in Oklahoma. We'd sat on the back porch of our house in Norman, drinking beer and talking, looking out over the lawn and trees that Kristi and I had spent way too many hours tending. My other brother, Gary, came to Fort Worth to hang out with me as I finished up my work for the Unitarian Universalist

*Robert L. Hill*

Association, the day before our departure. And I'd spent extra time with my daughter, Lyn, her husband, Scott, and my grandsons, Cooper and Casey.

In several situations, I'd found myself to be unexpectedly tearful. My emotions were much closer to the surface than normal in the blur of busy-ness just before we left. And then, almost before I knew it, Kristi and I were in the midst of (according to a web site's estimate of the distance from Dallas to Brisbane) an 8,333-mile leap from the country we'd always called home.

Kristi: It certainly was a long flight from LAX. My advice about long flights is: **sleep** as much as you can. The Qantas plane we were on had TV screens in the seat backs in front of us that gave us access to several channels of programming. Sleeping as much as we could, though, was the best help.

Our direct flight to Brisbane took a bit more than 14 hours, a long time to be sitting in a metal tube with a few hundred other people. If you get a flight that requires a stop in Melbourne or Sydney, the trip can be much longer, of course. Fortunately for us, Qantas offers this late-night direct flight from LAX to Brisbane, currently, six times a week.

#### **Arrival**

We landed in Brisbane just after sunrise on Sunday, June 26. Back in Dallas, in the time zone to which our bodies were attuned, people were enjoying the Saturday afternoon we'd skipped. Not one of our bags had been lost by Qantas, though, and getting through customs was simple, uncomplicated, and fairly quick.

Kristi's new boss, Wendy, graciously picked us up, drove us through Brisbane, and dropped us off at our motel in **St. Lucia**, leaving us to sleep or recuperate in whatever way we preferred. Our second floor unit had a bedroom, small kitchen, and living/dining room, but when we opened up our bags so we could get to our clothes and other things, there wasn't much space left for moving around our rooms. We didn't care. We were safely housed and full of energy. It was time to go out and begin exploring.

#### **CityCat tour**

Who told us to take the CityCat, the river ferry with catamaran boats? Perhaps it was Wendy. Whoever made the suggestion did us a great favor because this was the best imaginable way for us to spend our first hours in Brisbane. We got directions to the nearest CityCat stops, bought all-day tickets for a little over \$5 each, and rode up the Brisbane River to the University of Queensland campus. We found Kristi's building easily and I took pictures of her standing by its sign: Human Movement Studies. I figured her family would like to see where she'd be working in five days. The

*Moving to Australia*

building was all locked up for the weekend, so we caught another CityCat and headed back in the other direction on the beautiful river.

You can sit well sheltered inside the CityCat's cabin, but we managed to work our way to the front railing so we could face into the wind and have a good view of everything on this cool and partly cloudy day. From the UQ stop we went to the West End stop, then darted across the river to Guyatt Park. A longer ride took us back to the Regatta stop in Toowong, which is where we had got on. From here the ferry speeds along what is called "the long reach" to North Quay (pronounced "key") in the Central Business District (CBD). Then we went over to South Bank Parklands, on to the Queensland University of Technology stop, then to Riverside, Sydney Street, Mowbray Park, New Farm Park, Hawthorne, Bulimba, and, finally, Brett's Wharf. Then we rode back to the Regatta stop.

**By the time we got off**, we'd had a conversation with some tourists, including a farmer's wife who told us not to look for mangos until December because the season starts around Christmas most years. We had also gazed at the tall buildings of the CBD and at the bridges, parks, warehouses, businesses, apartment complexes and homes that line the river as it twists and turns like the huge snake that, according to Aboriginal legend, lives on its bottom. It was a little more than two hours well spent, and after two years we still delight in riding the CityCat whenever it is convenient to do so. For most trips, Brisbane's excellent train and bus system makes more sense, and a ticket on one – CityCat, train, or bus – entitles you to ride the others without extra charge.

For pure enjoyment, though, nothing beats the CityCat as a means of getting around. If everything in our new life could be counted on to proceed as easily as our first day, we decided, then we could begin to use, with great sincerity, a phrase we kept hearing from Australians: "No worries."



## **Chapter 2**

### **A FORTNIGHT IN QUEENSLAND**

A car and a “unit”

**L**ife isn't always a sunny-day ferry ride anywhere, of course, not even in Brisbane. We were surrounded by strangeness. We knew one other person on the entire continent. We were in two expensive motel rooms that we'd reserved for a week. We had no car and no phone number of our own. We had some cash, but no bank account. Where were we going to live? Where should we go to buy food? Where should I go for the haircut that I'd been too busy to get before we left home?

Not even trivial things seemed mundane. This was all both exciting and stressful. It might have been overwhelming except that Kristi had a job that would begin in a few days. Also, we did have a car reserved for us, a hybrid Prius we'd ordered in advance. It was being made ready for us at a Toyota dealership in Kedron, wherever that was, but, having seen the scary streets full of traffic racing along on the left side, we were in no hurry to pick it up.

Walking on the sidewalks was challenging enough. As we made our way to and from the nearest mall in those first few days, we developed a mantra which we depended on to keep us safe: “Walk left, look right, walk left, look right.”

People we met on sidewalks tended to stay to the left, so we did, too. And looking right when crossing a street is necessary here because that's where any near-side traffic will most likely be coming from. Even after we'd been here a few months, I came close to death or serious injury one day by not looking to my right enough times. Standing between two parked cars on an inclined street, I looked right toward the top of a little hill close by. No car was coming. I looked left to see that a vehicle in need of a muffler was roaring up the hill slowly, but it began signaling and turning left onto a side street well short of where I wanted to cross. I had already begun to move forward and I was leaning into the traffic lane when a car that had topped the hill to my right whizzed by me, inches away. Walk left, look right and don't count on your ears in noisy situations.

#### **Changes big and small**

The mall to which we could walk from our motel was a large one, Toowong Village. It was about half a mile away. We went there often at first and I practically lived there for several days because it became my source of

*Robert L. Hill*

food, telephones, and Internet service. My notebook from our first Monday here lists shops I could see from where I was sitting with a cup of coffee. Those included:

- Fruit Capers, a stand with bins of fruits and vegetables and a sign saying it was “2003 Retailer of the Year,”
- Donut King,
- Le Scoops, an ice cream shop,
- Kmart, just like at home,
- Coles, a grocery store,
- a Vodafone cell phone kiosk,
- Roast and Toast, a lunch place,
- Baker’s Delight, a bakery,
- BB’s Espresso, offering to sell “1 tea + 1 coffee, \$4.90,”
- and Toowong Village Meats where “all chicken sold here is guaranteed growth hormone and steroid free!”

Our grocery list for that day included peanut butter, shampoo, yoghurt, and “tonight’s dinner.” I don’t recall what that last item turned out to be. We shopped for food first in Coles, which is one of two national grocery chains here, and then went across to a nearby Woolworth’s, which is the other grocery chain, not a five-and-dime store. In both stores, we noted that many people carried their own canvass bags, a practice we soon adopted to cut down on plastic and paper-bag use.

My notebook for this first Monday also includes the notation: 1 kilogram = about 2.2 pounds, 1 meter = about 3.3 feet. I needed those reminders to help with my transition to the metric system, which is the norm here. The temperature was predicted to reach 18 degrees as a “top” for that day which, we had figured out, meant a cool but pleasant 64 degrees Fahrenheit. (The formula “Centigrade times two plus 30 equals Fahrenheit” gets close enough to tell you how to dress for the day.) We didn’t realize, then, that Australia went metric only in the 1970s. An Ask.com writer identifying himself as “flabdablet” said he was an Aussie teenager when the change came and that he still catches himself “thinking in inches occasionally.” Pints, pounds and Fahrenheit have been replaced in his mind, he said, but he still thinks of tire pressures “in pounds per square inch, not kilopascals.” Kilopascals? Even my favorite dictionary ignores that word. Flabdablet also advised, “Don’t bother with centimetres; nobody in the civilized world does.”

Back to our first Monday: From Toowong's station, we took the train to Central Station in the CBD, which is what everyone here calls the downtown area or Central Business District, and found our way to the Immigration Department to get our passports amended. We'd been promised work visas, but we'd have no ready proof of that until the immigration people printed little labels and pasted them into our passports.

**Talking Tip:** I've noticed that nearly everyone here pronounces "kilometer" exactly as it is written, kil-o-meter. The way I'd learned to say it, kil-lom-uh-ter with the emphasis on "lom," sounds pretentious to my own ears now, although it is the second pronunciation listed in some dictionaries.

#### **Hassles and details**

Except for the experience of walking around downtown before and during the noontime rush of harried workers, it was a wasted trip. The office's printer was broken. We were promised that I would be able to acquire the necessary labels another day if I brought in both passports and I made myself a note to do that. We had a lunch-counter meal that was expensive and not great. Afterward, according to my journal, I was "feeling surly" and finding that it was good to get back to Toowong Village, which was busy but calmer. Sometimes, the tiniest bit of familiarity is soothing.

My not having a regular job (I did a bit of freelance work for the Unitarian Universalist Association back in the United States soon after our arrival) was fortunate for us in our early weeks here. While Kristi was getting immersed in her new work situation, I was free to attend to the thousand and one tasks that stood between us and a settled life as Brisbane residents. Tending to details is not my greatest talent, but even a go-with-the-flow, big-picture guy can buckle down to the mundane when wife depends on it. Oops, I mean when life depends on it.

On Tuesday, after checking out some other banks (including ANZ, which is pronounced "Ann-zed" in Queensland, but not in all parts of Australia), we opened an account at the Bank of Queensland's branch office in Toowong Center. The bank officer who helped us, Charyl Rollinson, was gracious and friendly. Realizing, perhaps, that we had no friends in Brisbane, she even invited us to her house for "tea and biscuits." We appreciated the offer, but, imagining the difficulty that would be involved in finding our way to her suburb, we didn't take her up on her gracious invitation. Maybe if we'd known then that "biscuits" means cookies...



For our bank account to become usable, we learned as we were filling out the forms, we had to get a copy of Kristi's contract from the university. I promised to show up with that in a day or two. The forms required each of us

**Tip:** The price tag for a product or service here may not be as high as it seems for these reasons:

- The quoted price is actually what you pay, almost always. In the US, sales and other taxes (six percent, eight percent, or more) get added in at the pay-out counter, but all that is included in most quoted prices in Australia.
- Tipping is usually not expected. So, especially in restaurants and hair salons, you may be saving another 15 or 20 percent.
- Exchange rates fluctuate, but since we've been here, the price in US dollars has always been a smaller number.

to say how we were employed and offered a list of professions with boxes to check. There was no listing for "professor," Kristi noticed, but there was one for "prostitute or escort." Maybe I should have checked that. I wasn't happy with "retired," and "between professions" was not a choice either.

We initiated the electronic transfer of our house sale money and some savings from our US bank to the Bank of Queensland. With the exchange rate as it was then, each US dollar became \$1.30 in our Australian account, so when the transfer came through we suddenly felt almost rich. Later, when we got our first full-month bank statement, we were elated to see that the quite-high interest rates here, even on checking accounts, had added more than \$1,000. By then, though, we'd begun the rapid draw down of our momentarily cheery account totals.

The fluctuating exchange rates for Australian dollars could tempt one into efforts to do what stock traders call "timing the market." It's not a recommended practice unless you have an unusually accurate crystal ball, but the statistics do lend themselves to if-only thinking. If only we had moved here in 1998, shortly after severe economic problems hit Japan and other Asian countries, each of our American dollars would have bought us two Australian dollars and we'd still feel rich. If we were wiring our money here today, two years later, we'd have a somewhat smaller account total, since the Australian dollar is at an all-time high compared to the US dollar. On the other hand, Kristi's salary from UQ is worth a little bit more now when measured in the currency that carries pictures of Washington and Lincoln.

## *Moving to Australia*

### **No squirrels, no pennies**

Other first-week observations included in my journal were:

- The little bananas that fruit stands sell here are not tasty. They cost about one US dollar per pound, at least twice as much as we've been used to paying.
- The oranges are good, though not as sweet as Texas oranges.
- Electric pots here have thick coils and heat water quickly.
- There are no squirrels. Not even ground squirrels.
- Banks sell insurance and investments.
- There are no pennies, so clerks round things up, but there are \$1 and \$2 "gold" coins.

I wrote: "Australian bills seem odd to us. They are made of plastic and each one contains an oval that is totally transparent. Not one of them has a picture of an American President. Who the heck is John Flynn? Or Edith D. Cowen? Oh, well. You can buy things with them."

Vodafone seemed to have the best offer on pre-paid mobile phones. We call them "cell phones," but Australians have "mobile phones" and the first word rhymes with "file." By forgoing text messaging and all the available bells and whistles, I got voice-only service for \$50 spread over two months, and I haven't neared my minutes limit yet. If I renew before the last day of the 60-day period, I get to carry over unused minutes. I paid \$199 for a good Samsung phone in part because I was told it would accept the cards of other countries, making it usable back in the US and elsewhere. One positive difference: here mobile or cell phone owners do not pay for incoming calls. The callers do.

### **Lookin' for a home**

With Kristi heading off to work each morning, I began seeking another place for us to live. I read ads in papers and on bulletin boards, but mainly I called or visited real estate offices, almost all of which have plate-glass windows full of for-rent and for-sale listings available through their particular agencies. Here, agents don't work from a shared Multiple Listing Service (MLS) book. Each office has its own inventory of properties, so you have to go from agent to agent to learn about what's available. That made my job harder.

Also, in Australia, agents may or may not offer to drive you to places you want to look at. Often you're just informed of times when an agent will be on hand to show a unit to all comers. You have to be present at the address between, say, 2 o'clock and 2:30 p.m. on a Saturday. The agent arrives, opens

up, invites everyone through, asks them to sign a guest book, shows them around, closes up, and leaves for the next showing somewhere else.

My already high appreciation for the work of real estate agents increased during this process, however. These workers will never be replaced by machines or computers because their jobs are labor-intensive, personal, and just about necessary for people in situations such as ours was.

There were real estate web sites, of course, but I was using an Internet café in Toowong Village for emails, limiting myself mostly to “we’ve arrived safely” messages to family and friends. We’d checked real estate listings in Brisbane before we left Norman, Oklahoma, but we gave that up as a waste of time since, even when we found one that sounded interesting, we had no notion of its surroundings.

We were difficult clients for two reasons. One was that we wanted something within walking distance of (as we’d already learned to call it) “the uni,” the University of Queensland, which meant looking in or very near to St. Lucia, one of the most expensive areas of Brisbane. In addition, although we assumed we’d have to rent for a while first, we wanted to look at houses for sale also. We didn’t want to miss out on any suitable bargain that might be out there for purchase. Fat chance in St. Lucia.

**Among the possibilities** Kristi and I saw were these:

- A second-floor apartment... excuse me, a second-floor unit, overlooking a nice backyard, with a large and open park across the road and, downstairs, a neighbor practicing scales on a tuba.
- Another second-floor place with small rooms that managed to look dingy even though it was almost new.
- A couple of units on the far side of Toowong Village which we viewed hurriedly with several other individuals or couples during a half-hour showing.
- A brand-new condo with neighbors behind adjoining walls on two sides, lots of carpet, one bath, two small bedrooms, and a garage, oops, “car park.” Price: on the far edge of our range. Location: on the far edge of walking distance to the university.
- A recently elevated “Queenslander” (more on these houses later), with new appliances, one bath, and no built-in closet space. Zero closets and even farther from the uni? We said no.
- A wonderful, spacious, fairly new condo with many closets on a top floor of a high-rise building located on Coronation Drive. It had a large balcony that provided a great view of the swimming

### *Moving to Australia*

pool below and, across the Brisbane River, the St. Lucia area in which we really needed to locate. We felt a little guilty about asking the agent to show us this one since, lacking connections in the drug trades, we couldn't think of affording such a place, but he seemed to enjoy the view, too.

- A similarly elevated unit, in St. Lucia, with a smaller balcony providing treetop views available at \$550 per week. The agent was a young woman honest enough to say she thought this place was over-priced (most of the places I saw were renting for between \$300 and \$500 per week) and that the building contained several units occupied by three, four, or perhaps more rent-sharing uni students given to loud parties. Grateful for her openness, I asked if she had anything else to show me and she did: the place we rented.

#### **Success**

In an email for the folks back home, I was soon writing, "We have an address: 5/66 Sisley Street, St. Lucia, QLD 4067. Here, addresses are written with the apartment number first, then a slash, then the street number. It's a small, two-bedroom, two-bath, second-floor 'unit,' unfurnished, and it's a 17-minute walk from Kristi's office in a reasonably quiet area." So I thought. More later on how quiet it was, but it was well located, clean, and available for (take deep breaths and be brave, we said to ourselves) \$375 per week on a six-month lease. We were able to leave our motel quarters two days early, for which the owner didn't charge us since he had someone wanting to move in right away.

The real estate woman met me and Kristi on Friday night, July 1, at the Sisley Street apartment house. Kristi concurred that this was as good a place as we'd been shown, so we agreed to meet at the agent's real estate office the next day to finalize the deal. That set in motion what we now think of as Mad Saturday, the day in which we had to:

- acquire keys to our new home by signing a contract and putting up a \$1,500 property deposit,
- settle our bill with the motel owner,
- move all our stuff from the motel to our unit,
- buy a bed to sleep on,
- buy everything else we needed for ordinary living, including sheets and pillow covers, forks and knives, glasses, plates, towels, a can opener, and 30 or 40 other things.

*Robert L. Hill*

We had to acquire all that before all the stores closed their doors at four or five o'clock. Yes, 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. on a Saturday. In the final minutes before closing, we were rushing from department to department with a bulging "trolley" at a Target store. Fortunately, some of what we needed was on sale.

#### **On the road again**

But wait, I forgot to tell you. By this Saturday morning, we had a car. It was a loaner car, a white Prius that had been brought to us by Neil Wojic of Kedron Toyota for our use until the car we'd ordered was ready. Since its delivery, it had been sitting safely in the car park underneath our motel. Our luggage filled it completely, leaving just enough room for one driver and one passenger saying, "Stay left!" Our first trip was a nerve-wracking six or eight blocks to Sisley Street.

We unpacked and moved in, grateful our new place had an elevator from the underneath car park to the second floor. We had a cheese-and-cracker lunch. Then, well into the afternoon, we set off on an even more perilous journey to find a futon store we'd been told about in the heart of the downtown section. With Kristi reading maps and directing me, I drove, staying left! until we spied the store we needed up a street we couldn't turn onto because it was one way the wrong way. I pulled over out of traffic, Kristi studied the map, and we found our way around to a place where we could turn onto the street we needed. Lucky break: we found a parking place near the store.

Second lucky break: the store was still open. We hadn't known for sure that it would be on Saturday afternoon downtown. Hurriedly looking over the selections, we found a futon mattress and frame we wanted and asked the price. The salesman said, "\$1,000." My reply probably surprised him. I said, "Okay." I felt proud that, before paying, I managed to get two pillows thrown in. A few days later, I learned that Australians never expect to pay the stated price in such situations. They almost always get a lower price as they're about to leave the store in mock disgust.

But then we had lucky break three, something about which I had my doubts although I hadn't said so to Kristi: we managed to get the frame and the double-bed mattress into the Prius, a hatchback that thinks it's a truck. It fit, but just barely. The salesman, who had helped us squeeze it all in, was smiling broadly. I thought he was proud of our achievement.

We rushed cautiously home, manhandled the floppy futon into the elevator, and dumped it and the wood pieces of its frame onto the bare floor of our unit. Then we immediately set out for a shopping center in Indooroopilly, again with Kristi reading maps and calling out directions.

### *Moving to Australia*

That's where we found the Target and started throwing things from Kristi's list into our trolley. By the time we got home, exhausted and hungry, we'd managed our first left-side nighttime driving.

#### **Lots and lots of screws**

While Kristi pulled together dinner, I began reading instructions for assembling the various wooden parts of our futon's frame. "Tools," I thought, feeling like a cartoon character with a light bulb shining above his head. "It would have been smart to have bought tools."

A \$2 screwdriver, for example. All the pieces that needed to go together so that the futon could function as either a bed or a couch were to be held together by screws or fasteners with screw heads. I could have put the whole thing together in 20 minutes if I'd had my old screwgun, a favorite gadget of mine that was now more than 8,000 miles away. And no longer mine. After two hours and one blister in my right palm, we had a functional bed, thanks to my Swiss Army knife.

We both slept soundly that night. Our \$1,000 bed turned out to be sturdy and comfortable and it is now, two years later, serving as an acceptable couch that's always ready to be folded out for guests. I've tightened its fasteners a bit more with my new screwgun.

Bright and early Sunday, I walked to a nearby "everything" store that we came to think of as "Ling's store" because of the friendly young Malaysian woman who worked there. John, the Chinese owner who was to become a sort of friend of mine because I saw him so often, was busy putting together the Sunday "Brisbane Courier" newspaper, inserting sections printed earlier in the week into just-printed new sections, a weekly task that caused him to describe himself as "a cheap machine." I bought one of the fat Saturday/Sunday papers and took it home so we could scan the classified ads for garage sales. We found a couple that we thought we could locate with the help of our map book, and set out.

Sunday morning early is a great time to drive in Brisbane, regardless of which side of the street you're on. (I know, I know, stay left!) Traffic was light and we found a sale being given by two young couples wanting to shed a number of items that we needed. Then we found another sale in progress at a nearby house with a tree full of the most wonderful, brightly colored parrots.

#### **Lorikeet magic**

"Lorikeets. I feed 'em," the owner of the house said. He had a flock of 20 or more that flew away like a magic cloud when we got too close. People who grew up here give lorikeets no more attention than robins get in the States, but they thrilled us that day with their beauty and their loud chattering. We came

*Robert L. Hill*

home with a load of stuff, including a bicycle that turned out to be not worth repairing and a couple of plastic chairs that served us well so long as we were, as someone put it later, “camped out” in our St. Lucia unit.

While we’re talking about garage sales and their importance to our move here, I want Kristi to tell you about our next bit of luck. This is from something she wrote for a subsequent issue of our “Brisbane Chronicles.”

Busy and stressed though we’ve been, we’ve been having a great time. People have gone way out of their way to be friendly and helpful to us. Brisbane, they say, is “just a big country town” and it seems so. For example, Saturday morning before last, we showed up early at a “news agency” (we’d call it a news stand) and asked about which papers might have ads for garage sales. The proprietors, Paul and Marilyn, volunteered the fact that a friend of theirs, Anna, was planning a garage sale. They said they’d ask her if we could come early. We checked back in a few days and they’d done that. Anna welcomed us the following Friday and was gracious and accommodating. Getting “first-pick” on Friday and then returning for the official garage sale on Saturday, we bought so much nice furniture and other necessary household things that it took several trips to haul it all back, and in the process we learned just how much our hatchback Prius can carry, even a five-drawer chest if you let part of it hang out the back and tie it down with rope.

Finally, everything was in place. Everything, that is, except a refrigerator, telephone, microwave, washing machine, dryer, dining table, computer connection, computer printer, all the things we’d put into a container and arranged to be shipped to us here, and a few other odds and ends. And we needed to swap our borrowed car for our own.

#### **Gold Coast fridge**

The absence of a refrigerator in rental units in Australia surprised us. Apartments we’d rented in the US always came with refrigerators, but that is not the practice here. You have to supply your own. We found and bought a used one. The story of how we did that involved our first trip out of the city limits and Kristi told it in her email newsletter:

A newspaper ad for an American-size (that is to say, big) refrigerator got us to venture down to the Gold Coast yesterday, to the home of a married couple who live in a fancy house with a boat dock on a canal. The fridge is not particularly interesting, but the Gold Coast was worth the trip. After we bought and paid for it, we drove along the coast, and got out at one point to walk on the beach next to the ocean.

### *Moving to Australia*

The white sand squeaks like snow underfoot and reminded Bob of the beaches between Fort Walton Beach and Pensacola in Florida, the best he has ever seen. The water felt a little chilly on our fingertips, but it was a gorgeous blue and a few people were swimming. There were even a few surfers out catching real waves.

We particularly appreciated the way the beach has been made available to all, not just to folks staying in hotels and condos. The beach extends for miles and miles, but even in the most developed parts, walkways and green spaces run alongside the beaches. In some areas, there are even park areas and playgrounds. These green areas are between the street and the beach and the big hotels are all on the other side of the street, so we could walk along the beach without worrying about “private” areas.

The various towns run together, but they seem nice and clean. There are lots of stores, but we saw no junky beach shops selling shell lamps and T-shirts.

Best of all, we made the trip without incident and arrived home safely. Now all we had to do was find a trucker willing to haul the thing to our unit, squeeze it in through our door with only a centimeter or two to spare, and install it in a space with a centimeter or two to spare. My fingers almost cramped from being crossed for more than a week, but, finally, the installation was completed successfully.

With the refrigerator in place, our diets improved. Until then we’d been living mostly on peanut butter, crackers, and other things that did not require refrigeration, plus small quantities of foods transportable enough so Kristi could keep them in a refrigerator at her office until we needed them. Fortunately, Ling’s Chinese Everything Store had fruits and vegetables we could buy daily, as we needed them. I even found a tray or two of soft, perfectly over-ripe persimmons there and they cost only about 25 cents each. Heavenly!

Soon, we had reached a significant milestone and we wrote a “Brisbane Chronicles” email to commemorate it:

July 10 – Not so long ago we were not absolutely sure that “fortnight” meant “two weeks” and now we’ve been here that long, in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, Southern Hemisphere. Two weeks, as of today. We have a unit (Aussie for apartment) that we’re pleased to be living in and a car that we’re scared to drive.

Today even WE thought it was chilly. It was windy all day and the temperature never got above 60 degrees Fahrenheit or 15 degrees



*Robert L. Hill*

Celsius. June, July, and August are the wintertime months in Brisbane, so we should expect some cool weather. Still, up to now our standing joke has been Kristi's remark one morning soon after we got here: "Oh, what wonderful weather! Or, as the Australians would say, 'Brrrrrrr!'"

We were feeling pretty proud of ourselves for having accomplished so much in two weeks and for knowing it was a fortnight. Kristi wrote:

Obviously, practical considerations have occupied much of our time so far as we set ourselves up here after selling everything we had in Oklahoma. Cars, real estate, rent and a lot of other things are more expensive here than in the US, but up until now our set-up costs (except for our car) have been almost covered by what we took in from our garage sales back in Oklahoma. Soon, we'll be able to get on with living here.

The Prius salesman, Neil, was so genuine and nice that when he delivered our car, Bob took him to lunch and learned a lot about two kinds of rugby in time for us to watch the "match of the year" on TV with some awareness of what was going on. The local team was trounced by New South Wales. I didn't think it was much more interesting than football in the US. Bob thought it was faster and a little more fun to watch, but he turned it off at halftime.

We felt ready to draw some conclusions about Australia as compared to the States, and we alternated comments in an issue of Kristi's "Chronicles."

Bob: People here are doing what people everywhere do: they try to make a living, get to work on time, be with each other, have fun, and enjoy life. Things really do seem **a little more laid-back**, though. In fact, on Kristi's first day of work, she rushed past an Australian woman in the office and the woman was totally startled. Thinking there must be an emergency, she asked, "What's wrong?!" So, we're trying to slow down a bit. We don't want to startle anyone, and the change could be good for us, too.

Kristi: Even if they move more slowly, Australians talk faster than anyone else, we've been told, and we believe it. That, plus the accents, can make it difficult to understand their English. We're learning the lingo, though. Bob's working on saying "How ya going?" instead of "How're ya doing?" Since that greeting implies a concern about *being* rather than *accomplishing*, we think it's a language upgrade.

Bob: Kristi is beginning to sound more Australian by

*Moving to Australia*

unconsciously adopting the tendency to end sentences with an upward inflection. For some reason, this practice doesn't strike me as being obnoxious or "Valley-girl."

Bill Bryson, while visiting the Gold Coast, noted that a young female clerk in a tourist shop spoke "with the rising intonation common to young people in Australia," a tendency that "drives older Australians crazy." In his down under travel book, he reports that he found it "endearing and sometimes, as here, charmingly sexy." He's right. It can be over-done, but now and again it's nice.



## **Chapter 3**

### **COUNTING THE COINS**

#### Cost considerations

**D**osh. That's an Aussie word I learned on July 28, according to my journal. A newspaper story said that a local festival entices people to "freely part with their dosh." Of course, I went to the Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary that had cost us, I can now say, very little dosh at Anna's garage sale to find that this is a colloquialism of unknown origin that means "money."

We had been parting with our dosh like festival goers as we moved here and got ourselves set up to function as a household. So, even before we learned the Aussie term for it, dosh had been on our minds. After the flush feeling that came from selling out in the US and wiring the resulting funds to an Australian bank account that multiplied the total by 1.3, we started buying things that cost at least 1.3 times as much as we would have expected to pay back home. The first-month decline seemed disturbingly rapid. (Note: from here on, \$ will indicate Aussie dollars.)

Of course, that drop included a \$1,500 property deposit on our apartment, which we expected to get back and did. It also included \$39,091.50 for our Prius, including taxes and first-year "rego." (That's short for registration, it appears on Queensland Government brochures, and it's pronounced "rej-o." The amount: about \$500 per year, including what we'd call liability insurance, which is compulsory.) We anticipate getting a lot of the initial cost back, if and when we sell this car, especially since our first two years of driving put less than 10,000 kilometers, or just over 6,000 miles, on the odometer.

#### **A Prius aside**

The Prius purchase price looks less bad in US dollars: \$29,710. Still, here, closer to Japan, our Prius cost us nearly 28% more than the one we bought in December, 2003, in Oklahoma. We paid nearly \$6,500 less for that one: US\$23,251.50. Did we make a mistake when we decided against shipping our first Prius here and having it converted for left-side driving? I still don't think so, and I'm not sure we could have found anyone able and willing to do that work.

We swallowed hard and bought the Prius for several reasons. One was that we wanted a reliable car that could take us around Australia. (So far, we've

*Robert L. Hill*

used it mostly in town, as a weekends-only car, but we may yet do some car trips, as we'd imagined that we would.) We wanted our driving to do minimum damage to the environment. And we wanted to be as insulated as possible from increases in the cost of fuel.

A wise investment, financially? Maybe. It will be if (a) we sell it and find it has kept most of its value or (b) we drive it until it's worn out. Meanwhile, we're getting about 45 miles per gallon (in Aussie terms, we're using about five liters of petrol for every 100 kilometers) and having to buy a tank of fuel once every other month. In our first two years of driving this car, we used only about 500 litres of petrol or, in US-speak, 133 gallons of gasoline.

One reason we use our car so little is that we bought good bikes, touring style, with high handlebars and with baskets on the back, and we use those for getting to the university most of the time, as well as for occasional pleasure rides on weekends. During our start-up period we put down a \$200 deposit on these "Townies" with a local bike shop, Epic Cycles. In August, after we'd made our start-up calculations for the box below, we received the bikes (shipped, somewhat to our surprise, from California) and paid the remaining \$1,557 they cost.

We hope the expense details in the box on the next page may help you think about what your costs might be if you decide to move here and set up a household. You may be able to do it for much less, of course, but for these two Texans trying to get organized for a stay of at least three years, start-up expenditures in the first month or so came to about US\$3,890, using the July 2005 exchange rate.

While we were not pleased that it cost us nearly US\$4,000 to get set up, we decided the totals were not too bad, considering that we arrived here with nothing but the contents of four pieces of luggage and two carry-on backpacks. ("Miscellaneous" in this list includes both garage sale and store purchases of dishes, flatware, pots and pans and other kitchen implements as well as things like sheets, towels, and pillows.)

These calculations, which we were able to make by the end of July, did not tell us with certainty how secure or precarious our Australian financial situation would be, however. With one UQ paycheck in the bank and our basic start-up needs met, it appeared we might be able to break even and have some money left over for traveling, but there were several questions still to be answered about what our monthly expenses would finally turn out to be. Health insurance costs were yet to be determined. We both needed to buy computers. And, from experience, we knew to expect unexpected expenses.

*Moving to Australia*

<b>Start-up</b>	<b>AUS</b>
Mobile phone, account	\$208.95
Pre-paid phone cards	\$40.00
Wall phone	\$39.95
Laser printer	\$439.30
ADSL connection, 1 year	\$486.65
TV (garage sale)	\$120.00
Replace camera cable	\$19.95
Refrigerator (used)	\$640.00
Washing machine (used)	\$709.00
Dryer (garage sale)	\$50.00
Vacuum cleaner	\$499.00
Steam iron	\$59.95
New tire for Prius	\$179.00
Lone Pine membership	\$69.00
Futon	\$1,000.00
Deposit on two bikes	\$200.00
Miscellaneous	<u>\$297.83</u>
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$5,058.58</b>

I'm the optimist in the family and I figured if it turned out we couldn't afford to live here, we could go home and I'd go back to work as a minister. Kristi, in keeping with the mindset that shows up at the end of almost all research papers, said, "More study is needed," or words to that effect. After a bit more than a month we were nervously encouraged about our prospects, but more study was, indeed, needed.

I made myself feel, temporarily, a bit easier than I should have felt by making a mental mistake.

You probably wouldn't make the foolish assumption I made, but reading of my folly will surely prevent any chance of it. Our St. Lucia rental unit, per the lease we signed, cost us **\$375 per week**. That, I calculated, was \$1,500 a month or \$1,140 per month in US dollars, more than we could have charged for our three-bedroom, three-bath, stand-alone house in Oklahoma, but evidently the best we could do.

My mistake, which you've probably already caught, is that I multiplied the weekly rent by four to get a number I was accustomed to using: monthly rent. Six months, though, the term of the lease, contains 26 weeks, not four times six or 24. Our six-month lease cost us \$9,750, not the \$9,000 I expected. Note to self: listen more closely, pay attention, watch out for assumptions.

**Grow career, see Australia, don't go broke**

Our goals for our adventure in Australia were to enhance Kristi's standing as a researcher in her field, get to see as much of the continent as we could, and return to the United States not completely broke.

Normally, people do post-doctorate positions or "post-docs" immediately after acquiring doctoral degrees. Kristi, limited in her choices by the geographical constraints of my career, chose instead to take a position doing

*Robert L. Hill*

research and teaching at Oklahoma University. After three years of that and my willingness to stop traveling for the Unitarian Universalist Association, she accepted the University of Queensland (UQ) post-doc. The gains of three years of Oklahoma-living on two salaries, we figured, should be enough to finance three years of single-salary existence down under. And three years was our original expectation. Ann, Kristi's mother, took me aside just before we left and said, "You know, Bob, three years in Australia will be just about enough."

#### **A not-so-great day**

A learning opportunity had already presented itself to us while we were attempting to explore health-care options. Did you note the \$179 for a **new tire** (actually, a new "tyre") in the table of start-up costs above? There's a story that goes along with that entry and it's not a pretty one. Feel free to skip to the end of the chapter if you hate tales of woe.

Having been advised during Kristi's hiring interviews that our work visas would let us become part of Medicare, the Australian universal health care system, we set out one July morning for the nearest office where we could sign up. In place for more than 20 years, Medicare is supported by a 1.5 percent tax on income (not just salary, but all income) and provides access to free public hospital stays and free or subsidized treatment by doctors. We'd read enough to know it was a system with some problems, but it promised to be better than the non-system we were accustomed to in the United States, and we were eager to enroll.

Hoping to accomplish that before Kristi went to work one day, we launched ourselves into a morning rush hour. We could do the same trip today, two years later, with little problem. But this drive was taking place while the sight of traffic approaching on the "wrong" side of the road still triggered in me brief primordial flashes of terror. I am comforted now by the belief that Australians generally drive carefully and conservatively, but that morning, while cars swept toward us and around us at seemingly breakneck speeds, I felt as if we'd bumped onto the Indy 500 race track on Memorial Day.

With Kristi reading the book of street maps we'd purchased and guiding us through intersections we'd never seen before, we eventually found the shopping center and its underneath car park. I slowed down as we approached an entrance and glanced up at my rear-view mirror to see scores of late-for-work and/or suicidal commuters racing toward our back bumper. Misreading a sign that made me think this entrance was, in fact, an exit, I made a snap

### *Moving to Australia*

judgment to change directions. **Bang.** I hit a curb. I knew immediately that I had ruined the left front tire.

With a river of commuters flowing around us, I drove slowly to the next entrance, and, without hitting anything else, found a parking space. While Kristi, whose mood was somewhat less than sunny at that moment, went upstairs to get in line at the Medicare office, I dug out our jack and donut spare and removed the flat tire. Isn't it amazing how, at special times, one's memory can work so well? I'm sure I'll always recall how beautifully pristine that still-new Prius tire was, except for the hole in its sidewall. It wasn't even an especially large hole, as holes go.

#### **Private insurance and other early findings**

When I'd finished, I went upstairs, washed my hands as well as I could in a men's room sink, and joined Kristi in time to learn from a harried clerk that, despite what we'd been told at UQ by people who were supposed to know, we were not eligible for the Medicare system. We'd have to attain permanent residency first, she told us, and, in the meantime, we should seek private health care coverage. It was our worst Australian day to that point.

Our chagrin at being denied Medicare coverage was based largely on our assumption that private health insurance in Australia would cost what we would have been paying if we had been back at Oklahoma University, about US\$400 a month or \$520 in Australian money. Adding that to our list of monthly expenses, we feared, would shift us from positive to negative end-of-month totals. After a bit of research, however, we found an acceptable policy with the International Medical Assistance Network (IMAN) for about half that amount, \$276 per month for the two of us, just over US\$200 at the exchange rate current then.

Although we did not have any serious health issues while IMAN was our health insurance company, the small claims we did file were paid as promised. Feeling "covered," we relaxed a bit and began investigating Permanent Residency. For a long time I capitalized the term when I wrote about it, as if it referred to something holy. And why not? Only the attainment of that status and coverage under the national healthcare system could allow us to truly relax about the possibility of catastrophic costs than can accompany severe health problems. Only with permanent residency standing, in other words, could we cease to have in the backgrounds of our lives the nagging worry that plagues millions of Americans who have no health insurance. No worries, mate? We couldn't claim that just yet.



*Robert L. Hill*

### **Size matters**

Lots of things are noticeably smaller here. Refrigerators, washing machines, and clothes dryers also tend to be much smaller. Commodes here are a bit smaller, perhaps, but their main difference is that most of them have two buttons to push, so you can choose a full flush or a liquids-only half flush. Australians, by the way, avoid euphemisms for “toilet.” They don’t use “restrooms” or, horrors, “bathrooms.”

Although Holden cars, which are manufactured in Australia by General Motors, include some Buick-like full-size sedans, most cars are closer to the size of the Toyota Corolla, and some are quite a bit smaller. The “Smart Car,” for example, has room for only two and looks like a motorcycle with a cab on it. Morris Minors are fairly common on local streets, which, by the way, appear to us to be narrower than the US standard. We doubt that a Humvee could navigate most Brisbane streets. Back home, we’d thought of the Prius as a small car, but here it looks like an average-size car.

Writing about this in our “Chronicles” in late July, we said:

Smaller often means more ecological and sometimes better for one’s health. Coca Cola bottles from machines and in restaurants are noticeably smaller, as are other soda bottles. There’s less “super sizing” of food portions here, although we did note that the line in the food court the other day was, sadly, longest at the McDonalds. Even people ordering Big Macs, though, were buying drinks considerably smaller than the ones that are standard in the States.

And I went on to say:

One major gain of being here is that we have **slimmed down** both our lifestyles and our bodies and we’re reaping some benefits. Without a house, I have more time. Without a job, my time is my own. I feel infinitely free and I think I am using my time well with meditation and exercise and writing. I like having fewer things, since things require maintenance and attention.

And I like being down to 167 pounds from a high of almost 185. I think that difference is one reason I was able to jog for the first time this morning all the way along the course I had set for myself. I had not jogged that far without having to walk part of the way in more than a year.

As new arrivals, we noticed that we were walking and jogging and shopping with lots of thin and athletic-looking people here, but we soon learned that Australia has an obesity epidemic under way and it is, tragically,

### *Moving to Australia*

especially noticeable among children. This is one of the many paths down which Australia is following the US.

#### **Australian newspapers**

Although people here complain about the newspapers just like people everywhere, we're impressed with them so far. We began by getting the Saturday/Sunday "Brisbane Courier-Mail" and then, when "The Australian" began a low-cost promotion for university staff and students and the "Courier-Mail" became a tabloid-size paper, we switched.

On July 28, Kristi wrote:

The newspapers here opt for long, in-depth articles, leaving the short snippets of news to the radio and TV. The paper, physically, is wide (16 inches across) but short (22.5 inches long) compared to our papers back home.

As we read the papers, we try to figure out **the political situation**, which seems puzzling, indeed. There's the National party, Labor party, Liberal party, the Greens, and some minor party with the word "Democrat" in it. We've been told the National and Liberal parties are the conservative parties. The Labor party is the not-quite-so-conservative party that used to be Socialist. According to a historian we talked with, it's hard to really figure out what each party stands for. So, we're not the only ones confused!

#### **Television**

Thinking we needed basic cable service in order to get a fast Internet connection, we agreed to a two-year deal with Telstra/Foxtel. Kristi wrote for our "Chronicles:"

In addition to reading the paper, we are watching a little bit of TV now. Here, you can get good reception without cable, and with it, the pictures are really sharp, even on our inexpensive, second-hand TV. The basic package gives us only a few channels, not the zillions of stations we got in the US in a basic package, but that's okay because we don't watch often enough to care.

The very first television program we watched in our St. Lucia unit was a show we happened upon by chance, a production of "Oklahoma" with Hugh Jackman as Curley. I'd seen this musical a couple of times in the United States as stage performances but I found the Australian version refreshing in a way that surprised me: it did not demean Oklahomans. American performances I'd seen over-played the back-woodsiness of the characters. Jackman and the other cast members played it straight, without a single wink or smirk. We found that delightful.

Kristi continued: A lot of what we do get on cable is from the US. We are enjoying reruns of episodes of shows that we missed the first time around. We had forgotten how good "Mash" was. And we missed lots of episodes of "King of the Hill" and even "Frazier." So-called "**reality shows**" have caught on here, but we don't watch them here any more than we did at home.

Bob: I watched enough of one to know that it was about a dozen or so single people of prime mating age and that the episode I watched should have been entitled something like: "Jane Spends a Night in Harry's Bedroom Along with a Camera and Camera Crew." Very romantic. Very "real." Nothing sexually explicit, of course, but lots and lots of talk, and expressions of high emotion later when Harry's in-residence girl friend -- surprise, surprise -- finds out.

By now we've seen, we think, every episode of "Everybody Loves Raymond" at least twice. A channel called "Fox Classics" carries that show nightly and we've made a ritual of watching it, but now we're spending that 30 minutes after supper seeing other shows we didn't watch in the US, including "Friends" and early episodes of "Sex in the City." If you're beginning to question our taste, please note that it could be worse. The same oldies channel has been offering us a series of movies they promoted as "100 Years of John Wayne." Honest to goodness, that was their title.

Kristi: When we first got here, I thought that the Aussies emulated the English for the most part, but I have since learned that they pay a good deal of attention to American trends. In addition to American TV programming being so common, even on regular channels, the theaters get American movies quickly, the papers and newscasts pay attention to American news, and Australian women's clothing mirrors the fashions of the US. However, there are some noticeable differences in women's styles. Here women wear their jeans tighter and they tend to show more **cleavage**, sometimes even when they're dressed for work.

Unfortunately the cleavage women show here is in one or both of two places, (a) where it should be, at the top and in front, and also (b) where it should not be, below the waist and in back. The low-rider jean fad seems to be about gone now, but when we arrived, it appeared some local fashion designers had been paying way too much attention to the attire of American plumbers.

Not that I have any opinions about this. Not that I ever notice such things, really. I'm just repeating what people tell me.

## Chapter 4 SETTLING IN Ekka Day and other events

Brisbane's best-attended annual event is the 10-day exhibition called Ekka. Cancelled only once, in 1919 because of an international flu epidemic, Ekka has been happening in essentially the same location since 1875. Every August, it draws well over half a million people to the Brisbane Exhibition Ground in Bowen Hills, a couple of kilometers northeast of downtown. On a Saturday following our first trip to see it, Kristi wrote in our "Chronicles:"

Today was the last day of Ekka, a combination county fair and carnival here in Brisbane that reminds me of a scaled-down version of Rodeo in Houston. We're told it was originally the time farmers came in to town to show their animals and produce and to see the latest farm equipment. There are still animals and there's equipment, but Ekka now includes carnival rides and exhibits by various companies and even the state government.

A Queensland government web site says Ekka was intended from the first to promote Brisbane-area industries and to showcase the state's agricultural, pastoral and industrial resources. Social aspects of these 10 days were always important, too, the web site says, providing a chance for city and country people to come together, wearing "country tweed, moleskins, and city business suits" to mingle at bars and "Show Balls." My Aussie dictionary says "moleskins" were trousers customarily worn from the early nineteenth century on by Australian stockmen and made of thick and durable cotton. Early blue jeans? If so, we dressed appropriately, as did many others on our exploratory trip.

Kristi: Each year, Brisbane has a public holiday when most people are let off work so they can attend Ekka. That was last Wednesday, so, after I worked only half a day, Bob and I went to see what it was all about, starting out on the CityCat at UQ and winding up on a special train from Central Station. It was not something we'll need to do every year, but it was fun and we stayed longer than we thought we would.

We saw pigs, goats, and cows, learned about the various **produce** that comes from Queensland, and sampled lots of food. We learned

*Robert L. Hill*

that an important export crop of Queensland is bananas, even though they are far from cheap here. The state also produces macadamia nuts, which are native to this county, mangos (season coming soon, yea!), oranges, apples, pineapples, and avocados. “Avos,” as they are called, are one food that is cheap right now.

After sampling various **honeys**, we decided we liked “Yellow Box” the best. Bees gather nectar from Yellow Box trees (a variety of eucalyptus) to produce it. We were also happy to find chai tea for me and rich coffee for Bob from Kenya, and we bought some of each. Until we found this, the tea I’d bought here had seemed to be weak, even when it was a brand that I used to buy in the US. It was great to find a tea with rich taste, and since Bob likes really, really dark and flavorful coffee, finding some was a bonus for him.

#### **Farmers’ markets**

We have started a Saturday morning routine. After going to a garage sale or two, we head to a wonderful farmers’ market. About this, Kristi wrote:

The **West End farmers’ market**, which happens every Saturday morning in a park alongside the Brisbane River, is certainly the best place we’ve found to get fruits, vegetables, nuts, eggs and other things, including spelt bread and gluten free snacks. The prices are better than in grocery stores, the produce is much fresher, and there’s greater variety. There are other markets around the city, but this is the best one we’ve found and it is near us.

Kristi mentioned spelt bread because I’m allergic to wheat, but not to spelt, an ancient grain that is variously described as being a “cousin” or “grandparent” of wheat. In 1988, the story goes, a farming couple in New South Wales got 50 spelt seeds from Europe and planted them. For four years they harvested their spelt crop manually (at first with scissors), until they had enough seeds to begin a commercial operation. Now spelt is an important crop here and we’ve found it much easier to find spelt products in this country than we did in the US. Before our bread machine arrived in the goods we shipped over here, we bought a couple of loaves of spelt bread from a baker who always had a stand at the farmer’s market. Now we make our own, buying 25-kilo bags of spelt flour from a wholesaler.

Kristi: Some things, both in stores and at the markets, seem unusual to us. The carrots, for example, are huge, twice or more as big around as those in the States. Parsnips here are big, too, and, unlike many we bought in Oklahoma and Houston, they are firm and fresh. Red bell

*Moving to Australia*

peppers are the same price or cheaper than green bell peppers and they're both called "capsicums." They tend to be very good.

Our love for baked potatoes is squashed (ha!) because of the poor quality of the baking size potatoes here; they're not the Irish potatoes we expect. Some of the sweet potatoes we've bought aren't very sweet here, either. (Later, we found a seller with consistently good ones.) We haven't bought passion fruit yet, though it's grown here. The strawberries are in season now and they look great. Kiwis are also in season and they're big and cheap at the market: about five US cents each in bags of a dozen (but half a dollar each singly in grocery stores). There's always a fish seller with boxes of various kinds of fish packed in ice but not looking all that fresh.

It's also a real trip just to visit this farmer's market by the river. Americans sometimes say Australia reminds them of the US in the 1950s. I think that's just a way of saying the pace is a bit slower than the current US pace, but the West End market does have sellers, entertainers, and customers who look to me as if they have just stepped **right out of the 1960s and 70s**. Tie-dyed T-shirts, hippie-looking hair, peasant skirts, pigtails. Lots of folk singers with acoustic guitars, some quite good. So far I haven't heard anybody say "Far out!" but it won't surprise me if I do. I hope I can catch myself before I reply, "Right on, man!"

Over time, visiting the West End farmer's market became a social occasion for us. We got to know, for example, two sisters, Kelly and Vicki, who had a popular coffee and breakfast stand at the market. Their coffee was strong, they were quick with their smiles and wit, and they remembered the names of many customers. As a result, they kept a crew of employees, including Fred, Jess, and Brit, busy brewing, cooking, and serving. Soon, though, they sold their stand and opened a fine restaurant at 500 Boundary Street on the edge of the CBD and began offering business folk healthful lunches. Combining "sisters" and "company," they called it **Sisco Café**. Last we heard, it was doing well.

Later, we met and got to know Michael and Jacky, interesting world travelers who make and sell their own all-natural soap and cosmetic creams, including a lemon-myrtle soap that keeps away mosquitoes, "mossies" here, and the well-named "no-see-ums" or midges. It works as well as Deep Woods deet and Kristi likes one of their creams, but we stop by to talk with them even when we don't need anything. Jacky's a painter with a couple of canvasses on display in the Old Treasury building in the CBD and Michael's

*Robert L. Hill*

full of stories that he tells with infectious enthusiasm and verve. Since he was born in Iraq, I like to think of them as "Jacky and the Iraqi."

Even the people we know by the quality of their products rather than by their names -- our "nut guy," the people with the best pineapples, the folks with wonderful apples, the man who sells good sweet potatoes, our favorite orange vendor, even the egg seller whose "perk-perk-perk" laying-hen imitation can be heard far and wide -- have become a part of our community, of "our" Brisbane. For a long time, this market provided about 90 percent of our social life (or mine, at least, since I work at home). That's not a complaint, either. It's a lively, friendly place.

Getting used to seeing people, though, has its risks. Kelly and Vicki left. So did the woman who always had a whole table full of her homemade, gluten-free treats. She offered samples and she was warm and friendly. Her treats were so good we always bought at least one. And then one Saturday, she wasn't there. And she hasn't been since.

Some folks might like to see the market disappear, though. On Saturdays it sits shoulder-to-shoulder with a well-kept playing field owned by a sports club that's been there for decades. There's at least one boat club, too. We've heard about conflicts over space use and one weekend we noticed that vendors had been forced to set up their stalls around several unattended, parked cars.

The areas available to the vendors who show up in trucks and vans every Saturday have been shifted several times since we've been going there. Brisbane officials have fenced off large sections that used to be used for stalls, citing concerns for huge old trees that used to provide sellers with shade. I looked through a city master plan for the area's future development without finding a single mention of the market's existence. This fuels my worry that the market may lose its lease. Its vendors, after all, are a racially diverse lot who drive in from elsewhere and sell produce that is fresher and better than what is available in supermarkets. I doubt that many of its customers are members of the city's social or political elite, but I could be wrong.

Maybe this is just my pessimistic side saying, "If it's this good, can it last?" We'll see.

### **Mick's Nuts**

In her "Chronicles" report on our Saturday routine, Kristi continued:

We load up on our produce and bread at the market and then drive a few blocks to a tiny hole-in-the-wall West End store called Mick's Nuts, at Hargrave Road and Vulture. They do sell nuts, but they also sell spelt flour, other flours, beans, olive oil, cereals, rice in bins, and

### *Moving to Australia*

lots more. The goods take up much of the room in the store, and they always have three to five clerks, each scooping things from bins, bags, and jars for the customer they're serving as people line up to be waited on. Often the line stretches out the front door on Saturday mornings.

I was delighted to find that Mick's sells dry **black beans** because I haven't been able to find those anywhere else. They also sell pinto beans. I know this would not usually be exciting news to most people, but I like to cook with both. I'd rather have already cooked beans in cans, but I'll take what I can get. We found this store last weekend and, on our first visit, we loaded up on beans.

So our Saturday shopping has fallen into a pattern. First garage sales if there are any near by, then West End farmers' market. If we need any of their goods, Mick's Nuts is next. And last of all, for what we haven't been able to find elsewhere, the regular grocery store near us, a Coles.

#### **Aussie talk**

I continue to be fascinated by Aussie language. Even after two years, I keep hearing astounding new terms and ways of saying things. In that same early "Chronicles" I wrote about a "stoush" (fight) that was going on.

There was a particularly interesting local-news flap this past week about the Aussie's version of "good buddy," which is "**mate**." Some official at the state government house sent out a directive to all the guards, policemen, and aides of the legislators and it told them to stop calling people "mate." They should use proper titles instead, it said: sir or madam or senator or such. Of course, this provided fodder for politicians who held news conferences to defend that fine old Aussie term. By Friday, the memo had been revised to say simply, "be respectful."

An Australian friend of ours, though, speculates that it was female legislators who had complained and for good reason. She doesn't like it, Nicola says, when men she doesn't even know call her "mate." Good point. It probably sounds like "babe" to her ears. Not a worry for me, though. I haven't called anybody "mate" yet and I'm not sure I ever will. Kristi says she hears women call each other mate or "matey."

Remember when television newscasters in the United States began to put the word "now" at the front of every sentence? Maybe they still do that, but I recall that it became, quite suddenly, an entrenched practice. It was as if a



memo had gone out to all TV reporters saying that listeners don't begin attending fast enough to catch the first word an announcer says, so "now" should always be the first word spoken. "Now, the weather pattern is shifting..." "Now, President Bush is in Washington tonight..."

Australians on radio and television, politicians especially, but ordinary people, too, have a similar placeholder word that they use without concern for logical coherence. That word is "look." Asked about the federal budget, for example, they'll say, "Look, John Howard says..." In that case, "look" can be said to serve a "now" function. But Australians use it in the middle of spoken paragraphs, too. "My wife and I have been married seven years now. Look, we have two children and I work at ..."

If someone suggests that he'll "have a look" at something when he gets a bit of time, is he Aussie? Bet your money on it. Americans "take a look," but Aussies have a look.

Subjected to politician after bureaucrat after politician here using the phrase "at the end of the day" on radio and TV, we thought we'd found a particularly noxious Ozism. We were wrong. In 2006 "at the end of the day" was the most-often used cliché in the US press, and a British guy has started a campaign to stop its spread there, saying that its use in a speech invariably means that the speaker is about to say something totally irrelevant. Or, perhaps, totally vacuous.

Sometimes people here ask, "**Are you right?**" I correctly understood the question to mean "Are you okay?" I assumed that they were saying "Are you all right?" Kristi called my attention to the fact that there's no "all" in the question. And if you accidentally bump an Australian and apologize, the likely response, meaning "no problem," is: "You're right." Maybe the "all" gets swallowed up in the abbreviation of "are." Am I right?

In a "Chronicles," I wrote:

I came across a term new to me in a book about Australian explorers, used in this sentence: "Mind you, the maps they were using were **not all that flash.**" My Australian Pocket Oxford says it's a colloquium meaning "smart, with it."

Kristi's heard several people use a term I found in the same book last week: Explorer John McDonald Stuart "was not a man to complain, but every now and then he had a quiet **whinge** in his journal..." Again, the Oxford: "(colloq) whine, grumble peevishly." Stuart was, though, according to Les Hiddins in Bush Tucker Man, "a **fair dinkum** bachelor who didn't get into city life or socializing." In

*Moving to Australia*

other words, he was truly, genuinely, a bachelor and you could count on that.

In my reading about explorers, I also found a phrase that has endured to the present: “Stuart reckoned if he could make it to that point he’d be **home and hosed**.” Home and hosed? Dictionary: “having achieved one’s aims.” A 2007 newspaper headline about a businessman named Steve Vizard selling his dwelling for a Melbourne-record \$18 million was: “Vizard home and hosed with mansion windfall.”

Even terms that you’d think would be cross-cultural sometimes are not. Kristi wrote about some of the differences she experienced in academic titles here:

What we refer to in the US as a college (for example, the College of Engineering) is called a "faculty" here. Faculties are made up of "schools" ("departments" in the US) and the people who teach and do research in the schools are called "academics," not "faculty members." At the University of Oklahoma, as an assistant professor, I was a member of the faculty in the Department of Health and Exercise Science in the College of Arts and Sciences. Here at the University of Queensland, I am an academic in the School of Human Movement Studies, which is within the Faculty of Health Sciences.

Australians like to shorten words, ending the snipped-off versions in “ie” or “y.”

- So instead of saying breakfast, Aussies say “brekkie.”
- Relatives are “rellies.”
- Sunglasses are “sunnies.”
- Tasmania is called “Tassie.”
- A journalist is a “journo.”
- The city we live in is called “Brissie.”
- There’s even a short name for “kangaroo.” It’s ‘roo.

You probably already know the Australian term “barbie.” What you may not have learned, though, is that the term does not necessarily have anything to do with cooked meat and sauce. It can mean an event, what we might call a picnic or a cookout. In the sentence, “Throw something on the barbie,” it’s the grill that is indicated by the word.

Also not as simple as it might seem at first is the term “bickies,” which is short for biscuits. “Biscuits,” however, are not what my mother used to serve with bacon and eggs. Biscuits here are cookies. No one, you’ll be glad to know, throws bickies on the barbie.

*Robert L. Hill*

“Mulga” is another new word for us. It's a term that can refer to a wattle bush or tree or, according to my ever-handy dictionary, it can refer to the outback or to remote, sparsely settled country in general. To say something is mulga can mean it is rustic or countrified.

We're trying hard to learn the language, but when we open our mouths here, people know we're from some place else. They don't usually guess we're from Texas, though. We're often asked, “Are you from Canada or the US?” This makes us think the people we're meeting are either (a) having trouble identifying North American accents or (b) being polite and covering all bases. Maybe both.

Gracious sensitivity seems common here. It's opposite is something we're glad to have avoided: “ockerism.” That's the Aussie word for behavior characteristic of an “ocher,” and an ocher is, according to my dictionary, a “rough, boorish, aggressively Australian male.” Maybe we haven't seen anyone “ockering it up” because we don't spend much time in bars. There's not much ockering among people drinking tea.

#### **Teatime**

For our September 19 “Brisbane Chronicles,” Kristi wrote:

The Aussies do like their tea. My department, I mean, school, at UQ has morning tea at around 10:30 and, at that time, our administrative staff takes a break. Tomorrow the person who would be called the dean of a college in the US, the “executive dean” here, is coming for morning tea, so I'll be attending my first special tea event. It's not a “high tea,” though. That's in the afternoon and it's fancy, with pastries.

Kristi was spending a lot of time writing proposals for grants. She was delighted to get an Early Career Grant for researchers out of school eight years or less. Competition for those grants is stiff, so it was good to see some payoff for her long hours. I was feeling good, too. For the “Chronicles,” I wrote:

It's usually after dark when I go to UQ to fetch her and walk her home. So far, I am tending to the nitty gritty details of settling into a new country and seeking to buy a house, learning more about Apple computers, writing some, and considering what I'm going to do next with my life. I am content. I love our situation here (except for some neighbors). My health is great, I have an iBook laptop with iPhoto for working with the pictures I take with my digital camera, and the possibilities seem limitless. Best of all, I have TIME.

### **Peak oil**

This was not a period, really, of no worries, however. Soon, I was writing in the “Chronicles:”

We attended a film and follow-up discussion recently that made us think even more about energy costs. It was a documentary called “The End of Suburbia.” (DVD rental available from Netflix, we’re told.) Cheaply obtained oil, most of the people in the film believe, is just about gone and with it will go the “the American way of life,” built around suburbs and highways. Predictions from the **end-of-cheap-oil folks** are that there will be major economic and social disruptions, perhaps within this decade, comparable to or worse than those of the Great Depression. If there is a positive side, it has to do with the necessity of local community interdependence, along with reductions in humankind’s environmental impact.

Australia, with most of its cities strung out along coastlines, is said to be the world’s most suburban nation. The Brisbane City Council was one of the sponsors of this documentary’s showing. Like the US, Australia no longer produces enough oil to meet its own needs, and this issue is, it seems, being taken seriously here, as is the water shortage.

### **About time**

And finally, there is time itself:

Kristi: Another hot issue here is **daylight savings time**. Queensland does not go on daylight savings. Evidently, this fact is an issue that is debated every year without any change resulting. The Northern Territory doesn’t change its clocks either. Western Australia does, but it is doing so as part of a three-year experiment that started in 2006.

What this means is that on the last Sunday of October, all Australians except Queensland and Northern Territory folks will adjust their clocks forward one hour. Sydneysiders and other New South Wales people will. Melbourne people and the rest of their Victorian neighbors will. Adelaide and the rest of Southern Australia will. The Australian Capitol Territory residents, where Canberra is, will. Western Australians, including those in Perth, will. But we won’t. Brisbanites and others in Queensland won’t change their clocks. Darwin residents and other Northern Territory folks won’t, either, although even folks way down south in Hobart will.

But, wait, that’s not quite right. Tasmanians will have already have done that. Tasmanians don’t wait until the end of October. They

*Robert L. Hill*

move their clocks forward an hour on the first Sunday of October. Why? Heaven knows.

**And it gets worse.** Australia has three time zones. Because it's not October yet, nobody is in Daylight Savings Time as we write this. In the middle of the country, which includes the states of Southern Australia, New South Wales, and the Northern Territory, all the clocks are 30 minutes behind Brisbane clocks, so it's 2:00 p.m. here and 1:30 p.m. in the middle of the country. All of Western Australia is two hours behind us, so it's 12 noon there.

If this were a November afternoon, however, most of our neighbors would have clocks reading 3:00 p.m. while ours would still say 2:00 p.m. and the middle-Australia folks would think it is 2:30 p.m. Perth people will know it's 1 p.m., and which of us would argue with them?

All clear on that? Good. We're not. Best bet: If you want to know what time it is anywhere and you have access to the Internet, go to <http://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/>. They seem to have it all figured out.

Kristi: The time complexities don't bother me much, but Queensland's not going onto daylight savings time gives me, I think, a justifiable whinge. I would like to be able to go outside into sunlight after work, but I usually can't. Daylight starts here a little before five on summer mornings, which is fine for us since we get up early to exercise. I usually work past six in the evening though, and sunset is never later than 6:48 p.m. That's in mid-January. Things get worse, of course, in the winter. All through June, for example, the sun comes up at around 6:30 and sets a minute or two after five o'clock. Not much daylight after working hours for me.

So far, I haven't been able to sell Kristi on my simple solution: quit early, get on your bike, and come home while it's still light out.

## Chapter 5

### SIGHTSEEING WITHOUT LEAVING THE AREA

#### Weekend tours

**W**e arrived here in the middle of Brisbane’s best season, winter, and we took advantage of the cool weekends to begin exploring our new habitat. There’s plenty to see within the city limits, we found, and lots more close enough for day trips, especially for nature lovers.

First, using public transportation and walking, we toured the downtown area, including commercial parts like the **Queen Street Mall**, which is said to draw a few million more visitors every year than Australia has citizens. (Perhaps “more visits” would be more accurate.) Two blocks of Queen Street are pedestrian-only and there are coffee shops, restaurants, stages, street performers, and kiosks where cars used to flow, so it’s a great place for people watching.

Or, if you wish, for buying opals or nearly anything else. There are several hundred stores of all kinds and sizes, and the entire Central Business District (CBD) is usually humming with activity, in mid-week and on weekends. Perth’s downtown retail area, we discovered when we got to visit there, is quite different, shut down tight on weekends and so quiet it’s eerie. In that way Perth reminded us of some American cities where most commercial life has moved to suburban malls. Somehow, Brisbane has kept its downtown alive and well.

**Looking for nightlife?**  
Eagle Street Pier, four blocks or so from Queen Street Mall, is on the river and lively both night and day, and Fortitude Valley’s many clubs offering live music are not far away.

As soon as we had the necessities of life in place, we began exploring inner city parklands, and Brisbane has several. One of the best is the **City Botanic Garden**, which shares with Parliament House and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) a large area bounded by Alice Street, George Street, and the curving Brisbane River. A sort of horticultural experiment site as early as 1828, this garden contains countless plants that are rare and/or extremely old, including scores of magnificent trees. It is well kept, beautiful, and seemingly worlds away from commercial life even though it is surrounded by some of Brisbane’s tallest buildings.

### **Uncle Walter and Cousin Faith**

Two significant points a casual visitor might miss while touring the Botanic Garden:

- The garden's first curator was Walter Hill. Seeing that he has the appropriate last name, I have proudly grafted him onto my family tree, something a horticulturalist should appreciate, surely. He's on the Antiquities Branch of our tree, which is close by the branch labeled "Still Living; Invite to Next Family Reunion," which has only one grafted-on twig at the moment, country singer Faith Hill.
- A small plaque alongside the river in the Botanic Garden identifies a near-holy site on the opposite bank. There, just below steep cliffs now used by rock climbers most weekends, ships once docked to unload cargo and that cargo included, the plaque says, the first mango tree brought to Australia.

We have visited the Big Pineapple up the coast in Nambour and

Want to see photos of many of Australia's "big things?"  
We found some at  
<http://home.alphalink.com.au/~richardb/page4.htm>.

we've seen pictures of the Giant Murray Cod and the Big Macadamia Nut. So, shouldn't there be a giant mango in the park where that boat landing used to be? Sixty feet tall, maybe, and at least forty feet across? Park visitors could admire it from the garden side of the river and, after all, as one of the city's web pages says, the Gardens are the state's "premier public park and recreational facility." Well then, yes, in memory of Uncle Walt and those early ships, a Giant Mango, please.

### **South Bank Parklands**

From the Botanic Gardens one can walk across the cyclist- and pedestrian-only Goodwill Bridge to a place we visited early and have returned to many times, South Bank Parklands.

With two train stops on the Beenleigh line, South Bank and South Brisbane, this is both a park and the front yard of much of Brisbane's cultural life. Nearby are four arts institutions with "Queensland" as the first word of their names: the Cultural Centre, Art Gallery, Museum, Performing Arts Centre. The city's convention center is nearby as is the State Library of Queensland, which was reopened this year (2007) after extensive remodeling and expansion.

According to an article in Wikipedia, this area was once a meeting place for the Turrbal and Yuggera people. After European settlement, it became the

central business district of Brisbane until a flood persuaded businesses to shift to higher ground on the other side of the river. After a World Exposition was held here in 1988, a citizens' campaign led to its becoming South Bank Parklands, and it is now managed, well it seems, by a state-chartered corporation.

This is a place of fantastic plants, including a carefully protected **Wollemi Pine**. Only fossilized remains of this species were known and it was officially extinct until 1994 when a bushwalker in Wollemi National Park, New South Wales, made what has been called the botanical find of the century. The small evergreen on display at South Bank is an offspring of the isolated clump trees (not, actually, pines) that had lived un-noted for centuries in a mountainous area near Sydney. Viewable through a stainless steel cage, this may be the most impressive item in the park, but there are also sculptures, monuments, and buildings from the World Exposition, including a beautifully carved wooden pagoda.

You will also find at South Bank (trumpets, please) "Australia's only beach in the middle of the city." That's Streets Beach, consisting of sand beside a pond containing enough chlorinated fresh water to fill five Olympic-size swimming pools. It is located between the river and a business district of apartment complexes, office buildings, restaurants, movie theaters, and shops.

Too artificial to be tolerated, you think? I thought so, too, but I've changed my mind. The tourist brochures claim that 70 tonnes (154,000 pounds) of new sand are imported fresh from Moreton Bay each year, and it surely is a pristine beach. There are areas for kids and for adults. There are rocky streams and sandy inlets, palm trees, sun-baked and shady places, and lifeguards on duty whenever it's open. (It closes in the winter for repairs and maintenance.)

The best characteristics of Streets Beach, though, are in what it does *not* have: no water reaching my nose when I'm standing up in the deepest part, no rip tides, no jelly fish, no sharks, no crocs. My kind of beach, for sure, and it's big enough for Kristi to swim laps while I watch.

Either by taking a quick train ride or by walking across the Victoria Bridge to Queen Street Mall and working your way to the left, you can go from the country's "only beach in the middle of the city" to "the world's largest subtropical garden in a city center," Roma Street Parklands.

#### **Subtropical CBD garden**

These parklands are easy to find because they are adjacent to the Roma Street train station, the one just before (or if you're traveling generally south, just after) Central Station on several train lines.



*Robert L. Hill*

Marvelous and well-tended, Roma Street Parklands are on several levels. There's a stream and a pond, playing fields, a theater, an amphitheater, a great variety of trees, and luxurious beds of ornamental plants, some of which are always in bloom.

The Brisbane CBD has many smaller parks and green spaces, also. They're all free of charge and they are usually busy in nice weather and on holidays regardless of the weather. Australians do love to gather in parks and cook on grills, though. Most Brisbane parks provide gas or wood burning grills as well as picnic tables.

#### **After Roma, roaming farther afield**

After seeing the downtown sights and visiting parks we could reach by train, bus, City Cat, or bike, we started braving the light traffic of early Sunday mornings in our car.

Learning to drive here showed me, I think, what it must be like to be a student pilot, logging a few hours at a time in a Piper Cub, flying low and taking off only on clear days. A simple procedure for experienced pilots can be white-knuckle time for the learner. One ever-present goal of our Sunday outings in our car, worthy of celebration when accomplished, was getting back home safely, without incident.

Even so, we did learn about and enjoy the Brisbane area during our first year by taking day trips.

#### **July 31 – Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary**

Located on the Brisbane River in Fig Tree Pocket about a half hour drive from our St. Lucia apartment, we found this to be a sort of laid-back zoo. Here we got our first up-close sightings of wombats, echidnas, koalas, and kangaroos of various sizes. Kristi enjoyed having 'roos eat out of her hand, I shot lots of pictures, and we got to see a demonstration of sheep dogs expertly working a flock. There were four or five skilled dogs, Border Collies I think, or maybe Shelties, and they were so eager to be put to work that they appeared to be in pain when their master ordered them to sit on the sidelines while other dogs moved the woolies around.

Dog-human communication can be marvelous. Seeing the skill and eagerness of these dogs took me back to memories of Laddie, an old, retired sheepdog my family was given when I was a teenager. He loved to work so much that, having no sheep around, he became adept at herding chickens out of our yard. And he would move the smallest of my little brothers away from the road when a car was coming. Once, when I was playing "sword fight" with that smallest brother, Mike (we were using cane stalks), Laddie decided he didn't like the size discrepancy. He barked twice at me and when I didn't

stop “attacking” Mike, he nipped me in the butt. Too bad he couldn’t talk. I’d have preferred the word “stop.”

“The earth is not only for humans” is the motto of Lone Pine. Expecting to take visitors there and wanting to support the sanctuary’s education, conservation, and research goals, we became members on our first visit.

#### **August 14 – Boondall Wetlands and Sandgate**

Kristi: Today we headed North toward Moreton Bay. We started at **Boondall Wetlands**, where we saw lots of water birds and shore birds. Signs told us that 190 species of birds live or visit there each year. Often walking along a creek that feeds into the bay, we went through various ecological zones, from gum tree forests to grassy fields to mudflats to forests of mangroves and back again. We were lucky to arrive near high tide, the best time to visit if you want to see birds.

Then we drove to the little town of **Sandgate**, which is on the Sunshine Coast, an area totally different from the ritzy, highly touristified Gold Coast that we visited about a month ago. Although the beach near Sandgate is brown, not white and fine-grained the way they are south of Brisbane, we understand that beaches farther up the Sunshine Coast have white sand. No worries. We enjoyed our Sandgate beach walk and we hope to head back to that area when the bird migration starts in October. Maybe we’ll see birds from Asia and even from Alaska heading south along the Aussie coast. In April, they come back going the other way. We hope to see it all happen.

Bob: Scattered throughout Boondall Wetlands are displays I admired a lot, **Aboriginal symbols** on posts. These are delightful metal sculptures about a foot wide, two feet tall, and a couple of inches thick. I have no way of knowing authentic Aboriginal work from European imitation, but I trust these were done by people with integrity as well as artistry. I think they’re great. These pole-mounted symbols, alone, would have made the trip worthwhile.

#### **August 21 – A disappointment and then a bike ride**

Kristi: Today we went to a forest reserve south and east of us called **Karawatha**. It was a little disappointing. I guess we have now seen enough eucalyptus forest to last us for a while. We didn’t even see any birds, except for a Collared Kite. After walking around for a couple of hours, we headed back home.

Bob: Except for the rain forests, the woods around here are beginning to look very much alike to our eyes. The British novelist

*Robert L. Hill*

Anthony Trollope visited Australia in 1871 and wrote, after a long trip on horseback, “No man perhaps ever traveled two hundred and sixty miles with less to see. The road goes eternally through wood, which in Australia is always called bush; and, possibly, sandy desert might be more tedious. But the bush in these parts never develops itself into scenery, never for a moment becomes interesting.” There wasn’t a whole lot about Australia, of course, that Trollope felt able to praise, but we were beginning to see his point.

We talked with a local guy in the Karawatha parking lot who obviously loves the place and I’m sure it’s nice for walking your dog if you live nearby, but we wouldn’t recommend that anyone go to a lot of trouble to visit this park.

Kristi: Back at home, we got on the **bikes** we bought about three weeks ago and went out for a ride on the bike/pedestrian path that runs along both sides of the Brisbane River. It was a glorious ride. This city is really made for biking or walking. We peddled from our area in St. Lucia to the downtown Brisbane area in less than 30 minutes, and it was fun.

Bob: There are, however, a couple of hills here in St. Lucia that are not fun at all. I had to push my bike up one of them, but then, I haven’t done much bike riding in many, many years. I hope to get better at it soon.

Kristi: There’s so much to see along the way and the path was not crowded, not today, anyway. I could do this every Sunday! We ended our trip on the other side of the river, so we just took the CityCat back to our side when we were done.

Bob: The decision to take the CityCat part way home was a stroke of genius. Going away from St. Lucia we rode mostly downhill and we didn’t have to ride uphill coming back! That’s great cycling: downhill all the way. Except for those two brutal hills at the start, of course.

### **September 11 – Mt. Glorious**

It appears we got over our phase of being tired of forests. Kristi wrote:

Today we went to Brisbane Forest Park to an area called **Mt. Glorious**, another gorgeous forest area full of eucalyptus, melaleuca, and palm trees with a couple of great views of the surrounding hills. The rainforest there had ferns – not just any ferns, but ferns the size of trees. The largest ferns in the world grow here, we’re told, and the whole effect is exotic.

*Moving to Australia*

We carry binoculars and a bird book with us when we hike and we make a notation by pictures of any new birds we see. Today we were able to write “Mt. Glorious, 11 September 2005,” by pictures of these birds:

- Noisy Friarbird,
- Pale Yellow Robin,
- Logrunner,
- Rufous Fantail, and
- Satin Bowerbird.

We’ve been seeing at least two or three new-to-us birds each week.

**September 25 – Moreton Bay whale watching**

Kristi: We just had a great day whale watching in Moreton Bay. After a drive of about 40 minutes up the Sunshine Coast, we left from **Redcliffe Jetty** on a catamaran with about 100 other people, getting under way at about 9:30 in the morning and getting back about three in the afternoon. It was a spectacular cruise. I had gone whale watching out of Boston, but I had never seen the number of whales we saw today. A few breached, coming up out of the water until about a fourth of their bodies were in the air, and then falling back with a great splash. Previously, all I had seen was a few whale tails and maybe little bits of whale backs.

Bob: Which is all I caught with my camera this time, I’m sorry to report. Some of my shots could be labeled “water where a whale once was.” Captain Kerry Lopez provided, as advertised, a fact-filled commentary that stressed environmental issues and urged us to do all we can to save these magnificent creatures. She seemed deeply concerned and well informed.

Kristi: We also saw a **mommy whale and her calf** breach and play around in front of us. We saw a few small sharks, mostly hammerheads.

Bob: While traveling back from the whale-spying area, we got into conversation with a middle-aged Australian couple from a town a few kilometers inland. The husband gave us our first lecture on Australian federal and state politics. His message, essentially, was that the Labor Party is composed of crazy people with no redeeming characteristics. We smiled politely and filed that opinion away for later reconsideration.

*Robert L. Hill*

Before the cruise, we walked along the shoreline and saw these new birds:

- Black-winged Stilts
- Whimbrels,
- Eastern Curlew.

#### **October 2 – Mt. Coot-ha**

Bob: Here's an indication that winter is over and the weather is getting uncomfortably warm. Kristi was ready to come home after only one hike and a leisurely visit to the Mt Coot-ha Botanic Gardens, which are much bigger, by the way, than the downtown Botanic Gardens. Normally, Kristi is eager for two hikes per trip, but today high humidity and temperatures above 80 Fahrenheit did us in before noon and we came back here and turned on our unit's air conditioning.

We know, we know! This stirs great depths of sympathy in those of you who have been and maybe still are enduring much worse, but we are falling into summer after having had very little of what we would call springtime. Everyone tells us that the current temperatures are unusually high for this time of the year, so we are hoping it cools a little before we get into what people have been warning us about: the dog days of summer, December through February. The humidity here reminds us of Houston or Miami. Not so good.

Kristi: We have been reserving Sundays for sightseeing, but with the weather getting warmer, our Sundays may not be outdoors-focused much longer. Maybe we'll stay home and make one or two loafs of beer bread with spelt flour.

We did see a couple of new-for-us birds today, a Red-backed Fairy Wren and a Silvereye.

I think the Silvereye is one of the most beautiful birds I've ever seen even though its colors are not bright like a parrot's. It seems to get its name from the distinctive circle around each eye.

No matter how hot the weather gets, I didn't think I'll be swimming anywhere but in swimming pools, I wrote in the "Chronicles," our email reports to our families and friends.

There were two newspaper stories last week about swimmers being killed by **crocodiles**. And, of course, there are occasional news items describing shark-human interactions that are almost invariably unfortunate for the humans.

*Moving to Australia*

Once, in the US, I saw a TV documentary about sharks off the coast of Australia and I got the impression they were huge, numerous, and constantly on patrol along beaches. That is not the case, but even one medium-size shark can spoil an otherwise pleasant swim.

**October 17 – Coastal areas to the north**

Kristi: Today we got up early while it was cool and drove north to some of Brisbane’s coastal mangrove and wetland areas hoping to see some of the **five million birds** that are said to migrate along the East Asian-Australian Flyway. I guess we were too early in the season. No luck. We did, though, add a few local birds to our list. We also found members of “Birds Queensland” there, a birding group that sponsors talks and guided bird walks. They were friendly and helpful. We think we’ll join them now that we are really into birding here.

We never got around to joining the Birds of Queensland folks, but we probably should have. They were friendly and willing to instruct novices like us. New birds we saw included:

- Grey Butcherbird,
- Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike,
- Blue-billed Duck,
- Sacred Kingfisher,
- Spangled Drongo,
- Tawny Frogmouth (on her nest!),
- and Common Greenshank.

Please note the long break between “Chronicles” trip reports. Summer here is like winter in cold climates. It’s a time that lends itself to activities in climate-controlled spaces. We didn’t do any hiking for several weeks. We started back, though, with a fine outing.

**May 28 – Springbrook National Park**

Springbrook National Park is in the mountain range called **the O’Reillys** in the “hinterlands” of the Gold Coast, almost all the way down to the New South Wales border. The drive of about an hour and a half from where we live is mostly along the Pacific Highway or M1. The last third of the trip, though, was along a narrow, winding road that took us up into the mountains.

Kristi: We got to the start of one of the hiking trails early enough to see a small wallaby, but it was only a glimpse because he bounded quickly into dense forest to get away from us. We spent about five hours hiking in various kinds of forest settings while also getting occasional views of the far-off Gold Coast skyscrapers and the ocean.

*Robert L. Hill*

Most forests in which we've hiked here include at least one section of subtropical rainforest, but these are different from my experiences of rainforests in the Americas. What I'm used to is rainforests that are, well, wet. Here, they are not always wet. They feel and look tropical, and they have palm trees and gigantic ferns, along with eucalypt and melaleuca trees, but often they have no dripping water. Southern Queensland seems to be too dry, these days at least, for the rain forests to feel rainy.

Bob: We also saw a small pocket of ancient **Antarctic beech trees**, remnants of *Nothofagus* forests (a new term for me) that a pamphlet told us "were once widespread across the continent and provided a habitat for many animals that have long since disappeared." One reason for our hiking in places like this is to see and appreciate what is left of relatively undisturbed pockets of nature, areas not yet "developed" for commercial profit.

Not everyone cares about wild places, of course. I remember well a look of genuine puzzlement on the face of a young New York City man I met in a rainforest in Puerto Rico many years ago. A friend of mine and I were moving slowly up a muddy trail when the New Yorker and his wife stopped to ask if the waterfall below was really worth going to see. Having just spent half an hour watching it flow at full force, we said that it was, so they rushed on past us.

In only a few minutes, to our surprise, the Manhattan couple caught up with us on their way back toward the top of the trail. As his wife kept slogging upward, the guy stopped, looked back at us, and said, "You really like plants, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose we do," one of us replied.

He looked down at the trail and shook his head. "They make me nervous," he said. And then he turned and rushed after his wife, who was well on her way to their parked car.

Maybe nature makes other people nervous, too. Many seem to have no notion of why anyone would want to preserve wilderness. Maybe, as nations, we'd be better conservators if more of our people got out and spent time in natural settings, even in the easily accessible places Kristi and I were visiting on our day trips. How can anyone walk past a huge tree that has lived several times as long as any human without being a little bit changed?

### **June 3 – Gold Coast at Point Danger**

Ah, glorious June, wintertime again in Queensland. Despite the fine beaches of the Gold Coast, after our initial visit there we'd written that area

### *Moving to Australia*

off as just another tourist spot, too built-up for our tastes. Some friends, though, told us about areas farther south that, they said, are more low-key, so we went to have a look.

Kristi: Sure enough, we found that the southern part of the Gold Coast, about an hour from where we live, is lovely. The beaches are long and wide and the sand is white or light brown. The water is clear. Most people in the water were surfers in wet suits. We are in the middle of winter after all, and it was a bit cool.

Bob: But there were folks in bathing suits soaking up sunshine all along the beach, including a few women who seemed to be celebrating the sixtieth anniversary year of the bikini despite being able to afford only a bottom half. We saw one young woman sitting bare-breasted on a beach blanket while a teenage boy sat in the sand a few yards away having a look at the ocean, staring fixedly out to sea (of course, out to sea), apparently immobilized by the ample natural beauty of the waves.

Kristi: *Our best views* were from **Point Danger**, one of the many coastal areas named by an early explorer, Captain Cook. From the boardwalks in this area, there are long vistas of beach and surf. We didn't see many new birds this day, but in a shallow 'pond' among the volcanic rocks that bordered each beach we saw colorful fish – some striped horizontally, some striped vertically, some a bright purple. We haven't been to the Great Barrier Reef yet, so this was our first look at tropical fish in the wild since moving here.

From Point Danger we worked our way north along the coast until we got to the really touristy area, **Surfers' Paradise**. After a bit of beach walking there, we headed home.

In less than a year, then, using weekends and holidays, we managed to get what we felt was a fairly extensive overview of nature's wonders in and around our new city of residence. Mostly, though, we'd headed north or south. Our trips west hadn't taken us far from the coastline region. Still on our agenda: a visit to the outback.

#### **Now, for something totally different...**

Obviously, your tastes may be unlike ours and hiking may not interest you. You'll have to ask someone else if you want to know what the night life in downtown Brisbane is like, but we can tell you that if you are a gambler, you can satisfy that craving in culturally significant luxury just steps away from a CityCat stop and the Victoria Bridge.



*Robert L. Hill*

We finally visited the **Conrad Treasury Casino** on Queen Street. It is in a Renaissance-style stone building that dates back to 1890. The plush carpets and granite slabs of its massive hallways take you to high-ceiling rooms full of gaming tables and slot machines, all of which were busy on the Monday afternoon when we went in.

We didn't see much Las Vegas glitz and no offers of low-cost food or free beverages. Also noticeably absent was the high-pitched Vegas-casino hum that helps, studies have shown, to keep folks in front of the spinning dials and levers of chance. However, there did seem to be in the gambling rooms of the Conrad Treasury an almost in-audible, low-register, droning sound that we suspected of having the same function.

Something was working. We saw lots of money changing hands in just the few minutes we were there. All of it, as far as we could tell, was flowing into, not out of, the casino's cash drawers. We didn't see even one customer win anything. The old Treasury Building is building somebody's treasury, still. You'll be hard pressed to find a more elegant setting, though, for making your contribution, if that is your desire. One walk-through was enough for us.

## Chapter 6

### PRICEY PROPERTIES

#### Unit living, house shopping

We haven't told you yet about the worst aspects of our St. Lucia apartment. Our main living area had sliding-glass doors opening onto a second-floor balcony. So did each of the two bedrooms, and the idea of stepping out onto that balcony to look at the sky or get a breath of fresh air was a selling point for us when the real estate agent was showing us the unit. That feature, however, turned out to be essentially useless for two reasons.

One was that our unit was less than a block from Sir Fred Schonell Drive, the main street to and from the uni. Although the traffic noise had not been noticeably bad while we were considering the place, "Sir Fred" produced a multi-toned roar for sustained periods of most days when classes at UQ were in session. Air conditioning or fans made it less noticeable indoors, but this "urban surf" was a persistent irritant to us when we stepped out onto our balcony.

Still, that wasn't the worst of it. The daughter of our downstairs neighbors came home from school and practiced, nearly every day, her piano playing. She played pretty well, but she had one piece that she sought to perfect through unending repetition as I sat at my computer above her. Whether she learned that concerto to her satisfaction or not I can't say, but I know that I did.

Wait, that isn't **the worst of it**, either. On Sir Fred Schonell and near to Brisbane Drive was a large house that usually had two or three cars parked on its grounds during the day and sometimes more at night. The fenced backyard of this house contained a roofed patio and, although I didn't notice this until after we'd moved in, colorful paper lanterns strung from tree to tree. Under the patio there was also a neon beer sign that became eminently noticeable when lit. All of this cheery decoration was within 20 yards of our patio. Too bad we didn't see and understand those signs. Our unit was almost on top of a party yard.

#### **Party time**

The parties began as early as 10 p.m., but on more than one occasion they began as late as one or two in the morning, presumably after the closing of the evening's bar of choice. Well lubricated young voices shouted and sang with

*Robert L. Hill*

boisterous merriment that Kristi and I failed to share. While I couldn't say the same for the music which came from them, the outdoor speakers were of remarkable quality. Their ability to move air in pulsating patterns was too much for our walls, our plate glass doors, and the white noise of our fans. Our earplugs did us no good. We were not pleased.

I called the police so often I learned their complaint line's number. One officer seemed sympathetic, saying, "Yes, I can hear the party through the phone." He promised to send a couple of officers around as soon as they were free of murders, robberies, accidents, and other more pressing duties. Having to be awake and at work in the wee, small hours anyway, the officers, I suspect, took a lads-will-be-lads view of our crisis. We lost a lot of sleep. Our grievance, though, was surely nothing compared to that of our second-floor next-door neighbors whose unit was even closer to the party. They were an elderly couple, always elegantly dressed and friendly when we saw them in the hallways or the garage. He died early one morning in their apartment, having spent his last hours engulfed in the din of off-key singing.

There was no chance we were going to renew our six-month lease, of course. On August 21, Kristi wrote:

Last Saturday we spent the entire day roaming around in suburbs where we may want to live. We have basically given up thinking that we are going to stay in St. Lucia. Anything reasonably decent here is too expensive for us and there are too many noisy students. We hope to find something across the river in Dutton Park, Annerley, or Fairfield. We may be farther than we wish to be from my work, but lots of locations across there let you get downtown easily by bike, train, or bus. We are particularly interested in **Queenslanders**, homes built of wood and raised up on stilts to capture the breezes in summer. Many we've seen have polished wood floors and large, wonderful porches.

#### **Houses on stilts**

"Queenslander" is used to describe a distinctive style of house that was first built here in the 1850s. They are on raised platforms supported by tall "stumps" or pilings that were originally made of timber but now more often of metal. Today's Queenslanders usually have hardwood floors and porches on one or more sides. Being up high, they are safer than other homes from floods, snakes or other critters. More important in modern times is that they catch breezes in the summer and often provide their owners with good views of the surrounding areas. There's usually space to park a car or two underneath. Queenslanders are, though, harder to heat in the winter, the older

### *Moving to Australia*

ones have no built-in closet space, and there's normally only one bathroom unless a second one has been installed below, on the lower level.

We found one Queenslander for sale that seemed almost close enough to UQ. It had shiny floors, lots of windows, and many decorative touches showing great craftsmanship. A concrete slab underneath provided parking space. There was a laundry room down there, too. Despite the fact that it had, as is usually the case with Queenslanders, no built-in closet space, we were tempted.

However, that laundry room was accessible only by outside stairs. The underneath area had, in place of walls, thin, vertical slats. The spaces between these would allow for plenty of air flow. The flimsy slats, I thought, would provide easy access to any reasonably determined person. Another problem was that, although they were of standard size, the metal up-rights holding the house in the air looked, to my eyes, distressingly insubstantial.

Much to the regret of a patient real estate man who met us three times, we finally declined to make an offer. Kristi wrote, "It's hard to get used to paying twice or three times as much as we think a house 'should' cost. So we are still considering renting instead, if we can find a house for rent that we like well enough."

About the Queenslander virtue of being high above any potential flood waters, Kristi wrote:

The last big flood was in 1974, and, although public officials express confidence that the changes they've made to storm sewers will prevent any recurrence of that sort of flood, some folk worry that Brisbane is due for another.

One old-timer told us recently, "Brisbane gets a cyclone about every 30 years, so we're due."

He also told us we should hope for a cyclone to come ashore to our north, near Rockhampton. "Then," he said with the voice of authority, "we'll get lots of rain." We didn't want to wish bad luck on anyone and we didn't want a 1974-level flood, but, given the state of Brisbane's declining reservoirs, at only about one-third of capacity, we were hoping for a modest little flood. (Later note: No such luck. As you'll see, lack of rain is Brisbane's worry these days.)

#### **We found a house**

Finally, we were fortunate enough to find a house we decided we wanted and that we could afford. This was after lots of looking, several open houses, and meetings with six or eight real estate agents. This is what I wrote for our September 1 "Chronicles."

*Robert L. Hill*

It may or may not be big enough for us, but we have found a house across the river from UQ, in Fairfield, and we have made an offer. The negotiations have begun. Because we are not citizens or permanent residents, we have to get the permission of the government to buy a house, but we're told that won't be a problem. We hope not.

Permission did come easily, perhaps because Kristi was gainfully employed and the proceeds from the sale of our Oklahoma house made us look at least temporarily solvent. Because we were not yet permanent residents, we were not eligible for a government grant of \$7,000 available to those making their first home purchase in Australia. Perhaps we could have waited until we'd attained that eligibility, but we didn't know at that time when or if we'd qualify and we were eager to get away from the party pit in St. Lucia. I continued:

The house was advertised as a "**Tuscan villa**," which evidently means "small," and it sits behind a Queenslander at the end of a car-width easement. We're told it was built by an architect for her mother, and it appears to have been constructed lovingly of high-grade materials. I like it because it has almost no yard and seems to need no maintenance work of the sort that I can do. It has two bedrooms, into one of which we should be able to squeeze two desks, and two baths, a rare feature around here. The total living space is less than 850 square feet, but an enclosed patio adds another 140 square feet of space that makes the main living area seem larger.

At \$350,000 (gulp), it is the cheapest house we've seen that we really like. To remind ourselves that this is less than \$275,000 in US money helps a little, but not much. For taxation, Brisbane values the land itself at AU\$157,500. We've put earnest money down, and we're working with a mortgage broker to obtain the best possible mortgage.

#### **Getting a mortgage**

Mortgage brokers were new to us. Often associated with real estate companies, they work with buyers to find the best mortgage deal available from the various banks. I had learned on the Internet about a kind of mortgage that seemed almost too good to be true, but our broker confirmed what I'd learned: If you have free cash equal to the amount of mortgage loan you're getting from a bank, you can arrange to have that cash deposited in an account that balances your debt, dollar for dollar. You earn no interest on the money held in that deposit, but you also pay no interest on the money you're borrowing. Every month the bank transfers from one account to the other the amount due, in our case, \$895.

### *Moving to Australia*

Best of all, though, and I wasn't sure about this until the mortgage broker made it clear, since there is no interest charged, every penny transferred from our deposited funds for the monthly mortgage payment goes to principle. Knowing that almost all of every mortgage payment I'd ever made in the past was for interest, I found this to be a delightful idea. Kristi agreed. Having that sort of mortgage has enabled us to reduce our mortgage debt in a year and a half by more than \$15,000. I was almost gleeful in the "Chronicles" as we prepared to close this deal:

Granted, if our funds from cashing out of our US life allows us to choose this sort of mortgage, we could buy the house outright, but doing so would tie up those funds in a not-so-liquid asset. This plan will allow us to switch to a normal mortgage if we ever need to and withdraw the off-setting funds for other uses. Like getting us back to good, ole reasonably-priced Oklahoma, maybe?

#### **Cool air**

As much as we both were pleased with our decision, I think Kristi was disappointed we hadn't found a suitable Queenslander but were, instead, moving into a small house behind one. She wrote:

We're buying something behind a Queenslander. Both are on a small hill and we think our little place is high enough to be safe from floods like the one in 1974. That's what a neighbor tells us, anyway, and he and his family were living just three houses down (both down the street and down the hill) when that flood came up. The bottom floor of their two-story house did flood, and he recalls looking out to the north of his home and seeing nothing but a lake where he normally saw scores of roofs. Since we've been here, this area's problem has been too little rain, not too much.

We are investigating **air conditioning** options and we want something in place before we move in 10 days or so from now. We are getting varied advice, but we will probably buy the kind of air conditioner that serves our rented place in St. Lucia. It has a wall-mounted part inside (attached high up, right below the ceiling) and a fan and condenser outside. We will probably have one of those installed in our living area and in the bedroom, at least. Whole-house air conditioning is referred to as "ducted air" here and costs a lot. Few homes that we have seen have it. Actually, many homes, about 40%, have no air conditioning. We are trying to balance our need to live and work in relative cool, dry air with our desire to be ecological and relatively cheap.

Our negotiations went smoothly. We were advised to engage a particular firm of lawyers with good reputations and we did. We never saw them, but they did what was needed, accepted our check, and let us know when the deal was done. Meanwhile, we were getting ready to move, and Kristi soon had good news to report:

The stuff we had shipped over here, which we paid extra to have stored for about three weeks so we wouldn't have to move it from the St. Lucia unit to our new place, will be delivered to our new home in 10 days. It's been so long since we packed those boxes last June that opening them will be a little like Christmas. We'll probably be surprised at what's in some of them.

And we were. We'd also gone out and bought a 430-liter Whirlpool **refrigerator** on sale at a store called Harvey Norman's for \$1040. (That's about 15 cubic feet of refrigerator for about US\$900.) The store was willing to keep this appliance until we were ready to receive it in Fairfield. We contracted with a moving company to take our big stuff to our Fairfield home from St. Lucia and, once the final papers were signed and we received the keys to our tiny palace, we moved the rest of our gear a carload at a time.

But before we could complete the purchase and move, we had a pleasant interruption, which is what the next chapter will tell you about. Meanwhile, Kristi took this moment, like the college teacher she has been, to give a pop quiz to the readers of our "Brisbane Chronicles."

#### **A quiz**

As we have reported before, Aussies like to shorten words. In a previous edition of the "Chronicles" we gave you some examples, like "rellies," meaning relatives. Since then, we have found out some more abbreviations, and want to see if you can figure out what they mean. This is a quiz! One point each for getting the following correct:

1. Brellies
2. Firies
3. Pressies (pronounced "prezzies," with American "z" sounds.)
4. Esky

Two points each for the proper names meant by these abbreviations (hints supplied):

1. Woolies (a store)
2. Rocky (a town near here)
3. Salvos (you see them at Christmas)

Answers below.

### *Moving to Australia*

Sometimes, the shortening of terms here is efficient. "G'day," for example, takes less breath than "Have a good day" and means, I guess, the same thing. But Aussies do go a bit far with their abbreviations (they overdo their "brevies?"). Cauliflower, for example, becomes "caulie," and mushrooms are sometimes called "mushies." Kristi wants a short name for "capsicums," which is what bell peppers are called here. She's thinking of trying to introduce a new term: "cappies." Who knows? Maybe it'll catch on.

#### **Some Aussie facts**

ACCENTS -- We love how Australians speak English, and even, sometimes, how they spell out letters. We have learned that it is proper to say, here, "learnt." And in Queensland, at least, the letter H is pronounced "haych", which still confuses us when someone spells something containing the letter we pronounce as "aich."

An Aussie expatriate living in the United States, Alan C., wrote for an on-line bulletin board last year that he was so fed up with people saying they loved his Aussie accent that he'd begun to claim he doesn't have one. "In fact," he tells people, "I am the only person in this town who speaks English without an accent." When pushed, he says he even goes on to add: "Australians are the only people in the world who speak English without an accent." Raht, mate! But why protest? We agree with a writer in "The Australian," Christine Jackman, who said the Australian accent can be "as languorous as a southern belle on a Georgia porch."

PHONE NUMBERS here normally have eight digits, not including area codes. Some numbers have less, such as some government numbers and toll-free numbers, but eight digits is the norm. People who study such things say that most of us are able to recall numbers with seven digits, not more.

Australians, though, have come up with a way of making eight-digit phone numbers work. All or almost all eight digit phone numbers we have seen here contain doubles. The last four numbers of a phone number, for example, may be 3399. That gets said as "double three, double nine."

And if you give that phone number by saying that it ends with "three, three, nine, nine," it will be repeated back to you, invariably, as ending in "double three, double nine." In this way, an eight-digit number is reduced to six verbal units. The technique works.

GAMBLING is not restricted to certain areas here, as it is in the US. "Pokies," electronic poker machines, can be set up just about anywhere. Clubs and other venues with state licenses have, for example, just under 3,500 poker machines in operation on the Sunshine Coast north of Brisbane, and news



*Robert L. Hill*

reports indicate they took in well over \$100 million last year, a significant portion of which went to the Queensland government.

BROTHELS are legal in Australia. The “sex workers” get health check-ups every six weeks, and they, too, pay taxes. Escort services and other types of prostitution outside of brothels are illegal, but we read that they are common anyway.

So some things not legal in most of the US are allowed here, and one significant duty too often ignored by Americans is not only allowed, but required: voting.

VOTING is compulsory in Aussie federal elections. A citizen can be fined \$20 if he or she does not show up at the polls to vote or provide authorities with an acceptable reason for failing to do so. Of course, people can drop in a blank voting card if they wish or write in “Mickey Mouse,” but this at least gets people to the voting booth. Only the vast and thinly-settled Northern Territory has voter-turnout totals below 90%.

#### **Coming soon: doppler radar**

Kristi got excited one day when she read that Australia will soon be getting doppler radar for use in weather forecasting. Why? Well, remember that we spent three years in Oklahoma just before moving here. Remember “Twister,” the almost plot-free disaster movie that used Oklahoma flatlands as the backdrop for huge funnels, flying tractors, and soaring cows. In Oklahoma, we got used to paying attention to the weather.

Not only were we in tornado alley, but we were in Norman, a national center for weather forecasting technology, including doppler radar installations. As a result, we got used to some surprisingly accurate predictions. Years ago, a meteorologist I knew who was on the faculty of Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston got in trouble with his colleagues by publishing an article saying that prediction of local weather will always be unreliable because there are too many variables. However, Kristi wrote for our “Chronicles:”

Doppler radar does seem able to track big weather patterns. We were impressed by the ability of forecasters there to say things like “This line of thunderstorms will reach the western neighborhoods of Norman at 12:43.” Usually, they did.

At that point, we were bemused by how often weather forecasts here in Brisbane consist of two items, an estimate of the high temperature (“top”) for the day and the word “fine.” As we became more and more aware of the drought that is still plaguing Australia two years later, we were growing tired of hearing predictions of “fine” weather.

**“Fine?” How about all-day rain?**

Of course, if we were bothered by the term and how often it summed up expectations for a day, we could only imagine the feelings of Aussie farming families with failing crops. In the 1950s in Texas, my family suffered through a seven-year drought and I remember how irritating it was to hear radio announcers talk about the “beautiful, sunny day” we were having when a beautiful day, for us, would have involved moisture-laden clouds and lots of them.

Weather forecasters we’ve heard here don’t get into terms like “a 20 percent chance of rain,” the way US forecasters tend to do. That may not be a loss, since I never knew for sure what such statements meant, anyway. A one in five chance of rain somewhere in the area? Rain in one fifth of the area? Or maybe just: “We think it might rain, but we’re not very confident that it will.” Still, the percentage implied precision, however false. Here, the predictions tend to be “fine” most of the time, “scattered showers” occasionally, and, rarely, “late afternoon rain.”

Two things a betting man is not likely to lose money on in Australia: that tomorrow will be “fine,” and that the unidentified tree out there in the woods is a gum. If you bet that way, eight times out of ten, maybe even more often, you’ll win.

As we continue to read about farmers going broke not far from us and see headlines about the worsening drought in this spring of 2007, I hope some Aussies who depend on the land and rainfall for their livelihood are able to muster the stoic sense of humor displayed one hot, summer day half a century ago by a West Texas neighbor from the farm next to ours. My father, my brothers, and I had put down our hoes and we were all resting in the shade of our neighbor’s truck, which was parked on the edge of one of our fields.

We kids listened to the subdued conversation of the two adults. They were farmers with good reason for worry. Neither had made a decent crop in years because of the drought. Rainfall that year had been well below normal, too, and our hopes were fading. Finally, the neighbor stood up, looked over the shriveled maize field we’d been hoeing, and said, “Ah, it will rain again. It will. Maybe not in our lifetimes, but it will rain again.”

**Quiz answers:**

1. Brellies are umbrellas. 2. Firies are firemen. 3. Pressies are presents, gifts. 4. An esky is a cooler for beer or food, probably having arisen from the shortening of a brand name with the name Eskimo in it. Also: 5. Woolies is what people call Woolworths, a supermarket chain here. 6. Rocky is

*Robert L. Hill*

Rockhampton, a town north of Brisbane. 7. Salvos is what folks call the Salvation Army, as in "Give it to Salvos."

Now you know.

## **Chapter 7**

### **VISITING MELBOURNE WHILE BUYING A HOUSE**

It's pronounced Mel'-ben (usually)

**B**efore you've been in Australia long, you'll hear that differences between the five biggest cities in Australia are illustrated by the questions commonly asked of newcomers to each one. The Aussies say that in Perth you're asked, "Where do you come from?" In Adelaide: "What church do you go to?" In Melbourne: "What school did you go to?" In Sydney: "How much money do you make?" In Brisbane: "Want a beer, mate?"

During our first two years here, we visited all these cities except Adelaide and got a sense that the implications may be right even if we never heard the questions as such. One thing for sure: there is a competitive spirit among residents of the different capital cities. When Kristi was considering a job offer in Perth and told someone about it, the immediate response was, "What's wrong with living in Brisbane?" And when we were about to visit Melbourne for the first time a friend here cautioned us to not identify ourselves as Brisbane residents lest we be looked down on as hicks. Melbournians, she said, think they are superior.

We got our chance to check out those impressions in late October while our house purchase was pending. We had to trust our lawyers to do what needed to be done without us. When we got back, we learned that they had and all was well. Kristi wrote in our "Chronicles:"

October 23 – Last week, we had a break from thinking and planning for our move because we went to Melbourne, where I attended a conference and then we stayed an extra two days so we could look around a little more. This was our first trip away from the Brisbane area.

For those interested in geography, we found that the land around Melbourne is flat, particularly compared to Brisbane although not quite as flat as Oklahoma or Kansas. The ocean is on Melbourne's south side and there are some mountains to the north, but the city itself is level.

#### **Marvelous Melbourne**

If we had driven to Melbourne, we would have passed through or near Newcastle, Sydney, Woolongong, and then the national capital, Canberra,

*Robert L. Hill*

before reaching Melbourne. Between there and the South Pole is only the state of Tasmania and a lot of ocean water.

Melbourne has about 3.5 million people, making it about twice the size of Brisbane but smaller than Sydney, which has more than four million. Since Australia as a whole has only a bit more than 20 million people, you can see that the lower eastern corner of the Australian continent is home to a great majority of Aussies. In fact, if you draw on a map an arc from just north of Brisbane to just northwest of Adelaide, you enclose no more than 20 per cent of the continent's territory, including Tasmania, but you take in 85 per cent of all Australians. The only Aussie city with more than a million people that is not included in this southeastern concentration is Perth, capital of Western Australia, located across the continent.

We didn't drive to Melbourne. We flew on Virgin Air. This was our first in-Australia plane ride and Kristi noted some ways in which it was different from what we're used to:

We were able to print our boarding passes from a computer at home, but the pass does not include a seat assignment. You have to get your seat assignment at the airport counter, which makes printing the boarding pass ahead of time pretty useless. For the most part, **air travel** here is the same as it is in the States, but we were never asked for our identification at the airport. Also, we were not asked those three silly questions we used to hear in the US about who packed our bags and such.

On low cost Virgin Blue, nothing is free. All food and all beverages are for sale, or as people say here, on offer. Even peanuts cost money.

Once we arrived, our not having a car was no problem. Melbourne has a wonderful tram system, the largest in this hemisphere we're told, with electric cable cars that run on tracks in the middle of the street like the ones in parts of San Francisco and New Orleans. We spent lots of time riding the trams and walking around, looking at the architecture and all the wonderful parks.

We're impressed with the parks here in Brisbane, but in the general downtown area, at least, Melbourne has even more. One book on Australian history I've just finished indicates that there was a time when the British were making a project of elevating the culture of what they considered to be their embarrassingly unsophisticated Australian subjects and Melbourne was the focus of many of their efforts. You can see the results today all around, in the Victoria Museum of Art, in Queen's Park (location of a monument to Queen

### *Moving to Australia*

Victoria, for whom the state is named), King's Park, the Flagstaff Gardens, and more.

#### **A mystery to me**

The city's first Lieutenant Governor, Charles Joseph La Trobe, is apparently responsible for setting aside lots of the land for parks and other public spaces. He is also the subject of a statue that puzzled us for quite a while, one that had been installed upside down only days before we saw it. Yes, installed upside down. We came upon it purely by chance. It looked like any statue of a famous man from an earlier century except for the fact that the base was up in the air and the head was resting on the grass. Melbourne folks, evidently more blasé than their country cousins from Brisbane, were ignoring it completely, but I shot several pictures and stood around scratching my head.

A year later, I came across a newspaper story that answered many of my questions. This statue was created and stood on its head by a sculptor named Peter Corlett, who views it as a sincere homage to La Trobe and, according to a press release announcing its installation, as a means of questioning "the purpose of public monuments and their meaning in contemporary society." It has the approval of the La Trobe Society. We saw lots of other sculptures in Melbourne, including several of Queen Victoria and one of John F. Kennedy, all installed normally, base down.

#### **Best botanic gardens**

About the outdoor beauty of this place that prides itself on being "the garden city," Kristi wrote:

Like Brisbane, Melbourne has a river running right through it, the Yarra. The Brisbane River is wider, less brown, and has ferry service, which the Yarra doesn't have, but Melbourne's river does provide boat rides for tourists and it has lots of large park areas on both sides. In Brisbane, the river area downtown is heavily built up, and outside of the CBD there are homes all along the river. The banks of the Yarra, though, are lined with green areas that are wonderfully accessible to the public. Melbourne has the best botanic gardens we have ever visited.

Melbournians are proud that their city has been identified often as one of the "most livable" cities in the world, as has its arch rival, Sydney. A British firm, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), citing low crime rates, highly developed infrastructure, and little risk of instability or terrorism, identified Vancouver, Vienna, and Melbourne as the world's three best cities to live in

*Robert L. Hill*

or visit in 2005. Perth, Adelaide, and Sydney also made the top ten and Brisbane was rated 11th by the EIU.

Mercer Consulting's 2006 report on cities with "the best quality of life" put Zurich and Geneva at the top, Sydney at 9<sup>th</sup>, Melbourne at 17<sup>th</sup>, Perth at 21<sup>st</sup>, Adelaide at 29<sup>th</sup>, and Brisbane at 31<sup>st</sup>. All these were ahead of Paris (33<sup>rd</sup>) and Boston (38<sup>th</sup>). Regardless of whose ranking you accept, you'll find general agreement about Sydney's standing as the most expensive Australian city in which to live, although Perth has become a contender for that distinction.

As a country, Australia ranks near the top as a place to live. In November 2006, Reuters reported on a United Nations study that found Norway, Iceland, Australia, Ireland and Sweden to be the top five best countries in which to live. The United States ranked eighth after Canada and Japan.

If we'd been in charge of the UN study, Australia might have been at the top of the list because of our experience-based prejudice against Norway and our ignorance-based prejudice against Iceland. Norway is dramatically beautiful, but it has too little warm weather and it's shockingly expensive. An ordinary restaurant meal can set you back \$30-\$50 there and a bottle of beer in Oslo costs more than twice as much as a beer in Australia, which, in turn, costs twice as much as a bottle or can of beer in the US. Having never visited Iceland, we have no clue why a country with such a name ranks so high.

Want to live long and prosper? Some studies indicate that Australia may be your best bet, and Melbourne may be a top choice once you get here even though, after a couple of years down under, Kristi and I are content to be in the hick town up the coast. If you do travel to Melbourne, though, remember to pack your basic black duds. Kristi wrote after we got home from our visit:

The favorite color for clothing in Melbourne? Black, just as we'd been told. The suits, pants, skirts, and sometimes even the shirts that people wore as they were going to work were most often black. We even saw a herd of 30 or so private school kids in uniforms that were all black except for white shirts.

Maybe Kristi exaggerated a bit. I saw an occasional enlivening splash of dark blue.

#### **Great toilets**

One of the high points of our visit to Melbourne for me, literally and figuratively, was a men's room. In the men's toilet on about the **50th floor of the Sofitel Hotel** on Collins Street in downtown Melbourne there is a wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling plate-glass window. Since this wall of glass is beside the urinals, one can empty one's bladder while enjoying a grand view of the city

### *Moving to Australia*

below. Fortunately, there are no other tall buildings in that direction, so there's no chance of being reported for indecent exposure. Kristi said there's a similar window on the world in the lady's room. We assume the hotel doesn't encourage non-guest tourists to seek out these facilities with a view, since we saw no ads or tourist-guide notices of their existence, but I think they're a must-see.

As much as I liked that odd men's room, I had equally intense feelings about some highly promoted, iconic buildings in a section known as **Federation Square**. I've read that these buildings were designed by a British group renowned for innovative design and that they are considered by some to be modern marvels, "a world class public space that broke all the rules but work." Maybe so. They do seem to shelter people from rain and wind, so in that sense they work.

The shiny, metal-clad, patch-worked outsides of these buildings, however, feature jagged shapes and slanted window slits. They seem to have been built of thin sheet metal by a giant using tin snips. Maybe this is what a skyscraper would look like after an earthquake. Maybe this is architecture pretending to be rubble. I did, actually, like the insides of these not-altogether-pleasing structures, but I found it ironic, indeed, that Federation Square is just across a street from the beautiful old Flinders Street train station with its colorful and classic dome.

But don't mind me or my ranting. I can't stand rap music either. Or opera. And I'm from Queensland.

#### **St. Kilda and Williamston**

We used much of our Sunday together in Melbourne to take a tram to St. Kilda, an ocean-side resort area, and, from there, a ferry across a harbor to a town called Williamston on the tip of a peninsula, where we saw lots of interesting old houses and even a few birds. The weather was great. In their city, Melbourne folks say, you can experience all four seasons. In a single day. The weather was not so changeable while we visited. Temperatures began in the 50s and 60s F early in the day and then topped out in the 70s. Except for a brief spell of rain, the weather was "fine" and we loved it. So did other people. Well-attended fairs were in progress in both Williamston and St. Kilda the day we were there.

As a ferry returned us to St. Kilda's pier, we saw about thirty or so guys (I think they were all guys) "kite boarding." Their "kites" were fabric arcs with 30- or 40-foot cords attached to pieces of wood about the size of a surfboard. With strong winds along the shore, these kites pulled guys standing on the boards rapidly in and out of the boat traffic. They provided a lot of color and



*Robert L. Hill*

excitement for our ride into the harbor, but here is one more sport, along with hang gliding, rock climbing, and skydiving, that I plan to enjoy only as an observer.

There is so much public beauty to see without charge in Melbourne that a **frugal tourist** can roam around for the best part of a day without spending a cent beyond the cost of lodging. The parks and gardens are free, of course, and so is the Victoria Museum of Art. During the two days I was there, live broadcasts of ABC Radio National programs were originating from a famous traveling art venue known as the Spiegel tent, which was set up near the Victoria Museum. Seeing a radio show, it turns out, is great fun, and that, too, was free. Having had breakfast and coffee in our hotel room and knowing I'd be meeting Kristi for dinner, I nibbled on crackers we'd brought from home, hiked, gawked, took pictures, and made a game of refusing to do what tourists are supposed to do freely: spend.

The next day, though, on Sunday morning, we managed to find a great place for trading a few dollars enjoyably and well, the huge, stall-filled market named for the town's favorite monarch, Victoria. We declined the chance to pay for rides on camels, but we did buy some inexpensive Aboriginal prints on fabric, some wood frames for pictures, and hats with attached mosquito netting. Those saved us a few weeks later from attacks of Blue Mountain flies. We recommend a visit to Victoria Market even for folks who don't need to buy anything.

While we were waiting for our return flight at the airport, Kristi and I agreed that our first out-of-town trip had been educational and fun. And we got good news. I called our attorney's office and learned that the house purchase had gone through smoothly. I wrote in my journal:

So now we own a house in Fairfield. I have to be there by 8 a.m. tomorrow to get the keys and then wait for the phone guy and for the delivery and installation of our refrigerator.

#### **Back in Brisbane: shipping-container surprises**

With those tasks completed and our shipped goods from the US delivered to our new address, Kristi wrote to her family and friends:

October 25 – The stuff we shipped from the US has arrived and it includes, as we thought it might, things we don't remember packing months ago. We certainly have plenty to fill our new space. It's a good thing high shipping costs kept us from packing more. It's just as well that most of our worldly goods are in a storage unit in Oklahoma City.

### *Moving to Australia*

As we've said, our house is behind another and you get to it by driving down an easement, a narrow, paved driveway that has a fence on one side and a hedge on the other. When you reach the end of the easement, the carport is to the left. It's large enough, but there's not a lot of extra space in our "car park." Here, our Prius seems like a big car. Bob figured out a way to get into and out of the carport and driveway easily, and it only cost us one bush, which he chopped down so we'd have room to turn around.

That took some doing, but it seemed necessary. We're told the previous owners backed all the way out to the street, but that would require a right-angle turn from the car shed (oops, I mean, car park) while backing into the just-wide-enough driveway and then out into the two-way street at a point right below the crest of a steep rise. I wanted us to come out of the driveway moving forward and looking both ways. Removing the bush made that feasible for our Prius, but I wouldn't recommend this place for big-car drivers. No SUVs will ever live here. I have to keep our hedge trimmed closely to provide room even for our car.

#### **"World" Series**

Kristi also reported on our work detail the Sunday before we moved in. She had found moldy caulking in the bathroom and she worked hard at getting rid of that so I could re-caulk later. Then, she said:

After I'd done my part of the cleaning, I spent the afternoon lying down on the floor not wanting to move because of the heat and humidity. Bob finished his tasks during World Series commercial breaks. He was watching an important game for Houston baseball fans world over, including Brisbane where, as far as we know, Bob is the only member of the Astros fan club.

I was thrilled that I could watch the first-ever appearance of the Houston Astros in the World Series on regular, free TV, and, better yet, that I didn't have to stay up late to see the games. Even the longest game in the history of the World Series, which went until after midnight in Minute Maid Park and seemed even longer because Houston lost, ended, for me, a little after three in the afternoon. In this cricket-obsessed town where the idea of calling this a "world" series is laughable, the TV audience can't be large. Maybe, as Kristi suggests, I was the only watcher. Houston didn't win a game, but at least I was "there." Kristi, meanwhile, was eager for the game to end. She wrote:

We were finally able to leave for the comfort of our air-conditioned apartment in St. Lucia. For the past week before today, the weather wasn't so hot. In fact, it was fairly cool most mornings and in the

*Robert L. Hill*

evenings, too, but today's heat was awful. We're not moving into our new place until the three single-room air conditioning units we've ordered are in place and operational. We will be working at home a lot, so we got a unit for the study as well as the living room and bedroom. In effect, the whole house will be air conditioned, but we'll cool only the room or rooms we're using. It will be a rare event for us to have more than one unit operating at a time, we think.

Actually, I don't think we've ever had more than one of our air conditioners on at a time. Sometimes when I've been working in our office room on a hot afternoon, I've had to turn on the AC for a couple of hours. Then, when the late afternoon breezes come up, I can turn it off and open the windows again.

Having summer weather and thinking about Christmas at the same time takes some adjusting. We'd been bothered in the States by what seemed to be an ever-earlier start to the holiday sales push. That's a problem here, too. By October 31, Kristi was writing:

We have already started seeing Christmas **decorations** in some stores. Given that there is no Thanksgiving holiday here, all my colleagues at the university are looking forward to the week between Christmas and New Years, the next break in the academic calendar here. They're talking about where they are planning to go and what they're planning to do during that time off, but Bob and I have not made plans yet. We've been so busy we haven't given it much thought and, now, maybe we've waited too long. All the vacation places likely to be cooler than Brisbane seem to be already booked up. We were briefly tempted by ads for cruises to Antarctica, but then we saw the price: \$18,000 for the two of us.

**A month later – we've moved in!**

About a month had passed by the time we sent out our next "Chronicles" and by then we no longer lived in a unit in St. Lucia. On November 26, Kristi wrote:

We've moved! That's our big news. Two weeks ago Saturday, the air conditioning guys did their work. As the units were being installed, the few items that we could not move ourselves (a couch, the washing machine, and a chest of drawers) were being transported here by a moving company. We spent that weekend going back and forth between the old and new place moving stuff and then unpacking it. I'm sure you are all well aware of the drill.

### *Moving to Australia*

Here, movers are called “removalists.” We thought for a while we were going to have to get them to “remove” our old refrigerator to Salvos, since it was too large for the allotted space in our new kitchen. Kristi was able to sell it for a low price to some students, however, and they muscled it out of our life and onto a trailer they’d rented for hauling it away. May it serve them well.

With that done, we turned our apartment back to the real estate agency responsible for renting it. We’d been careful to see that the unit was cleaner when we moved out than when we moved in and we got all of our deposit back. One more item ticked off our to-do list.

Bob has spent the past two weeks organizing electricians to come fix a few things, and he’s been getting other tasks done to make our new house a home.

Either Kristi’s phrasing was getting more Aussie or my actions were. Folks here “**organise**” where we Americans might “arrange” or “buy” or “set up.” They say they’ve “organised a trip to the beach.” I even heard a bloke at a Starbucks telling someone on his mobile phone that he had “organised a cup of coffee” for himself. And, yes, they spell it with an “s,” not a “z.” Getting moved, though, really does involve a good deal of organization, organisation, and arrangement.

We have spent this weekend and last moving things around, buying some things we needed for the new place, and figuring out how to fit all our stuff into our itty bitty (Texas phrase) house. With both our futon couch and a smaller one in our living room, we have decided that two chairs are too many. We’re getting rid of one that was a \$4 garage sale purchase.

The “keeper” chair is a prized bentwood rocker that I got from a craftsman at a fair on Salem Common in Massachusetts nearly 20 years ago.

We have one remaining major storage problem: where to put the four large suitcases that we bought for the flight here. My friend Scottie worries that these bags may become a serious problem for us. “Either you are going to be constantly reminded of the transient nature of your situation,” she said, “or you have to get rid of the them and become permanently transplanted.”

Last weekend, we came up with a solution. We hid one large suitcase between my desk and the window in the home office, and then squeezed the other three into the laundry room above the dryer, which is stacked on top of the washing machine. We’ll see how that goes, but at least now we have our suitcases somewhat hidden.

*Robert L. Hill*

Transients though we may be, we are now, finally, settled into a place of our own. We still have a little organizing to do and decorations to put on the walls, but our place is looking more like a home and less like a random collection of stuff.

Being pleased with the work done by the air conditioning company and the electricians contracted to install the necessary wiring, I made an error in judgment. When I realized we needed some additional electrical work done, I asked the friendly and efficient electricians on site, whether, while they were there, they could replace one bulb in an outdoor light, install one motion sensor light, and put in one wall outlet. Of course, they said. Great, I said. I did that without asking their company for a written cost estimate.

Big mistake. The company's bill, when it came in the mail a week or so later, was for more than \$500. I called to complain but got nowhere. I did learn that I was being billed for enough electrical wire to circle our house at least once. After two months of wrangling, I gave up and paid \$498.30.

It was an expensive lesson I really shouldn't have needed to learn. Always get a written estimate before you get any work done, even if the workmen are on site for another purpose for which you are already paying dearly.

#### **Exercise**

Meanwhile, some more pleasant changes were being made. In her end-of-October report, Kristi gave more evidence of our settling in:

As part of our new routine, Bob and I jog along the Brisbane River and then have breakfast before I walk to the ferry, which takes 20 minutes. Once the ferry is under way, it takes only a couple of minutes to cross the river. Then the walk to my office takes only five minutes. There's a shower on my floor of our building, so I bathe there and then dress for work.

After shopping around a good bit, we have finally decided to join the **UQ gym**. It costs the two of us about \$1,000 a year, but it is the best around here and since it's in the building next to my office, it's convenient to go there in the mornings before work. The days we go there to work out, we drive to the ferry and park.

We are getting to know our **neighbors**. Alison, a museum curator, owns the Queenslander in front of us. I had a good conversation with her the day we moved in, and she has invited us to tea. Ian, Erin, and their teenage daughter, Bree, live in the Queenslander on the other side of our driveway. They are fixing it up, and it's looking really nice. Ian is president of the local Lions Club, Erin teaches music, and Bree is a high school student and a musician. Adjacent to us on the

### *Moving to Australia*

south lives a friendly retired guy, Mick, and his nephew. Mick has been around a while and he has given us a little history of the neighborhood. When we get rain, he says, the clouds usually move in from the southwest.

During the last week of November, Kristi wrote:

Thanksgiving Day was just a normal Thursday here, of course, but we did do one thing a little different. We both got **haircuts**. Bob has had his cut a couple of times at Stefan's in Toowong Center, but I have been scared to do so. I saw lots of people walking around with blunt cuts and I feared hairdressers here didn't know how to cut hair any other way. Finally, though, I tried the woman who'd been cutting Bob's hair, and she did a great job for only about US\$26. Bob's is less, about US\$18. Hair care, unlike most things, is comparatively inexpensive here, especially since tips are not expected.

Today, like most days lately, got hot, up into the mid-80s F, but the air cooled off when a storm approached. Generally, the nights are cooler, down into the 60s. Last week was nice, with hardly any days in the 80s, but given that it's almost December, we anticipate hot, hot weather soon.

#### **In the news here**

1. Nine Australians, ranging in age from late teens to late 20s, are in the news here after being arrested on the island of Bali in Indonesia and accused of trying to smuggle heroin to Australia. Known as "the Bali Nine," they may be imprisoned for life or even executed by a firing squad.
2. A petition to allow daylight savings in Queensland has been circulating. Our state premier, Peter Beattie, won't allow it to happen though, because of stiff opposition from people in rural areas.
3. Petrol prices keep rising. People are still buying SUVs.
4. The Melbourne Cup will be run tomorrow. That's a horse race that lots of people all over Australia set aside time to watch. We will be having a TV set up in our staff room, and it will be on from one to two in the afternoon. Lots of people will delay their lunch hours until race time so they can see it.
5. Queensland is the only state that does not fluoridate its water. The papers say the result is that Queenslanders have the worse teeth in the country and highest dental costs.

*Robert L. Hill*

And that, from our perspective at the end of our first Australian November, was all the news fit to email.

## Chapter 8

### SYDNEY AND THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

#### First Aussie Christmas

Maybe growing up in Texas helped prepare us for our first Christmas in Australia. We don't associate "Jingle Bells" with summer, but the temperature on our first Christmas Day here was surely less shocking for us than it would have been for someone from Vermont or Montana.

Kristi spent her childhood and teen years in Houston, where summers are much like Brisbane's except that they occur in months with different names and her early Christmas Days were usually warm enough for short sleeves. Snow was almost as rare near Abilene, where I grew up, and it never fell at a time when it could have helped Santa and his sleigh. The first December 25 that gave me a chance at Christmas-card scenes with boughs of holly covered in snow, I was fully grown and living in Boston, but what a disappointment that day was. The ground was bare and the temperature was in the 50s, just like home.

The very next year, however, Christmas in Boston was picture perfect. Heavy, wet snow fell all night December 24, and when the sun came up again every twig, wire, bush, roof, and lawn held at least six inches of undisturbed snow. Under a cold but clear and blue sky, that snow actually glistened. Honest to goodness, it glistened, just like it was supposed to. I was thrilled.

Hold that image. Nothing like it will occur in the rest of this chapter.

A week before Christmas, 2005, Kristi wrote:

We plan to fly to Sydney Christmas Day, which is generally a lower-fare travel day. We'll have two nights in a B&B along Sydney harbor. Lately, Sydney has been about the same temperature as Brisbane, but the mountains are supposedly 10 degrees Centigrade cooler. We hope we are escaping the heat for a couple of weeks.

#### **Holiday customs**

A student at UQ assured Kristi that Australians have Christmas trees, often plastic and shaped like pines, and that they exchange gifts just as we were accustomed to doing in the States. By making a mistake and visiting a shopping center a few days before Christmas, we confirmed for ourselves that **Australian malls get jam-packed**. Kristi wrote:

We hope to never again be in such a madhouse of shoppers getting ready for the big day. Santa is everywhere here, despite the



*Robert L. Hill*

predominance of desert. I had wondered about the Australian Santa story, about his sleigh and reindeer, and now we know how it all works. Bob found a CD at a garage sale that explained a lot of things to us. Santa visits the kids here on Christmas Day in a wagon pulled by large kangaroos, "six white boomers."

Thinking it would be a way to further our studies of Aussie culture, I quickly snapped up "The Smith Family Presents a Real Aussie Christmas." I was not disappointed. It's quite a find. Evidently produced in 2003 as a means of raising money to pay for toys and books for disadvantaged children, this CD, even though it has a selection from John Denver, offers a thoroughly Aussie selection of music for this holiday. I'm particularly fond of "The Golden Kangaroo" sung by John Williamson; "Dinky Di Christmas," sung by Barry Crocker; "Santa Claus is Headin' South," sung by Billy Field; and "Christmas Day Australia Way," sung by someone named, honest to goodness, Angry Anderson.

That last one must wrench the heartstrings of any Aussie far from home on this holiday. The singer should change his name to Lonely Anderson. It's the equivalent of the "I'll Be Home for Christmas" song that gets played on radio every year in the States. That, as you'll recall, includes the potentially heart-breaking phrase "... if only in my dreams." If you find this album somewhere and you're a homesick Australian, I suggest you skip Anderson's cut and, instead, play over and over again Rolf Harris's "Six White Boomers," a happy song about Santa getting his big kangaroos to work "a double run" so they can help a little lost joey get back to his kangaroo mum. Eat your heart out, Rudolph!

Kristi: Organized religion is not as big a part of life here as it is back home, so I'm not sure how Christmas differs, religiously, from the US patterns. In a department store window in the Queen Street Mall in downtown Brisbane, we saw nativity scenes, but they had Australian critters playing all the parts. Roos were the wise men, and a wombat got to play baby Jesus. Why? He was judged to be perfect for the part because newborns sleep most of the time and so do wombats.

My contribution to our December "Chronicles" was brief:

'Twas the night before vacation and all through the house, we moved very slowly, me and my spouse. (Sorry.) This December 24 was a pretty hot day, but the humidity wasn't too bad. I spent time putting music into my laptop ("Six White Boomers" included, of course) so we would have it on our trip. Kristi watered our outdoor plants in darkness because the watering ban kept her from doing that between seven a.m.

## *Moving to Australia*

and seven p.m. After we cleaned house and packed, we watched on TV a series of Christmas-oriented “**Everybody Loves Raymond**” shows. We never watched this sitcom in the States, but we’ve come to appreciate it in re-runs here where our basic-cable choices are pitifully few.

### **A dinky di Christmas Day**

Using my laptop during our flight from Brisbane to Sydney, I wrote:

Airport security is easier to get through here, almost worryingly so. Relaxed comes close to “lax,” to our American eyes. Nobody asked for our IDs at all, in the Brisbane airport [Kristi: We later learned that the Sydney airport checks ID upon check-in although not at the gate.], and we didn’t have to show boarding passes at the security entrance because non-flyers can still see folks off at the gates. No worries, I guess.

We’re flying over mountains and snaky rivers. I just saw smoke from a bushfire burning in a forest down to our left. As we learned the last time we flew on Virgin Blue all food is “on offer,” not free, but to our surprise we were just given Cadbury chocolate elves. I guess we’re having a “Dinki Di Christmas.”

The flight took just over an hour and when we landed the pilot said Sydney’s temperature was 23 degrees, which led Kristi to observe in our “Chronicles” report:

That sounds appropriate for Christmas Day in Maine until you remember that it’s in Centigrade and equals 73 degrees Fahrenheit, more normal for Houston. From the Sydney airport, we took a tram (Aussie for train and/or subway) to a stop not far from our B&B/hotel, and we only had to change trams once. Sydney trains are great. They’re clean, new looking, and soooo smooth. They are also double-decked. Not especially cheap, though. It costs us about \$20 US for the two of us to ride from the airport.

When we emerged from underground at **Kings Cross Station**, we found ourselves in a funky neighborhood full of backpacker hotels, which we need to learn about. [Later: A newspaper back in Brisbane told us that bed bugs are a real problem in these places, so we probably don’t want to investigate them after all. However, according to the story we read, there’s a worldwide bedbug outbreak and some luxury hotels in New York City have them, too.]

On the same street as at least five of the backpacker hotels, Victoria Court at **Potts Point**, our B&B, turned out to be adequate for

*Robert L. Hill*

our needs. We had chosen, via the Internet, the “budget” room, a third-floor walk-up and the only room without an “en suite,” which is the Aussie term for an adjoining bathroom. Our bath was private, but to get to it we had to walk down a flight of stairs.

The room itself was snug. It held a double bed with bedside table (no extra space on either side). A table and small wardrobe at the end of the bed took up the entire length of the room, so finding a place to put luggage was a challenge. As we anticipated, we didn’t spend much time there anyway, so we didn’t care that it was small. All we required other than a bed was air conditioning, and this little room had both. The breakfast was just dry cereals and toast, but the staff people were kind enough to make oatmeal for Bob.

Kristi’s on a roll here, so I think I should just stand back and let her continue.

#### **Long walk**

Kristi: By 2:30 in the afternoon, we were off on a long walk mostly around the harbour. [Yep, harbour with a “u.” At least the Aussie spell checker on our computers thinks that is as it should be.] We walked around a marina and passed by some of the fanciest yachts we have ever seen. We then went through the Botanical Gardens, which are lovely but not quite up to Melbourne’s or Mt. Coot-ha’s in Brisbane. These gardens, though, are along the harbour, and from them we got our first views of downtown and its two most famous structures, the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House.

A particularly nice feature of the garden area (Bob: Kristi’s favorite part, I think.) was the bats we saw hanging in tall trees. We have these “**flying foxes**” in Brisbane, too, and we even had one roosting behind our house for a while, but we’d never seen so many clearly visible in their day-time roosts. They were hanging from high branches, with their wings wrapped around to form a sort of cocoon that shielded their faces from the hot sun. Every once in a while, we would see one move around or fly off. Perhaps they got their name because their faces and bodies look like those of red foxes except that the fur on their backs is silver. Their wings are bat-black of course.

From the botanical garden we went to the Opera House. It was closed, but we were able to walk around it before going over to the Circular Quay (pronounced “key” here) where ferries take people around the harbour. Our last stop was a business area called The Rocks, the oldest part of Sydney. Lots of businesses were closed, as one would expect on Christmas Day, but we

### *Moving to Australia*

found an Italian restaurant that had wonderful risotto and refreshingly cold Aussie beer. After this early dinner, we headed back, walking for a while along a remarkable fig-tree lined avenue in Hyde Park on the eastern side of the downtown area, and then beside several less interesting city streets back to our B&B.

We were tired. By the time I had transferred my day's collection of digital pictures into my laptop, Kristi was sound asleep.

#### **The Great Yacht Race**

Sydney was cranking up a heat wave the day after Christmas but the humidity didn't seem high. After an early breakfast, we walked through the Domain, a park next to the botanical gardens on the way to Circular Quay, where we bought "Day Tripper" tickets for \$15 each. These allowed us to travel all day on any public transportation and that was quite a deal since it included the ferries.

Kristi: The first ferry we took carried us to **Taronga Zoo** on the north side of the harbour. After a few minutes in a sunny pay-phone booth for "Merry Christmas" calls to family members still enjoying Christmas Day back in the States, we began hiking east on a fabulous trail that wound in and out of the brush alongside the harbour.

It was about 10 a.m. by then and warm, but we were feeling occasional breezes as we walked in and out of shaded areas. We were getting quite a few views of the harbour, which seemed to be getting busier and busier. Gradually the reason for all this activity dawned on us. Purely by chance, we were in a position to witness, first hand, a major Australian sporting event: the start of the Sydney-Hobart Yacht Race. It's the biggest event of Boxing Day, so we found a boulder with some shade and a harbour view, settled down, and watched it develop.

I had read about this sailboat race of more than 600 miles, but I'd forgotten about it. Had we been planning this, we might have hiked farther toward the harbor mouth to even better viewing points, but finding an unclaimed spot with shade might well have been difficult. As it was, our rock on Chowder Head served us well and the starting line, when the cannon finally sent the yachts on their way, was right in front of us.

We've visited various sailing centers, but we'd never seen so many boats of so many kinds in one place. In addition to the scores of yachts big and small, there were ferry boats, huge cabin cruisers, modest cabin cruisers, non-racing sailing boats, a few outboard motor boats, a kayak or two, and even a peddle boat, the sort of plastic contraption you'd expect to see on the placid

*Robert L. Hill*

pond of a city park. A foolishly brave man and woman, peddling side by side, moved slowly in and out of the lanes of fast-moving boats. Since we didn't read of their deaths in the next day's papers, we assume they survived.

Then, finally, there was a warning cannon shot and all the sailing crews worked their crafts into position. The racers were in a marked-off area in the middle of the harbour, where non-racing boats were forbidden to be, but they looked pretty crowded together out there. The boom of another cannon sent them on their way toward the mouth of the harbour and the open ocean beyond. Half an hour passed before the last of the racers passed the starting line in front of us. Many of the boatloads of spectators followed along until the competitors were all well on their way to Tasmania and out of our line of sight. It was quite an event and we had a chance to see it by luck, not by planning.

Kristi: After the race was underway, we continued our walk past a navy base (decommissioned in the 70s and now being turned into parklands), a lively family beach, and **Balmoral**, a fancy beach area full of people and boats. Large picnics or barbecues were in progress everywhere. From Balmoral, we took a bus back to the ferry stop at the zoo so we could go back to Circular Quay and catch another ferry back northward for a 30-minute ride that took us past where we'd been hiking earlier in the day and then on to Manly.

### **Manly**

We highly recommend that you visit Manly. It's a beach town not like other beach towns we've seen. Many of the homes are flash (Aussie for "fancy"). It must cost a fortune to buy or rent any place to live in Manly, but for residents and tourists alike there are plenty of easily accessible beaches. Some are large and these were crowded the day we were there, but we saw many small patches of sand in little inlets. Often, in these, there would be only two or three beach blankets and a dozen or fewer people playing in the blue water.

Once again, as we've noticed elsewhere in Australia, beaches and other scenic waterfront areas are available to everyone, not hidden away behind resorts or mansions or condos. Most Manly beaches we saw have parking areas for cars. Bus lines as well as water taxis and ferries serve some. Not one required an entrance fee. The Australian "fair-go for everyone" attitude seems alive and well in Manly.

Kristi: We had a five p.m. combination lunch and dinner at a restaurant in the middle of a pedestrian mall near a beach before catching a bus to the Split Bridge, where we started a long shore-line

*Moving to Australia*

hike known as “the Manly Harbour walk.” The lady bus driver thought we were crazy for starting the walk so late (it was 6:30 by then), but we were determined.

Read that to mean that Kristi was determined. I played the role of “good sport.”

Kristi: We walked next to the harbour for the most part, passing by beaches and gorgeous vistas, and we were on dirt paths away from roads until we were almost back to Manly center. This was a tiring hike because we had to climb quite a few steep slopes, some with stairs, and we were in a hurry. Starting late in the day was good in that the temperature was declining a little, but I had to keep wiping the sweat off my face and neck with a towel, and by the time we finished my back was totally wet with sweat, as was Bob’s. We got back to the wharf area at 8:30 p.m., so our brisk pace let us cover what was supposed to take three to four hours in two.

**Just brisk enough**

Our pace *had to be* brisk. My Boy Scout training (“Be prepared.”) had deserted me, so we didn’t have flashlights. I guess Kristi’s Girl Scouts training had deserted her, too, since we didn’t even have cookies. We used up every sun-lit minute of the day for this hike, plus all the sun-set minutes, and quite a few minutes that were increasingly dusky. Thirty minutes after we finished the hike, we were standing on the deck of the nine o’clock ferry back to Circular Quay looking toward where we’d just been. We couldn’t see anything. The trail was in total blackout.

Kristi: The ferry ride cooled us off and we soon forgot the will-we-make-it tension, didn’t we, Bob? It was great to view Sydney all lit up as we came back in and got off the ferry at Circular Quay. From there we took the tram back to the hotel, showered, and went straight to bed. It was a full day but a great one.

We had spent almost all of our first day and a half along the harbour, which, we decided, is probably the best way to view Sydney. When you visit, be sure to take at least one ferry ride to see the city from the water. The ferry from Circular Quay to Manly is a great two-for-one choice: you tour the harbour and you get to see Manly.

Sydney Harbour water is blue and clear. We could see the rocks below the surface close in, and, near a Manly beach, Bob took a photo on a boat that seemed to be floating on air because the water below it was transparent.

*Robert L. Hill*

Also, Sydney Harbour is huge and lined with inlets, bays, and peninsulas. You can take cruises to explore the various parts of it. Next time, maybe. Sydney itself sits on rolling hills. Your legs feel those hills if you walk a lot, as we did.

### **By train to the Blue Mountains**

Just thinking about all that makes me tired. I think Kristi should do the talking for a while:

Kristi: December 27 – This morning we woke up feeling a little drained of energy from the previous day’s walking, so we were glad to have a day with a lot of riding in our plans. After breakfast, we took the tram to Central Station, where we boarded the train to the Blue Mountains. Thankfully we arrived early enough to get upper-deck seats. We needed four, two for us and two to accommodate our luggage, since there were no luggage racks.

The train was smooth and comfortable, just like the trams. At first the views were just of boring suburbs, but the scenery slowly improved as we got into the mountains. All the passengers seemed to be tourists. Sydney boasts that it is the world’s favorite tourist destination and, in the city and on the train, we heard many languages, including German, American English, and English English. There were some we couldn’t identify although they sounded European, as well as others that were surely Asian.

### **Katoomba**

The train got us to Katoomba in just 90 minutes. At the Katoomba station we dug out a street map and headed for “Araluen Cottage.” It was a sweaty 20-minute hike to this place I’d found on the web.

The two-bedroom, one bath house that Kristi discovered cost less to rent than we’d have had to pay to stay in a B&B or a hotel.

Kristi: The cottage turned out to be wonderful. On a corner lot with a small backyard, small porch off the back, and porch in the front, it is larger than our home in Fairfield. The kitchen is all high-tech. We had just about everything that we could need including dishwasher, microwave, and a French press for coffee. The coffee was even supplied, along with tea, and there was a washing machine and dryer. After dropping off our stuff, we headed back to the train station road and took a look at some of the tours available from vendors.

As our Aussie friends might say, we had a look at what was on offer.

After studying several choices, we bought \$30 passes, which allowed us to hop on and off Blue Mountains Explorer buses the whole time

## *Moving to Australia*

we were there, at stops in Katoomba and the next town over. This ended up being good for our trips nearby but didn't help with travel farther away. We also "hired" (Aussie word meaning to rent) from an adventure travel company, for \$5, a book that describes hikes in the area.

We soon discovered we could have bought our own copy, new, for \$10 elsewhere, but renting and returning this copy is consistent with our policy of trying to keep down our number of possessions, even books. Maybe we saved part of a tree as well.

### **Oldest mountains**

The guide on the first Blue Mountains Explorer bus trip we took did a good job of explaining things about the local area, such as the fact that Australia's mountains here are the oldest on the planet. When the Grand Canyon was "just a creek," the guide said, the peaks of these mountains were already being worn away.

Isn't that always the way? You go somewhere nice and the first thing you hear from the locals is, "Man, you shoulda been here 15 or 20 million years ago. It was really something then!"

Having now hiked in them some, I think that the reason these mountains have worn down so much is that they're made of soft sandstone. Anyway, it was nice to get an overview before beginning to hike, and we were still a little tired from the previous day's strenuous efforts.

Remember the three or four-hour, end-of-a-long-day hike we did in two hours? The one we did as darkness fell? I, of course, had forgotten all about it. Of course I had.

The bus guide also explained how most of the trees we were seeing are eucalypt (no surprise) but that the Europeans brought with them many other varieties of trees, including pines like those we're accustomed to seeing in the US. Native Aussie trees are, it seems, green all year, keeping their leaves and shedding their bark. We were told that the same chemicals responsible for fall colors in leaves elsewhere, in combination with sunlight and cold temperatures, makes Mountain Gum bark red as it peels off in big strips.

If all the gum or melaleuca trees disappeared, Australia would become known as the sunburnt and naked country.

After our bus trip, we bought groceries, pushed them home in a store cart (we got permission to use the "trolley" for that task) and stayed home the rest of the evening to read and plan. The day had been hot



*Robert L. Hill*

but by 6:30 it started cooling off nicely so that it was a pleasant evening.

This first night's cool air made us think there might be an evening cool enough during our stay to allow us to use the fireplace, for which plenty of dry wood was provided. Ha, ha, ha. Very funny.

#### **A pretty cool bushwalk**

December 28 – For our first day of bushwalking in the mountains, we decided to start off easy, I'm glad to say. These worn-down mountains are not especially big, but we felt the effects of being at a higher altitude for the first day or so.

Kristi: The Explorer bus only operated from nine to five. We wanted to start earlier, so we walked about 15 minutes to the head of a trail called Prince Henry Walk. This trail, which goes along the side of the mountain and provides good views of Jamison Valley below, leads to the Leura Cascades. We stayed in bush the whole time, which kept us relatively cool, and sometimes we were in pleasantly damp rain-forest areas. The cascades we saw were small but the vegetation around them was lush.

Our hike took us past great vistas and we saw few other hikers. Until, that is, we got to the vicinity of the parks department's information center and the set of large stone towers known as **The Three Sisters**. Here we found crowds, tour-bus loads of them. After joining the throng going down and then back up a steep staircase to the base of one of the "sisters," we hiked on to Katoomba Cascades and Katoomba Falls before boarding a bus back home.

By then it was early afternoon and the weather was plenty hot. We were ready to stop walking. We headed home for a restful but warm afternoon, and we didn't get the great cool-off that we got the previous night until after midnight.

With no air conditioning and no fan, Kristi was not a happy renter. She might have been happier as a camper. I am blessedly less sensitive to heat, but even I thought it was uncomfortably warm.

#### **The early hikers see the Lyrebirds**

Kristi: December 29 – We were thankful to wake up to more pleasant temperatures on this morning. We headed out at seven sharp to a point near where we'd started the previous day's hike and made our way down into the canyon via Fern Bower, Lila Falls, Linda Falls, and Marguerite Cascades.

## *Moving to Australia*

In the fern bower, we saw **three or four Lyrebirds**, which look like pheasants with long curly tails. They are great sound-imitators, giving convincing renditions of cats, dogs, and other birds. We've read they'll even imitate lawnmowers and the rings of mobile phones. We found out later that these birds are not often seen, so we were lucky to be at the right place early enough for this treat. We also saw and heard plenty of white Sulfur-crested Cockatoos, loud-squawking birds that seem to think they rule here.

Following a track called Federal Pass, we were in the relatively cool bush and in the valley where it was much more pleasant than up above. We were sweaty all day, but this was still a great hike and the trail was not difficult. Aussies do a good job with their trails. They are usually on dirt, sand, and/or rock, but there are boardwalk areas and, in steep or otherwise dangerous places, stairs with railings or handhold cables.

We ended this hike on boardwalks through a dry rainforest, where we were joined by people who had ridden a rail car down tracks once used for a coal mine. Some of the mine's abandoned equipment was visible, slowly rusting away in the vegetation. I wasn't impressed, though, since we have seen larger and more interesting rainforests in Queensland and elsewhere.

I did enjoy the steep, smooth gondola ride up over the treetops to the rim of the canyon. The cable-car ride took less than a minute and gave us views of the valley before dropping us off close to where we could catch a bus home.

It also saved us lots and lots of stair steps.

That afternoon, we called the landlords in sweltering Sydney, who said we could buy **a fan** and they would reimburse us for it. We did. That allowed me to sleep well the rest of the nights there. We also bought a few groceries and saw the inside of the historic Carrington Hotel (a "luxury hotel" with no air conditioning!) before going back to the cottage. Because the area is relatively dry, a fan helps a lot. It also helps that the air usually cools down by the middle of the night.

### **Wentworth Falls and Black Cockatoos**

Kristi: On December 30 we took a train to Wentworth Falls for a great hike. It began on the Charles Darwin Walk, so named because Darwin, in 1836, during his only visit to Australia, walked down to Wentworth Falls and praised the scenery. After strolling for an hour

*Robert L. Hill*

along a creek as he had done so long before, we agreed with the great British naturalist. This is a wonderful walk.

We saw a few birds (Scrub Wrens and lots of Rosellas) and plenty of views of the meandering creek. The Falls are gorgeous and we rested near them to enjoy the cool, misty air. In the water below the falls, Bob found three crawfish, and later a few minnows, the first aquatic life of any significance we'd noted in this clear, mountain-stream water.

And we finally got to see Yellow-Tailed Black Cockatoos, large, parrot-beaked birds with bright markings. We saw them from the top of the falls, as we were hiking along the side of the falls, and again when we were below the main part of the falls. What a treat!

From the falls, we took the National Pass Trail, which hugs the base of the cliffs, as we headed west. On the way back up to the top, we passed Sylvia and Empress Falls, also gorgeous, and then huffed and puffed up a long stretch of sandy trail and wooden stairs to Conservation Hut, a restaurant where we enjoyed ginger beer as we looked at a view over the edge of the canyon. We picnicked at a nearby table outside before taking the Overcliff Track (not exciting except for one snake that slithered across the path ahead of us) and then Undercliff Track (nice) back to Charles Darwin Walk.

The Darwin Walk took us back up to the train. Note the word "up." We were getting tired and the day was hot by then, so I was delighted to stop off at a pool in the creek along the way. We waded in up to our knees in clear, cool water. The sand on the bottom massaged my feet and the water felt great.

I know of no scientific proof that Darwin cooled his feet in the same pool, but I've evolved a theory that, as a matter of survival, he must have.

#### **Hell Day in Mount Victoria**

Kristi: December 31 was the one day while we were in the Blue Mountains when we did not hike much. Because of the heat wave, we took the train up to Mount Victoria, intending to do some low-key exploring in that region. Instead, we returned to Katoomba and went to an air-conditioned theater to see an IMAX documentary about the area. After that, all I wanted to do was soak in a bathtub of cool water.

The tour books call Mount Victoria quiet and rustic. The day we were there a better description would have been "comatose and rusty." Here's what we found:

*Moving to Australia*

- Not-great vistas accessible by long walks in hot sun and no breezes.
- A self-proclaimed gluten-free restaurant that was out of gluten-free products.
- A few nice old houses that were not open to visitors.
- One museum, closed.

Back in Katoomba, I was reduced to working on a jigsaw puzzle while Kristi soaked. Realizing after an hour or more that I'd managed to connect together approximately two percent of the pieces, I quit.

Kristi: At nine o'clock on this **New Year's Eve**, we saw the Sydney fireworks show for families, but for us the show was on TV. We had thought (Bob: oh so briefly) about taking the train to see the midnight fireworks, but after considering the heat, the huge crowds of people, and the time it would have taken to return in the middle of the night to our Katoomba cottage, we gave up the idea. We stayed in front of the fan and went to bed early.

The last day of the year was not the high point of our vacation. It did, though, come just before one of the high points.

**A wonderful forbidden hike (actually, two)**

January 1, 2006 -- While Sydney was having the hottest New Year's Day in 150 years (45 degrees Centigrade or 115 Fahrenheit at their airport, we read later), and while wildfires were raging south of the city (later we learned that these fires took homes, farm buildings, hundreds of cattle, and a couple of human lives), we misread a warning sign at the beginning of a trail near the town of **Blackheath** and began what I thought was the best hike of our trip.

Evidently the sign we saw said no one was allowed on the trails until further notice because of high bushfire danger, but our reading of the sign made us think it was referring to the trails down at the bottom of the canyons, where we didn't intend to go. Had we been on a tour bus or had we watched local TV news the day before, we'd have known that we couldn't hike on this New Year's Day, but we were not and we had not, so we had a wonderful hike with no one else on the trails. Lesson: avoid bus tours and don't watch TV news. Or, maybe: we were extremely lucky.

For three hours or more we went up and down mountainsides, into cool rainforest valleys and then onto ridges with incredible views and enough breezes to keep us tolerably comfortable. There was no smoke in sight anywhere (and no bushfires in the area west of Sydney during our stay), but we did take a risk, all the while speculating that the day was just too hot for other hikers. Later, after we'd been informed of our error by a slightly huffy

*Robert L. Hill*

bus-tour rider, we took a long walk (three miles?) into Blackheath, found a park with a shaded table, had lunch, and rested.

Then we found another trail's beginning and, glory be, there was **no sign prohibiting hiking there**, so we had a pretty fair second hike, arriving in the late afternoon at a parking lot where we learned that this trail, too, was forbidden until further notice. In this parking lot, we got into conversation with a young Chinese couple from Sydney who had lived in Brisbane, and they gave us a ride to the station for our 25-minute train trip back to Katoomba. A great day. And we lived to tell about it.

Kristi: Overall, we thoroughly enjoyed the mountains. They are probably about the size of the Smokey Mountains, but you get to view them as you view the Grand Canyon from its south rim, from up top. Going down into them, however, is not the ordeal that getting into the Grand Canyon is, and there are hikes for all levels of ability. The heat wave while we were there was unusual. Normally this area is on the cooler side at this time of year. As we said, the owners of the cottage had put wood in the fireplace ready for us to use at night.

The last full day we were in the Blue Mountains, on **January 2**, the heat wave ended and we were in drizzle. Still, we had a pleasant hike even though we got off the train, misread a map, and had to trail blaze for a couple of hours before we finally found the trail we were supposed to be on. By this time, we'd had just about enough of hiking. I'm not sure I would put these mountains on a must-do list for an Australia trip. Most visitors spend just one day here touring around the area or taking a bus tour to see some of the scenic overlooks, but it seems to me that to enjoy the area, you really need at least a long weekend so you can spend some time on the trails.

#### **Back in Sydney**

We took the train back into the city and stayed at a hotel near Darling Harbour (one little section of the greater Sydney complex of harbours), a tourist area with a convention center, hotels, restaurants, IMAX, museums, aquarium, and shops. We walked around Darling Harbour and again to The Rocks, to see more of the historic area that we had missed when we were first in town. By this time the heat wave was gone and the weather was pleasant. At almost dusk, we walked up the pedestrian path on the Sydney Harbour Bridge to the halfway point to get another view of the waterfront. What can I say?

Another great harbour view and a new angle on the Opera House.

I shot way too many pictures that included that icon.

*Moving to Australia*

Kristi: With only one full day left in Sydney, and because we had already visited the harbour from the city area and the north shore, we spent our time on the **south shore**. With bathing suits under our regular clothes, we made our way toward the famous Bondi Beach, but this turned out to be a better day for walking than for swimming.

We took a bus so we could stop off at various points along the way, but if we were doing the day over, we'd take a ferry directly to **Watson Bay**. Starting in this water-side town, there is a fine new walking path, mostly paved, that takes you to great ocean and harbor views. We took this path out from the town, rounding the southern point of the harbour and then moving along beside the Tasman Sea. Below us were the rocky cliffs where, bronze plaques informed us, a number of ships wrecked before a lighthouse was built.

We saw a variety of birds in this area, the most spectacular being the **Superb Fairy Wrens** that were all over the place – in the bushes and in the grassy areas. Their habitat here is limited and Sydneysiders are attempting to protect it.

Then we caught a bus to Sydney's most famous close-in resort area. Even on this cool day, **Bondi Beach** was pretty busy and we could see why it is so popular. It is large, it has white sand and blue water, and it is a beautiful place. A four-lane street that runs the length of the area is lined with shops and restaurants. We took off our shoes so we could walk in the sand and dip our feet into the cold water as we watched surfers and little children being much braver than we were.

Maybe we wouldn't have stayed long at Bondi Beach even on a warm day. After all, we have awesome beaches in Queensland, south, east, and north of Brisbane. Sydneysiders may look down on their country cousins up the road, but we found ourselves experiencing a bit of pay-back snobbery, so after a half hour at Bondi, we hopped onto a bus back to Watson Bay and then caught a ferry to Circular Quay.

Our flight home the next day was not until early evening, so we visited two of the three museums that we had wanted to see, the art museum and natural history museum. At both, we were particularly interested in Aboriginal displays, and these were worthwhile and educational for us. The art museum had a wonderful section of Aboriginal artwork, and the natural history museum had an

*Robert L. Hill*

illuminating exhibit tracing the reprehensible story of their lives after the arrival of Europeans.

**Some of these flocked together**

Here are the birds we saw on the trip. Birds new to us get an asterisk.

- Australian Wood Duck -- Sydneysiders called them Manned Ducks.
- Pacific Black Duck
- White Ibis
- Buff Banded Rail
- Crested Pigeon – We prefer to think of it as a fancy dove.
- \*Yellow Tailed Black Cockatoo
- Sulfur Crested Cockatoo – these are common in Brisbane.
- Australian King Parrot
- Crimson Rosella
- Laughing Kookaburra
- \*Superb Lyrebird
- \*White-Throated Tree Creeper
- \*Yellow-Throated Scrub Wren
- \*New Holland Honeyeater
- \*Eastern Spinebill
- \*Pink Robin
- Eastern Yellow Robin
- \*Red-Whiskered Bulbul
- Golden Whistler
- \*Rufous Whistler
- Gray Fantail
- Rufous Fantail
- Gray Butcherbird
- Pied Currowong
- Welcome Swallow
- Common Myna
- \*Superb Fairy-Wren
- \*Gould's Petrel
- \*Australian Hobby
- Little Pied Cormorant
- Crested Tern
- Silveryeye

### **Conclusions**

Overall impressions: If you come to Australia, of course you have to visit Sydney, and you should spend your time seeing the harbour, which is THE attraction. Taking ferry rides is a must. See the harbour from the water, the bridge, the city, the south shore, and the north shore. All these views are different enough to be well worth the effort required to get to each vantage point. There are about 40 beaches in the Sydney area to choose from. If you're really into the beach scene, though, come to Queensland.

#### **P.S. from about a month later**

Kristi: It's February here in Brisbane, but for the most part this summer has been quite manageable for two people who have lived in Houston. It has been hot (usually at or just below 90 degrees Fahrenheit), and on a few occasions, muggy, but, early in the day and late in the day, when I am traveling to and from work, it's usually relatively pleasant, in the mid-70s. Our house gets warm, but we're okay in rooms without air-conditioning most of the time and especially in the evenings. Except for sleeping. Our bedroom air conditioning unit works from bedtime to breakfast, always.

This is supposed to be the worst month of summer, so we figure we can manage the rest of it. We do not know, though, how people without air conditioning deal with summer weather here. The people who sold us this house bought an old Queenslander to renovate ("under priced" they said, meaning that they have lots of work to do to make it livable). The husband recently told Bob that they are living without air conditioning in their Queenslander. In addition, his company just moved into an office building with no cooling. He is living in the heat all day every day, and maybe his wife is, too. If I had to live through a Queensland summer without air conditioning, I would be planning for us to move back to the US by the end of next spring!

There's more. Those folks are renovating their bathroom. Their toilet is a PortaPotty. Their bathing involves the use of a bucket. Of course, they lived here in this house for several years, on the side of a hill and surrounded by wood fences, without any air conditioning. So this much is clear: some Aussies are tougher than we are.





## Chapter 9

### HOME AGAIN

...and then home again

*How would it be for you, do you think, to move far away from your family?  
To move far from the friends you have now? How might it be, after a while,  
to return for a visit?*

Ten months after we'd moved to Australia, we were able to go home, to fly back to the United States to see our families and our friends. After 33 days there, we returned to Brisbane and that, too, was going home. In the process, we discovered lines of inner complexity that we hadn't expected.

#### **What we did**

On April 12 our Qantas flight to LA arrived, according to the clocks, before we left Brisbane, thanks to crossing the International Dateline again, this time going east. You could say life gave us back the day we lost flying to Australia. The excuse for our trip was a work-related conference Kristi needed to attend in Atlanta, and I tagged along as far as Dallas Fort Worth Airport. In ticket-speak, we went from BNE to LAX to DFW. Kristi went on to Atlanta and then Houston (ATL to IAH), where I joined her.

We spent our first night back in the US in Southlake, near DFW, with my daughter, Lyn, and her family, Scott, Cooper, and Casey. Because Easter weekend was approaching and we feared many of Kristi's former University of Oklahoma colleagues would soon be traveling, we got a rental car and drove north to Norman, Oklahoma, the next day.

Academic communities being what they are, we were greeted by people in Norman who have lived in various places around the globe. Among Kristi's OU colleagues are people born in various sections of the US, India, Germany, and Columbia. Our struggles to adjust to a new culture and attain permanent residency status in Australia were put into perspective by some of their stories of difficulties in getting the "green cards" foreign-born folk need in the US for long-term living and working. One friend of ours, a professor at OU, says he would not dare to return to visit his home country for fear that he might not be allowed to return to what is now his home, the US. The hoops Australia put us through, by contrast, seemed relatively simple.

*Robert L. Hill*

After one night in Norman, we drove back to Lyn's and Scott's to spend Easter with them. Kristi flew off to her conference the next day. For the first time in many months she and I were apart for days on end, for much too long, actually, until we met up again at her mother's home in Houston. Traveling with our laptops, we were able to communicate by email and to continue with some of what we'd have been doing back in Brisbane: work. Kristi was writing papers and following up on her conference. I was writing about and studying Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), a mind-body practice that uses acupressure points to work on physical and/or psychological problems. Everything else about our lives for these 33 days, though, was different.

Our time in Texas was intensely social, for us. I got to be with Lyn and her family and with my three brothers and their families in Eastland, in Sweetwater, and on the farm my brothers and I own south of Abilene. Like Kristi, I got to see old friends from my former life, both in Norman and in the Fort Worth/Dallas area. Being back there in "the old country," as immigrants to the US used to call their homelands, gave us renewed awareness of how important relationships are. To us (and to you, too, we expect), family, friends, and even friendly acquaintances matter profoundly. I became even more grateful than I'd been before that I am a father, a brother, and a grandfather.

#### **Family tribes**

Some families, I've learned, fight when they get together. Old angers surface and rivalries reassert themselves at gatherings. That is not the case in what's left of my nuclear family. My family's defining myths pitted us against outsiders, I think. A father, a mother, and five kids on a farm 10 miles from town in a pre-TV existence, we banded together, wary of what was not us. That is obviously a worldview with unfortunate flaws, but one result has been relative harmony within the family, and that has carried over to me and my adult brothers. We have a shared history, a set of stories known first-hand only by us, and that is a form of tribal wealth.

We have a history, too, of helping each other out. Our middle brother Gary is a genius mechanic who has kept many of our vehicles going beyond their natural life spans while saving us lots of garage bills. Mike is a skilled welder and stockman. Ronald is an electrician who can service windmills and water wells. Stan, who died of Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS) in 1999, was a talented carpenter who, as he said, had "a degree in arguing," a doctorate in philosophy of science. Whenever we've lived near enough to each other to do so, my brothers and I have used our skills to **help each other out** whenever

### *Moving to Australia*

we could. We've relied on each other and we still think of ourselves as the five Hill brothers.

Maybe it's no surprise, then, that I felt close to the Aboriginal family at the center of an Australian novel (also a movie, which I haven't seen) by Nene Gare, [The Fringe Dwellers](#). Called the Comeaways, these fictional folk are deeply connected. Although they welcomed cousins and relations more readily than we Hills did as I was growing up, their story of family commitment feels familiar to me. The Comeaways have an acceptance of each other that is expected and ingrained. Like them, my brothers and I have wide differences in outlooks and beliefs, and these can require generous tolerance. It is usually present in our interactions. I am grateful, and I believe my brothers are, too, for the closeness within our clan of four who remain.

#### **True sharing**

Smaller families, surely, can have similar deep connections, but being one of several children seems to help. I recall overhearing conversations between my son-in-law, Scott, and a couple of his brothers one morning in Houston many years ago as we were all in the dressing room of a tuxedo rental place a day or two before his and Lyn's wedding. I can't tell you what the conversation was about, but I remember well the easy familiarity and affection, as well as the banter and teasing, in what passed between them over the dressing-cubicle walls. I was favorably impressed. A decade or so later, Scott affirmed the values I intuited from that exchange by donating to one of those brothers, at a time of desperate need, a kidney. Negative family interactions can be spiritually toxic. Positive family relationships can be lifesaving.

And yet, family or not, what a disruption of normal routines it can be to have a guest plop himself down into a household's on-going life. On this trip, I did this in several places. After a very few days, houseguests add an **extra strain** to the daily struggles of living. If Nene Gare's tale is accurate (and it does seem to parallel other reports I've read), Aboriginal cultures may have less difficulty with such strains than do those of us from European origins. Perhaps a traveling relative of an Aboriginal family can just fold himself in as a relatively non-disruptive part of "the mob." I don't think that works so well in my culture. The family I grew up in, although we welcomed and went out of our way to be hospitable to our infrequent guests, would not have invited relatives or friends to move in for visits that might last for days or weeks.

However warmly welcoming they may be, even genetically-linked adult hosts of European heritage generally experience guests who stay more than a day or two as aliens from some other space and time. Which, of course, Kristi

*Robert L. Hill*

and I were during this trip back to the US, even though our “other space” is Australia, part of this planet, and our “other time” is just 13 or 14 hours ahead. That is enough, after all, to put one into tomorrow. Having established households of our own, those of us who visit arrive not only with bags in hand but also with odd habits, political opinions, religious values, and social mores that are strange to, and not altogether compatible with, those of the resident tribe.

### **Guest work**

Being disconnected from the normal routines and comforts of home, guests can get a bit edgy, too. If we get a chance for such a trip again, Kristi and I intend to not be apart for so many days in a row, and I expect we’ll stay for less than a month. Although our time with family and friends was well spent and we treasured it, a month of being away from home base is more than I can easily tolerate, wherever home base may be. Kristi had some similar feelings. She wrote for our "Chronicles" after the trip:

Traveling between the US and Australia, for us, was a little surreal. Our lives in the two places seems so different that going from one to the other felt strange at the beginning of this trip. Norman, Oklahoma, while we were there to visit colleagues and friends, seemed both to be a place from our distant past and, at the same time, to be a place we had just left. Maybe it is good to have such a long airplane ride between our two worlds. A person needs time to get ready for the changes, time to prepare for the world you’re about to re-enter.

“Surreal” is the right word for some of what I experienced, too. The feeling was a sort of flip-flop, a where-am-I sense of strangeness similar to being half in and half out of an early-morning dream state. For the first few days of being back in the US, there were times when I felt that I’d been visiting in Southlake or living in Norman or walking through the mesquite trees of West Texas only the previous week. It was as if I had never left to live in Australia. And then the scenes before my eyes were suddenly new again, and the novelty of being “back home” swept over me. I was almost surprised I didn’t hear an audible snap as reality switched back and forth.

For me, it wouldn’t take long, I think, for the US to become the norm, the “given” of my life again, even as I missed Australia. The **familiarity** of the long-known has great appeal. Ordinary things like mesquite trees, a constant part of the environment of my childhood and youth, can make me feel welcomed. And the family ties I’ve been talking about are strong.

On the other hand, there is much to recommend **the new**. That which is different demands attention and attention reveals the “this-ness” of a place.

### *Moving to Australia*

When you are dealing with the novelty of a new environment and culture, you are forced to look at its special character, its unique aspects, as well as its commonalities with the old, the similarities of human existence everywhere. So, both the familiar and the new have value.

I recalled a time in Brisbane after we'd been in Australia for a couple of months when I became aware that the newness had faded a bit. Intermingled with the relief that came from experiencing my new surroundings as less exotic to my eyes and ears, there was a sense of loss. Things which had seemed odd and interesting to me only a couple of weeks before were, suddenly, just part of the scenery, ordinary, unremarkable.

Now, after a couple of years, Kristi and I know our way around Brisbane and don't think twice about grabbing our map book and finding our way to any place we want to visit. There is great freedom in that. But while kookaburras still please us with their calls, they no longer fill us with the delight of pleasant surprise.

*What about you? What, for you, is the best mix of the excitingly new and the comfortably familiar?* Living in the midst of newness takes extra energy, but it keeps you awake to your surroundings, too, and not just when you're driving on the "wrong" side of the road. What is **your preferred balance** between the unknown and the known? How do your family connections hinder or help your ability to be where you are or to move to somewhere entirely new? How would it be for you to go far away for a few months and then to return, to live or to visit?

#### **Super shoppers**

For us, this trip was not just about people and places, but also things. Lyn was generous with her time and knowledge of shopping centers near where she and her family live. Kristi and I are not crazy about big-box stores, but the first thing we asked of Lyn was for her to take us to a Wal-Mart and then to a Target. Prices tend to be higher in Australia, as we've said, and there are products we like that we haven't found down under.

One of my first purchases, though, was something I hadn't known to look for because I didn't know such things were on sale: cheap, pre-paid cell phones. Although, as I said earlier, I'd bought my mobile or cell phone at the Vodafone kiosk in Toowong Center because it was designed to accept SIM cards in the US, it turned out not to make sense to go that route. For about \$50, I got a phone in a box with its own charger and almost as many minutes of calling time as I needed for our entire trip.

Lyn says these handy gadgets are known as "terrorist phones" because they can be used and then discarded and are, therefore, not easily traced.

*Robert L. Hill*

Assuming, of course, that you haven't used your real name and your own credit card to make your purchase, which I did. That \$50 was well spent. Being able to have a phone and a phone number while traveling is a wonderful modern innovation.

We had some needs that were high-tech and others that were very low-tech. High on our list of things to buy and take back to Australia was a bottle of **Old English furniture polish**. We have not been able to find anything like it in Australia and we've looked lots of places. It's great for nicks and scratches on wood furniture, so we suggest you bring a bottle of that with you when you make your move to the Land of Oz.

**Sea Breeze** astringent for the face was next on my list. I use this in place of after-shave lotion and the substitutes I've found in Australia cost much more and don't seem to work as well.

Aspirin. Plain, cheap, **generic aspirin**. Can you believe that we knew for months that when we got back to the States, we were going to stock up on that old remedy? We did. We planned this purchase. The first week back, I bought a 1,000-tablet bottle of just plain aspirin, 325 mg per tablet, for about \$3.50, if I recall correctly. Maybe it was \$6.50. Either way, it was incredibly cheap by Aussie standards.

Aspirin for sale in Australia is coated and you have to buy it in fancy packages from behind the counter at the "Chemist's." I did a little calculating after we got home and figured out that to get a similar amount of aspirin here in Brisbane (factoring in different per-tablet strengths), I'd have had to spend US\$55.

Kristi: So, bring a big bottle of aspirin when you come and any similar over-the-counter products you may need from time to time. There seems to be less emphasis here on medicating and a desire to use drugs sparingly, which is commendable but may get carried a bit far. Once, when Bob bought a pack of **ibuprofen** in Brisbane, the woman at the chemist's counter warned him to only take two at a time, a total of 400 mg. In the US, doctors had told me to take twice that much in a single dose when I had serious muscle pain because, they said, lower doses would help with pain but would not help with inflammation.

I also knew I wanted a pair or two of new jeans, which are costly here. While still in Brisbane, I had daydreamed about finding a good pair at a garage sale in the US. The Friday we arrived in Norman, while Kristi was meeting with a colleague, I saw a garage sale sign. I stopped and I found, for two dollars each, two perfectly good pairs of jeans that fit me perfectly.

*Moving to Australia*

Honest to goodness. True story. Perfect waist size, perfect leg length, no stains, no rips, and I didn't have to pay extra for their pre-owned look.

**Returning from the return trip**

Soon (or, depending on my mood, I could say "after a long time"), I was using my laptop to write:

May 17 -- "To use these controls whilst watching a movie or TV program, press 'select' on your handset." If we didn't know already, that sentence would tell us we're not in Texas anymore. Whilst I'm writing this, we're on a Qantas flight and we're somewhere west of the International Dateline. We've slept, had dinner, nibbled snacks, watched a very dark and hard to make out version of "Memoirs of a Geisha" on the small screens built into the backs of each of the seats in front of us. We've even stretched our legs in the aisle a time or two and much of the long trip back is done. Only two hours and thirty-nine minutes to go.

Qantas does a good job of making bearable this flight of more than 14 hours duration and we were fortunate to be in a four-seat middle section with one empty space. The fourth seat was occupied by an old Asian guy who did not acknowledge our presence. We gradually spread out into the empty seat between him and us and Kristi slept with her head in my lap. Or so I thought. When she started using the laptop to add to this piece, she wrote:

Kristi: Saying I slept is to use the term loosely. Bob has been sleeping almost the whole flight but I've had only a couple of catnaps. It's hard for me to sleep sitting up in an airplane seat, so a flight that takes off at 11:20 p.m. from Los Angeles is pretty grueling for me. Last June, while we were on this flight from LA, we rested a while, had about four or five hours of awake time, and then rested again until the Qantas staff served breakfast. We had that planned so we could be as alert as possible when we arrived in Brisbane, and that worked really well.

On that trip, though, each of us took one tablet of a prescription medication called Ambien to help us sleep on the flight. We also took some herbal remedies suggested by my mom, or, as Australians say, by my "mum." I am now thinking that Ambien or something like it is essential for me if I want to sleep on a plane. Without that chemical help, I haven't been able to get comfortable enough to sleep. At this moment my body doesn't know how dark it is outside this plane. In Houston, where I've been for three weeks, the time is 8 a.m. "Yep, it's



*Robert L. Hill*

morning,” says my body, so it won’t do any good for me to try to sleep for a while.

In general, I agree with Bob that Qantas does a good job. However, for this flight we ordered vegetarian meals, which was a **bad idea** for me. We got plain white rice, with overcooked, bland steamed carrots. There was also some broccoli, which actually was decent, and, on the side, a cold roll. For dessert: an apple. If we had opted for one of the regular options, I could have had pasta with a creamy mushroom sauce, a fresh hot French roll, and a macaroon for dessert. Yes, I know the apple is better for me than the macaroon, but...

I supplemented my meal with junk food I’d brought on board.

Kristi: The other disappointment on this flight is the entertainment system. Normally, there are lots of first-run movies on offer as well as TV shows, but the system on this plane is down, so our choices are limited. I am not normally willing to watch non-stop TV, but cramped on a plane with little sleep, I have just enough brain cells working to watch a movie or TV show when I’m not trying to sleep. The flight from Houston to Los Angeles used up the batteries in my laptop, so doing work is not an option now. Bob’s laptop still has battery power because he didn’t have it on from Houston to LA or for most of this flight.

With more experience, after two years of traveling to and from Australia, we now rank Qantas behind both Thai Air and Singapore Air for service and comfort. We’ve also heard good things about New Zealand Air. The main thing, though, is to get from Point A to Point B, and after what seemed like about a week, I wrote:

Hooray. We’re getting ready to land. Back in Brisbane, finally.

**Yes, back in Brisbane**

Kristi: Saturday, May 20 -- We have now been back for three days. I was surprised by how much jet lag affected me after the flight from LA. I had developed a cold a few days before I left the US, so I probably have been extra tired because of that. As we did when we first came here, we have been going to bed really early, by 7 p.m. the day we arrived, by 7:15 the next day, and at 7:45 last night. We then have waking spells early in the morning before getting out of bed by 6:00 a.m.

Being back in Brisbane now feels perfectly normal. We are into our daily routine and nothing seems so foreign anymore, or as strange

## *Moving to Australia*

as it did when we first got here last June or when we got to the US five weeks ago. We are back into **our Brisbane pattern** of walking to get to lots of places, which I think must explain why in just a few days I have already lost the three pounds I gained in the US. I'm back to being below what used to be my normal US weight. Bob also gained weight in the US and will probably drop it within the next few weeks.

While I was back, I put on about a pound a week, walking less, exercising less in general, and eating a lot of good fried catfish, grilled salmon, ice cream... I guess I "supersized me" a little.

Being away and then coming back called our attention to the fact that it gets dark early here at night. The sun is setting at five p.m. and not coming up again until 6:30 a.m. We are still in late fall, technically, but winter is approaching, the days are shorter, and it's cooler in the mornings now. The five-day forecast calls for lows around 55 degrees F and highs between 72 and 77, although right now, in the middle of Saturday afternoon, it is 78 degrees F. There's been no rain since we left, so it looks like we will be going into Phase 3 of water rationing in the next few weeks. We will then have to use buckets to water outside – no hoses anymore! Sprinklers were banned a long time ago.

I claimed to have brought rain everywhere I went in Texas, but I haven't had any luck here yet.

### **Some facts you might need to know**

**Living Costs** -- Several folks in the US, while we were visiting, asked about living costs here. I'm terrible at remembering numbers so I gave answers all over the place, I think. Now that we're back and I have the facts before me, I can report with confidence what it has been costing us to live in Brisbane.

- Regular **gasoline** (it's called "petrol" here) is priced at our local station at \$1.22 per liter and it has fluctuated around that point for a good while. Since there are 3.79 liters per gallon, that is \$4.62/gallon in local currency, or US\$3.47/gallon. So, we're only a little worse off than drivers in Dallas, where regular was about \$3/gallon when we left. Fortunately, since we normally drive our Prius only on weekends, we spend only a bit more than \$21 a month for petrol. Other expenses of owning and operating our car (taxes, maintenance, the occasional new tire) add up to US\$100 a month, so our average monthly automobile cost, so far, has been US\$120.

*Robert L. Hill*

- Hearing what some of y'all pay for **electricity** makes me think we have a pretty good deal here. Our house is small and well insulated, granted, but we've just come out of a hot summer that required us to run our air conditioning many nights and parts of some days, and our average electricity cost is US\$49 per month.
- Our **taxes, water, sewer, and garbage collection** are folded into our "rates," which now cost us US\$100 per month. (We've reduced our water consumption more than 40 percent in the past year, to 112 liters per day. That helps.)
- Our **phone**, including charges for individual calls (we don't make many) averages US\$29 or so, and my **pre-pay cell phone** (basic, with no bells, whistles, text messaging, or camera) is less, US\$21. We use a GoTalk pre-pay deal for calls to the US at \$.30 per call plus two Australian cents a minute. Our **Internet ADSL** connection costs us US\$44 per month.
- Our monthly **insurance** costs are US\$227 for a supplementary, private health policy, US\$43 for auto liability and comprehensive, and US\$67 for house and contents.
- Our biggest expense, as is the case with most families, is our **mortgage**. On the money we borrowed from a bank, we pay US\$670 per month.

Taken together, our cost of meeting these basic needs comes to US\$1,370 a month or less than **\$16,500 per year** in US dollars, which seems to me to be not too bad for two people living comfortably in 2007. This is \$2,000 less than a Queensland University of Technology (QUT) web site for students says one needs to meet basic living costs in Brisbane, but I expect the QUT calculation includes some items not on our list above. We should also note that the median mortgage payment per month in Brisbane, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, is about US\$1,040. In Sydney it's about US\$1,440.

All the numbers in this section, by the way, are calculated at a time when the value of the Australian dollar is higher than when we arrived. It is now worth about 80 cents per US dollar and rising. In earlier months when the greenback was stronger, our living-expense total expressed in US money would have been a hundred or two smaller.

I guess we can afford to continue buying **bananas**, which, Kristi reported soon after we got back, became costly here for a while:

## *Moving to Australia*

Cyclone Larry, which hit the Queensland coast way north of us back in March wiped out the town of Innisfail along with 80% of the Australia banana crop. Prices of bananas in Sydney and Melbourne were expected to double or triple, but our farmers' market prices are not quite so bad because we are getting bananas from local growers.

Since we each have a banana as part of our breakfast every day, we are glad there are growers in our part of Queensland. [A year later: Eventually bananas in supermarkets here reached AU\$18.95/kilo, or about US\$7/pound. At the farmers' market, we never paid quite half that. After the harvest of a new crop, the prices dropped back again to as low as AU\$1.99/kilo or about 74 US cents per pound.]

The most popular types of bananas here are Cavendish (what Australians call the banana most commonly seen in the US) and "Lady Fingers," which have a slightly different taste that Kristi prefers. Lady Finger bananas are strangely named in that they are not at all long and thin, as one might expect a lady's fingers to be. They're shorter and fatter than Cavendish bananas. They should be called "Big Guy Fingers."

### **Conclusions**

I wrote this soon after we returned:

It feels good to be back. Crews constructing the Green Bridge, which will link our area to the UQ campus across the Brisbane River, made great progress while we were away, and we're told the bridge may open in December, a month ahead of schedule. Maybe we'll soon have a quick way to get to UQ. For now, the bird sounds that have become familiar to us here welcome us back, as do the friendly people.

At the farmer's market on our first Saturday morning back, we had a fine conversation with our friends at my favorite coffee stand. The fruit sellers were happy to advise us on the best ways to store their home-grown produce, and one even threw in a couple of extra tomatoes after we listened to him brag about the superior characteristics of the variety he grows. We brought home a super-sweet pineapple, which we cored and cut up with a gadget Kristi's folks had given us during a delayed Christmas-gift exchange the previous week.

When you can have a wonderful time visiting people you love back home and then you happily return home to a new place and a new life you love, you have, we think, the best possible situation. Especially when modern communications systems let you continue to feel in touch with family and friends.

The trip left us with many questions, though. The primary one is this: *Where is our home, Australia or the United States?* We could make

*Robert L. Hill*

arguments in either direction. If we let ourselves dwell on all we're missing by not being present for family events in the States, either of us could get upset. On the other hand, thinking about moving from here and no longer being cheered by the loud, raucous, "laughter" of kookaburras could plunge us into what my nephew, Reed, calls "pre-emptive homesickness." It gives us no help at all to say that home is where the heart is, since we are **of two hearts** about the matter.

We won't have to decide where home is if we can find a reliable means of instant teleportation.

## **Chapter 10**

### **HUGE BEACHES NEARBY**

#### A weekend on Straddie

**A**lthough they completely ignore July Fourth and San Jacinto Day, the Queenslanders in charge of holidays declared Monday, 12 June 2006, to be a day free of work so that all her subjects could celebrate the birthday of Queen Elizabeth. England's Queen had turned 80, actually, back in April. How better to celebrate such an event, we asked ourselves, than to visit Stradbroke Island?

Named after the Earl of Stradbroke in 1827, Straddie, as the locals call it, is the world's second largest sand island, so we left our two-wheel drive car at home on Saturday, walked (remember that verb, it will be important later) to the Fairfield train stop, caught a train to a connection with the Cleveland line, took a free bus to a water-taxi, and boarded that water-taxi for the pleasant half-hour ride across Moreton Bay to Dunwich, once a prison colony and, before that, home to a large Aboriginal population. Now it is a small town that seems to be focused on the ferry landing.

On the Straddie side, we got on another bus, this time one that probably had school-bus yellow underneath a dozen or so added coats of paint. That took us, during a half-hour ride over the two-lane paved East Coast Road, to a stop in the village of **Point Lookout** where, by pre-arrangement, we were met by Jan Deaville. She and her husband Peter, a former buckaroo (cowboy), run a small, quiet place called Straddie Views Bed and Breakfast. It lives up to its name by providing a balcony that lets guests enjoy breakfast while looking out over the Coral Sea.

#### **Wallabies in the wild**

After dumping our bags and slathering on sunscreen, we walked down to the ocean and, since the tide was out, followed the beach almost all the way to the point for which the township is named. There's a fine park on this elbow of land and it has great trails and views, lots of birds, and even a few animals. We thought we'd finally seen kangaroos in the wild, but the three creatures we saw munching grass turned out to be wallabies. Not small kangaroos? You could have fooled us. And in fact, they did.

Kristi: Oh, well, it was an exciting wildlife find anyway, and the wallabies let us be close enough so that Bob got a pretty good picture of one. Obviously, they are close cousins of kangaroos.

*Robert L. Hill*

The weather was stormy and the sea was beautifully rough, so it was a good time to be in a place that provided great lookouts, although we were reliably informed that Captain Cook, the British explorer who had the honor of naming this and lots of other places along the coasts of Australia and New Zealand, meant the Lookout part of the name to be understood as “look out!”

This is the most eastern point of Australia, and it is said to be a great spot for viewing whales as they migrate to and from the South Pole, but we didn’t see any. We did see a couple of dolphins swimming past in no apparent hurry.

Kristi: The most amazing thing about the island is how wild it still is, how little commercialized. There are three townships but they are all small. Mostly the buildings are residences or holiday rental homes and units. We didn’t see any supermarkets on the island, just general stores about the size of a 7-Eleven. Buildings cannot be any taller than two or three stories, so there are no high-rises and hotels.

The Queensland government considered putting in a bridge to Straddie in 1970, but environmental and native-heritage concerns helped prevent that. The northern half of the island became National Park land in the 1990s. Mining is allowed on the southern half. We’re told that locals wanting to keep their island from becoming over-developed have had a long fight with commercial interests.

As a result of their successes, you can stand on the beaches and look at sand, sky, and sea, not at condos, hotels, or shops. There is modest development in the townships, but, elsewhere, you see the crystal clean water, black volcanic rock outcroppings that border each half-moon shaped beach, white to light-brown sand, and then trees, shrubs, and grasses. It’s breathtaking!

As dusk settled in, a squall line was approaching Point Lookout. We hurried back to a little shopping center where we managed to get under cover before the rain started. Safely sheltered, we had dinner at a place called “Fishes,” which was next to a bread place called “Loaves.” Then we bought some next-day-lunch stuff at a nearby convenience store and began our 30-minute walk back to the B&B in light rain. It became much less light before we got “home,” so we were soaked but happy when we finally made it. Our hosts had thoughtfully left a small decanter of sherry in our room, so all was well.

#### **Our forced march (not)**

On Sunday our we-can-do-this attitude carried us a little too far. After a fine seven a.m. breakfast and conversation with our hosts, we strapped on our backpacks, strolled down to Cylinder Beach and began walking northeast. We

*Moving to Australia*

walked along Home Beach, past Adder Rock, past Rocky Point, and then headed toward Flinder's Beach. That goes all the way to Amity Point, the northern-most part of the island, and if you walk around that, you come to the little town of Amity.

The sky was partly cloudy, the air was cool, and the waves were big enough to be interesting. Although cars are allowed to drive on the hard-packed sand, the beaches are so wide that the 15 or 20 we saw doing so hardly mattered. Farm-sized tractors also move along the beaches sometimes, apparently to do maintenance work and to tow the occasional vehicle that has strayed into softer sand.

I took pictures, we talked, and we just kept moving, two delighted people surrounded by beauty on a Sunday morning. I think maybe we got into a nature trance. After a while we thought about how far we'd walked, but it didn't seem to make much sense to turn around or to do anything but to keep on walking.

So we did, all the way to Amity Point and then around that to Amity. I kept my sandals on most of the time, but, loving the feel of the sand and water, Kristi decided to go barefoot for a while. (This difference may be significant, as you'll see when we get around to talking about being back in Brisbane on Tuesday.) Adults going barefoot in the summer are much more common here than anywhere else we've lived. At the beach, sure, but also in parks and even in stores, Aussies like to shed their shoes. In fact, in order to really understand a man from Brisbane, you may have to walk a mile without his shoes.

We stopped briefly to eat a lunch from our backpacks at Amity Point, looking out, according to our map, toward South Passage and the spot where a Liberty Ship ran aground and broke in half in 1942. The front part of the wreck was salvaged but the stern is still there and, thanks to the clarity of the water, you can see its dark shape in satellite photographs available through Google Maps. What we could see this day, though, was open ocean in front of us and another sort of wreckage. Around us as we ate were trees laid down onto the beach. Some of these may have been holding the shoreline in place in 1942, but now they were washed out by their roots. This, we were told later, was a result of waves generated by Cyclone Larry, which had come ashore weeks earlier about a thousand miles to the north.

The novelty of being on such majestic, open beaches had worn a little thin, I have to admit, by the time we began to see signs of human habitation at the edge of Amity. Maybe crossing one stretch of beach so windblown that we were up to our knees in a Sahara-like sandstorm had something to do with our



willingness to leave the shoreline. Only later in the day did we realize that our stroll on sand covered close to 12 kilometers or 7.5 miles, about a third of the island's length.

Amity is a sleepy little town at best and while we were there this Sunday afternoon it was more like "drowsy." Not being able to get any reliable-sounding information about whether or not we could count on there being one more bus that could get us back to Point Lookout, we made another we-can-do-this error in judgment. Seeing on our small map that the main street becomes a highway that links up with the East Coast Road and its more frequent bus service, we set out walking down Claytons Road and then Beehive Road, which became two lanes of asphalt ("bitumen" here). If we had completed this hike, we'd have added another six kilometers of so to our total. Some cars roared past us, but we saw no other walkers.

#### **Last bus from Amity**

Fortunately, after we'd been strolling briskly for another hour on the sandy and uneven shoulder of the road, in the midst of scenery that was not so great (Oh, look – I think that's a gum tree!), we heard the last bus from Amity, the one we had not known we could count on, approaching us from behind. With what must have seemed to the driver to be inordinate enthusiasm, we flagged down that life-saving vehicle. The driver took us to East Coast Road and dropped us off at a stop where we soon caught another bus back to Point Lookout. Total walking to this point in the day: 16 or 17 kilometers, more than 10 miles, over a period of about seven hours.

Back at the bus stop near our B&B, noting that it was still a while until sundown, we decided to walk a bit more, in the Point Lookout park. The sundown was probably spectacular from the west-facing point, but we viewed its lingering colors in the sky and the water as we were walking east toward "home" by way of Deadman's Beach. (The sea uncovered a skeleton and a boot here in the 1950s. They were deemed have been the remains of the cook of a ship that, despite being named "Prosperity," wrecked offshore in 1902. Five others survived the wreck.) No wallabies were in sight this time, but the views were worth the trip and I'm glad we didn't miss the colors in the sky and water.

Total walking time that Sunday: about eight hours. I stress this because, back in **Brisbane on Tuesday**, as Kristi and I were walking at our accustomed rapid pace to an in-town appointment, her right foot decided it had had enough and began sending sharp signals of pain. What did you say? Moderation? Oh, yeah, that might have been good: moderation. Maybe we'll think of that next time.

### *Moving to Australia*

Kristi: I limped for nearly a week and then had to walk slowly for a few days after that.

Fortunately, on Monday, our last day on Straddie, we hadn't walked a lot. We rode around that day in a vehicle driven (barefoot) by Dave, one of the co-owners of Kingfisher Eco Tours. We had a nice bit of luck in being his only customers for the tour we'd reserved in advance. Dave took us over sandy two-rut roads we wouldn't have had the nerve to attempt if we'd had been driving, even in a four-wheel-drive beach wagon like his.

Despite his diligent efforts, we had no new wildlife sightings, but we visited in-land lakes, saw from a distance an extensive and apparently well-run mining operation, and viewed the skyline of Brisbane way off to the west. Dave helped us identify bracken and foxtail ferns, grass trees that grow one inch a year and get to be eye-level tall, pandanus palms, bridal bushes, and "she oaks."

#### **Straddie bird list**

Kristi bought new binoculars for both of us in Houston while we were home and mine are far and away the best I've ever used. We saw lots of birds, including these that we had not spied before:

- Little Wattlebird,
- Brown Honeyeater,
- Caspian Tern,
- White-Bellied Sea Eagle,
- Osprey,
- Bush Stone-Curlew,
- Peaceful Dove,
- Pheasant Coucal (or Swamp Pheasant),
- and some New Holland or Yellow-wing Honey Eaters.

Interesting birds that we had seen before at least once:

- Spangled Drongo,
- Grey Fantail,
- Rufous Whistler,
- Kookaburas up close,
- Little Black Cormorant,
- Pied Oyster Catcher,
- Australian Pelican,
- Striated Heron (grey morph),
- Brahminy Kite,
- Crested Tern,

*Robert L. Hill*

- Lewins Honey Eater,
- and a Noisy Friarbird.

**What we wish we'd done**

1. Walked a little less.
2. Waited for the bus in Amity.

**What we learned**

RESERVATIONS -- It's not smart to wait as late as we did to make reservations on Straddie for a bed and breakfast or a vacation rental unit. There are many of them, but they usually fill up in advance of holidays and we simply lucked out. The same goes for tours such as Dave's. And if you are as fond of quiet as we are, be sure to ask the proprietors of any place you're thinking of renting in Point Lookout if it is on the main road. A lot of them are. We were glad to be up a hill and a couple of blocks away from its heavy traffic.

FARES -- The Stradbroke Ferries water-taxi service from Cleveland to Dunwich costs \$15 for adults and \$10 for children five to 14. A vehicle ferry that charges more than \$100 to carry a car across and back (less for senior citizens and islanders) takes walk-on passengers for \$11. A bus is usually waiting when the water taxi reaches Dunwich and the round-trip fare to Amity or Point Lookout is \$9.

SIZE -- If Straddie is the world's second largest sand island, what is the first? We thought you'd never ask. It's **Frasier Island**, just off the coast of Queensland to the north. Home of the Great Sandy National Park, it is more than 76 miles long. Nevertheless, even though it is only about 23 miles long and 11 wide, Straddie can still boast of having the most easterly point of Australian land. And we can boast that we've been there.

**Conclusions**

Stradbroke Island is extraordinary. Where else is there such a vast expanse of pristine beach so close to a major city? Where else can you so quickly be almost alone in the presence of open ocean and dramatic skies? All praise to the Stradbroke Island citizens who have opposed "progress" in order to keep their paradise.

It's not that the local folk are anti-tourist; they've just kept things low key. When you go there you'll find, in addition to rental units and bed and breakfast places, camping grounds for tents or recreational vehicles ("caravans" here). Adjacent to the beaches, these look ideal for families vacationing on a budget. Almost within sight of the skyscrapers of the Gold Coast, Straddie is worlds away from Miami-like glitz.

May such differences survive for generations to come.

## **Chapter 11**

### **GREEN BRIDGE, BEER BREAD, JACKFRUIT, AND CIVILITY**

Getting comfortable, learning more about Oz

Gradually we began to get more settled into life in our new habitat. Much that had been surprising to us just weeks earlier began to become well known, even commonplace. Pretty soon, we thought, we'll be offering help to people who've just arrived. We'll see them staring at maps and we'll offer them directions, just as people did for us. Pretty soon we'll stop being newcomers.

And that has happened. After two years, we're old-timers, able to tell tales of the days before the "**Green Bridge**," when two small boats ferried people across the shark-infested waters of the Brisbane River from Dutton Park to the St. Lucia campus of UQ. We were not here for the 1974 flood, but, by golly, we were here pre-Green Bridge.

It was our good fortune to arrive just as the first visible signs of this useful structure began to rise out of the water, one solid "foot" showing up on each side of the river. We got to observe as the Green Bridge became, stage by stage, a reality in concrete and steel. If you strung together daily pictures of the main constructions on each side of the river and ran them as a movie, you would see strange metal "plants" sending up shoots that would become pylons, sky-scraper-high. Then you'd see each side begin extending "branches" toward the middle of the river and you could watch them meet in the center. Suddenly: a bridge! Even in slow, day-by-day time, it was a treat to watch.

In our March 2006 "Brisbane Chronicles," Kristi wrote:

A workman just told us they expect to be finished with the bridge by Christmas. We're hoping that turns out to be accurate because we're eager to start riding our bikes over to our gym at the uni. And I'll ride across to get to work. We don't mind the ferry ride, but it costs us about US\$5 on the days we both use it and we would prefer to not be limited to the ferry's schedule.

There'll be only four lanes, two for bus traffic in the middle, a bicycle lane on one side, and a pedestrian lane on the other. This will be a first for Brisbane, a bridge with no car traffic. Plenty of people

*Robert L. Hill*

have complained, but we think it's great. We're hoping for a personal benefit, too, a boost to property values where we live, in Fairfield.

I was one of several "sidewalk foremen" who watched the workers make it happen over 20 months or so. Some of the others were not as positive as I was about what we were seeing. On the day when the last section of the roadway or deck was laid in place, three old guys were sitting on a park bench watching and commenting. I stopped to look, too. One of the guys said, "Nobody will use it. There'll be six or eight people a day crossing it."

"Oh, I don't know," I replied, "my wife and I will use it several times a week."

"Harrumph," he said.

My guess is he made the same prediction again the next day, but he was wrong. The bridge is used a great deal by walkers, cyclists, and city buses. We love it. We do, I admit, feel a little nostalgic, too. We do miss the quaint ferryboats and our conversations with their drivers, all of whom were interesting characters willing to tell stories about floods, fishing, travels abroad, other ferry riders, and a lot more. Listening to them over the rumble of diesel engines trained our ears to understand Aussie terms and intonations.

We worry especially about one ferry driver who was constantly in animated conversation with his customers, the one who seemed most saddened by the cessation of the ferryboat service and, of course, of his job. Where are you now, Barry? Doing something, we hope, that lets you brighten the spirits of scores of people every day as you did at the helm of your boat.

#### **Food and beer**

Becoming more settled here has required adaptations, including some changes in the foods we buy, how we cook, and what we eat. We rarely dine out, partly because we find restaurant meals expensive, but also because we prefer the wheat-free, vegetarian meals that we prepare.

We were eating lots of fruit in the US, but now we're eating even more. Most of what we buy is locally grown or at least Australia grown. I heard on radio that a sweeter variety of pineapple was introduced to Queensland growers a few years ago and that consumption has increased significantly. They're so good that we buy one, two, or three every week at the farmer's market, where, as seasons come and go for other fruit, pineapples are a constant.

Kristi: We've been enjoying different varieties of mango over the last few months, but now that it's March, we fear the mango season is about to end. We get several varieties of apples such as Fiji, Granny Smith, and Pink Lady. We get pears, tomatoes, bananas, and oranges

### *Moving to Australia*

as well as fruits that are quite strange to us. The last few months “stone fruits” (peaches and such) have been in season and they're good. We've been delighted to find nectarines that are super, super sweet.

I wasn't familiar with the term “stone fruit” before we came here, although it makes sense, given the hard, single seed in the middle of every peach. But then, given that reasoning, what would you expect to find in the middle of a “rock melon?” Something large and hard, right? Not so. “Rock melon” is the local term for cantaloupe.

What I was most excited about at the farmer's market that first March here, though, was a fruit I described in our “Chronicles” as “something really ugly that you should try at least once.” Its name: jackfruit.

Kristi: A jackfruit is green and rough-skinned, almost spiky. On the inside, it's yellow. Often bigger than a football, it's really sweet when really ripe, and it tastes somewhat like mango. The sweetest part is the firm flesh right around the seeds. The rest of the inside part has the consistency and look of cooked fettuccine, each strip of which is firmly attached to the inner walls. We have used kitchen scissors to cut some of that part loose, but then we decided it wasn't worth the trouble. The “fettuccine strips” are not as tasty as the pulp around the seeds.

We have read that the jackfruit is common in India, Vietnam, and other Asian countries, and, like some other Asian fruits here, it is being grown in Northern Queensland now. A little bonus is that the brown-hulled seeds, which are about the size of chestnuts, can be boiled and peeled, to provide a white substance with the consistency of baked potato. I like it. Kristi doesn't.

There is no way to eat jackfruit politely or delicately. It is best to **just dig in** with your fingers and lift out the yellow pulp and seeds. You should have at least two or three napkins available. Then you'll want to wash your hands when you've finished because jackfruit, in addition to being a delectable food, is sometimes used to make glue.

#### **Too slimy?**

Not everyone here agrees with our high rating of this fruit. It is too slimy for some. And, considering that the part you eat is less than half of the big green thing you buy, this is expensive food. After our initial excitement, we became more selective, passing up a large jackfruit that would have cost us \$24, close to US\$20. We figured that, however delicious, the edible pulp would have amounted to a kilo or less. However, when you get a chance, buy

*Robert L. Hill*

a ripe one, cut it in half, and dig in. Then, for the rest of your life, you'll be able to say, "I have tasted jackfruit!"

Soon we were eagerly awaiting "custard apple" season so we could try that fruit, which has both fans and detractors here. These, too, are green-skinned and lumpy, but they are much smaller than jackfruit. Some are the size of their namesake, apples, and some bigger than grapefruit. Cut in half and eaten with a spoon, they can be wonderful. If I had to choose only one fruit for the rest of my life, I'd choose custard apples. A good, ripe custard apple is the *crème brulée* of fruit.

Kristi: The biggest change in our diets has been in our increased dependence on **dairy products** for protein, mostly cheese and yogurt. In the US we had lots of vegetarian options for protein. We ate a variety of beans from cans, some of which are available here only in dry form. That means cooking the beans before adding them to recipes and I've just been too lazy to do this. Maybe I'll start when it's cooler.

The soy-based products, soy cheese for example, taste yucky here. I finally found, recently, some frozen veggie-burgers that I like. Overall, though, since we haven't found soy-based products in the variety and quality we were used to, we've moved to cheese and yogurt.

We like the "lite cheddar" Coles has in one-kilo blocks for about US\$6. Australian dairy farmers are in trouble because of the drought, though, so we probably shouldn't expect prices for anything coming from cows to stay where they are.

#### **Adaptations in the kitchen**

Kristi: I thought I was being cleverly adaptive recently when I bought corn flour to make a good, hearty pan of Texas cornbread. We haven't been able to find in grocery stores here either cornmeal or the masa we've used in the past for making tortillas. When I saw on a Coles shelf "100% corn flour," I thought I'd solved my problem. I thought I could use this in place of cornmeal for cornbread. When I opened the box at home, the contents didn't look or feel like any corn flour I'd seen, but, with nothing else available, I tried it in the cornbread recipe. As my Australian friends would say, "I gave it a go." The result was edible but it was far from being cornbread. In the US, we would call this cornstarch, not corn flour. I won't make that mistake again.

### *Moving to Australia*

Not finding masa was a disappointment. We've never been skilled at making good corn tortillas, but we were willing to try because, here, almost all the corn tortillas contain, much to our surprise, wheat flour. I'm allergic to wheat and I love tortillas and other Mexican foods. Most groceries stock a full line of El Paso brand Mexican-food ingredients in cans, including salsa and piquante sauce, but without corn tortillas they're not especially useful.

Soon after our arrival here, Jennifer, a thoughtful friend of ours in Fort Worth, created a "Care package" for us containing salsa and three-dozen corn tortillas made correctly by Mexicans in Texas. I'm sure she must have been shocked to learn at the post office that airmailing it to us would cost her more than US\$50, but she did it anyway. As a result, Kristi and I enjoyed several meals made with the world's most expensive corn tortillas. Maybe we should airmail her a jackfruit.

Kristi: Cooks from the US have to do a lot of adapting here. I often find myself wondering where to find one thing or another when I'm attempting to make a recipe that I brought with me from home. Often it's easiest just to buy whatever veggies are freshest, stir-fry them in a wok, pour a sauce over them, and call that dinner. It's the safest bet, especially when we serve it with Bob's wonderful beer bread.

Nothing I do in the kitchen earns me so much praise from Kristi as a hot, buttered slice of **beer bread**, and it's the simplest imaginable gastronomic wife-pleaser. If you can boil an egg, fellow non-chefs, you can do this.

#### **Bob's beer bread**

(a variation on everyone else's)

- Get a large bowl. Put in three cups of flour. We use spelt flour, two cups whole grain, one cup white, but white flour made from wheat is the norm.
- Add a tablespoon or two of sugar. One gives the resulting loaf just a touch of sweetness. Three produces beer cake.
- Add a tablespoon of baking powder. NOT, of course, baking soda.
- Add a teaspoon or so of salt.
- Mix well. (Hey, this is sounding a little like a Julia Childs recipe, isn't it?)
- Slowly stir in one beer. Room temperature beer is okay but refrigerated is better if you plan to take one sip before you begin to pour it into the mix, as I always do. (Only one sip allowed because you need about 12 ounces for the bread. The best beer in any bottle or can, I think, is always at the top, anyway, and you get it all in the first sip.)



- Again, mix well.
- Grease a bread pan well and pour the mix into it.
- Bake until done.
- Serve the person you're trying to impress an end slice, smeared with butter, while it's still hot. If she's Aussie, offer her (or him) Vegemite.

"Bake until done" was a little vague, wasn't it? The recipe I started with, which was Kristi's, suggested 35 minutes or more in an oven set at 375 degrees F. I set the oven we have here a bit lower, to about 180 C, set the timer for 50 minutes, and forget about it until I hear the buzzer go off. The result is always a fine little loaf, cooked all the way through and wearing a nice, crispy crust. It would probably be smart to experiment with your oven, using a shorter time and testing by sticking a toothpick in the top. If it comes up clean, the bread's probably done. If it comes up with anything stuck to it, bake longer.

Kristi: Our diet changes have been great for **losing weight**. As I said earlier, Bob has lost 20 pounds or more since coming here, and except for when I was training for a mini-triathlon in 1997, I haven't weighed less in my adult life. Exercise has been at least as important as changes to our diets, of course, but we've exercised less in hot weather months without much change, so the diet adjustments must be helping.

Now that it's March, fall is definitely in the air. We're still getting hot days, but the humidity is lower and the air cools down in the evenings. If we start early enough, it's pleasant to go walking or jogging in the mornings again. Today we finally got our bikes out and rode on the bike path along the Brisbane River, and we are making plans for more bushwalking and birding in the coming weekends.

#### **About beer**

From what I said about first sips a moment ago, you've probably deduced that I'm not a great fan of beer, but if we're going to drink it, we prefer it as the Aussies do: really cold. We have recently learned that a prized possession in times past was a small, specially-made beer refrigerator set at a low temperature. Some people had beer refrigerators in their homes before they had regular refrigerators.

Despite a reputation for hard drinking which some blokes seem eager to further, statistics indicate that Aussies drink only a little more beer each year than Americans and that their rate of consumption has been declining steadily since a peak in the 1970s. Wine consumption here is increasing slightly. On the positive side, Aussies are eating more vegetables and fruits, year by year,

and less meat. Better yet, according to recent news reports, fewer than 20 per cent of Australians smoke.

**Aussie realities: digging a bit deeper**

Over time, we've come to understand a little more about Aussie culture and history. From the beginning, we've wanted to figure out just who these people are who have agreed to let us be permanent residents in their country. We make comparisons, of course, according to what we know from our own pasts, and, bit by bit, we're constructing opinions about Australia and the US, hoping that our experience in each country will help us understand better the other one.

Kristi: Australians are the most egalitarian people we have ever known. As Bob reported earlier, it's a part of the Australian self-image to believe that everyone should have "**a fair go**," an equal chance. A part of this egalitarianism is that Aussies do not like seeing people getting special favors or putting on airs. If you put yourself above others, claiming high status or wealth or power, you may be seen as a "tall poppy." Tall poppies get cut down to size. It is better, in the Aussie mindset, to be safely average, like everyone else, like all of your mates.

So, no boasting, thank you, not even about how badly your life is going. People tell about bad events in their lives as if they were minor things. Big gains? Big pains? The standard response here is, "No worries."

As we have said before, Aussies are also genuinely friendly. Yes, people in Texas and Oklahoma are friendly, too, but this feels, well, different. Strangers seem to have a real interest in being helpful and are usually willing to strike up a conversation.

I agree, and how people respond to each other in casual interactions is something that matters to us. It is one reason we were glad to move from **New England** back to the Southwest many years ago. So many people in Boston seemed not to know how to respond when a stranger said "Hello." In Texas, in Oklahoma, and here, positive responses to casual greetings are more common. A columnist in an Australian paper recently complained about what she saw as the insincere friendliness of clerks and cashiers in stores, but I think she was just being grumpy. The friendliness people show to each other in public is indicative of deeper assumptions. Civility is not trivial and "G'day, mate" is as Australian as the sound of kookaburras.

A January 1 "New York Times" op-ed piece some years ago struck a chord in me because the writer, whose name I can't recall, complained of a

*Robert L. Hill*

widespread decline in civility. He linked friendliness toward strangers to the average person's assumptions about all those beyond their immediate circle of friends and family. *Are these strangers enemies, are they likely to harm me? Or are these fellow human beings caught up in life and struggling with issues similar to mine?* The quality of our responses to others is shaped by our answers to such questions and gets reflected back to us from those we meet.

We like being in a place where people seem to give others the benefit of the doubt until there's reason to do otherwise. As Rachel Naomi Remen has written, "All suffering is like my suffering and all joy is like my joy." In Brisbane and in other parts of Australia we've visited, as well as in the sections of Oklahoma and Texas where we've lived, people seem a step or two closer to realizing this truth of our shared human condition. The result, for us, is an environment that seems relatively generous.

#### **Absence of obvious poverty**

It is easier to be civil, of course, when you and your family are economically secure. Australia's having one of the highest minimum wage levels in the world may have something to do with both the apparently easy-going nature of many and the absence of obvious poverty here in the southeastern quarter of the nation. The current federally-mandated minimum wage for full-time adult workers here is \$13.47 per hour (about US\$12 depending on exchange rates) or \$539 for a 40-hour week. When we arrived, that would have been about \$20,000 per year in US dollars and, because of the decline in the greenback's value, nearly \$24,000 by the end of our second year here.

Although minimum wages vary by states in the US, Connecticut seems to have the highest one, US\$7.65. At this level, a person working 40 hours a week for 52 weeks in Connecticut would earn US\$15,912, several thousands less than a comparable worker in Australia. In Texas and 15 or so other states where the federal minimum wage of US\$5.50 is the norm, full-time adult minimum-wage workers may earn as little as US\$10,712, less than half the annual minimum wage of Australians. Tax rate differences do not make up for those gaps.

Another major difference is universal health care. Here, people of all economic circumstances qualify for health-care coverage not available to most Americans who are poor.

The retirement plan, known as superannuation, is relatively new here and we're not sure how it compares with our Social Security system in the US. Counting superannuation funds, stock market shares, and other investments, Australians had more money in managed funds, per person, in the last quarter

### *Moving to Australia*

of 2006 than any other developed country, according to a Melbourne “Herald Sun” article citing the AFG Global Management Index. The per-Australian average: \$48,178. The US ranked second, the paper said, at \$40,046, after having been the world leader in this statistic until early 2005.

These averages, of course, span populations that include the wealthy and the poor, and both countries have programs aimed at helping the less fortunate. In Australia, needy people can turn to a system of social welfare payments provided by the federal government and administered by a service delivery agency called Centrelink.

The term “Social Security,” in Australia, refers to Centrelink’s many, mostly means-tested, programs including a pension for men over 65 and women over 63. Centrelink is also the source for unemployment benefits; support for low-income earners; “youth allowances” for those under 25 in fulltime study, apprenticeships, or job searches; a similar program for students over 25; another program for Indigenous Australians in some form of study; support for pensioners who are studying; disability support; assistance for “carers” of both children and the infirm; and funds to help the needy with rent, prescription drugs, telephone costs, and the immunization of children.

Kristi: Centrelink programs seem to provide **a genuine safety net** here, and, as several people have told us, only the people not willing to ask for help are on the streets. “We’ll help you out, mate,” seems to be the prevailing social mantra. A fellow American who retired here with her Australian husband believes that the safety net explains why Australians don’t have as much violent crime as we do in the US. There are crimes here, of course, of all kinds, but they seem less frequent. In Fairfield and surrounding neighborhoods, things get stolen from cars and homes, often when windows or doors have been left open, but we are perfectly comfortable walking around at night here or in the central business district.

A combination of higher minimum wages and this safety net may contribute to what seems to be an atmosphere of less tension and more civility here.

#### **Racism in Oklahoma**

Racists, though, are not civil to those they fear or hate. Racism obliterates civility and it seems to occur in every culture. Because I was not Italian, I was once rejected by a landlord who had an apartment for rent in the North End of Boston, but being white and middle class, Kristi and I have had little direct experience of racism. We have had smooth going where others might not have been so well received. This was brought home to us recently by events in the

*Robert L. Hill*

life of a friend in Oklahoma, someone living with difficulty where we found so much openness and cooperation.

I'll call her Maria, a name common in the Latin American country where she was born. She sent us an email recently which began, "Today, I had to call the police and file a report because someone vandalized our front lawn." Then she told us of how life has been for her in Norman, Oklahoma, during the five years she and her husband have lived there.

Both Maria and her husband speak English with accents not common in Norman. Soon after they had bought a house and moved into the middle-class neighborhood where they are now rearing their son, Maria was subjected to whistles and calls from men driving down her street in a pick-up truck as she walked her dog. Later, she got obscene phone calls. A second catcalling incident lead her to file another police report. Nothing came of her approaching the police, except that the town's police chief assured her reports such as hers were quite out of the ordinary for her neighborhood.

Still, Maria filed a third report when her lawn was vandalized while her husband was away on a rare business trip of several days. She feared the person who damaged her lawn lived close enough to have observed the absence of her husband's car. Could he be the obscene caller? Could it have been the men who harassed her while she'd walked her dog? What else might they do in the absence of her husband? She was relieved to learn, after a bit, that neighbors' lawns had been damaged, too, that hers had not been singled out.

Less threatening experiences in Oklahoma have troubled her. Once she and her husband were shopping together in a large department store. They checked out separately. He presented his credit card and was not asked for **identification**. Maria, next in line at the cash register, presented her credit card and was asked for identification. She noticed that the cashier did not request an ID from the next person in line, who was also using a credit card. In a row: non-Hispanic, Hispanic, non-Hispanic; no ID required, ID required, no ID required. She spoke to the store's manager. Cashiers must always ask for identification, he assured her; everyone must be asked for ID, always. Sure, she thought, everyone who is Hispanic.

"I am convinced now that Oklahoma is not healthy for me and for my son," she wrote us. As soon as possible, this family will move away from a place we found hospitable and their memories of it will be much less favorable than ours. I have an African American friend in Texas who is in a similar situation. He has no doubt whatsoever that he has been stopped by

*Moving to Australia*

police for, in his words, “driving while black.” I trust he realizes that not all white policemen are racist. I need to remember, also, that some are.

**Racism here**

Is racism worse in Oklahoma or in Queensland? We’re not the right people to ask, I’m sure. Here in friendly Australia, I have heard one man disparage Aboriginals in graphic and racist terms. I’m pleased to say that I have not heard others express those views, but I know that Kristi and I, people who frequent forest trails, gyms, and academic settings and spend no time in bars, lead a sheltered life.

Also, we have not yet been in the outback and certainly not in the rural camps or towns where it seems that many Aboriginals live. We can count on our fingers the number of a people we have met here that we know to be Aboriginals and what we understand about life in their distant communities comes from books, newspapers, and television.

In an August 2007 column, Renee Nowytarger, a photographer for “The Australian” newspaper, wrote that the “town camps” near Alice Springs and in the Northern Territories are similar to slums she’s visited in Manila, East Timor, and elsewhere, in both positive and negative ways. “No matter where I have been in the Third World,” she says, “the one thing that unites everybody that I have met and photographed is the sense of appreciation and love they have in their families.” Belonging, great pride, and considerable humor characterize the Aboriginals she’s photographed, people who call her “sister-cousin,” but she adds, “Compare Australia with Indonesia, a Muslim country where alcohol is frowned upon, and you can see the damage that grog has done to Aboriginal communities.”

While Aboriginal art and many Aboriginal artists seem to be flourishing, the media present almost daily despair-inducing reports of murder, suicide, wife beating, rape, child abuse, and alcoholism in outback Aboriginal communities. The problems are so many and so varied, the issues so entwined with injustices, that perhaps it is not a surprise that no clear path forward is evident despite almost constant public discussions and widely-varying proposals for change. There seems to be an on-going tragedy here.

One of my brothers, after visiting a museum in Abilene dedicated to the history of West Texas, said he found it difficult to be there because he became so angry at how the **Native Americans** were treated by our white ancestors. The histories of both Americans and Australians contain shameful facts which we’d all like to deny if we could. America’s heritage includes slavery and the British began the colonization of this continent with prisoners, including some

*Robert L. Hill*

who were mere children and some whose crimes grew out of life-threatening poverty.

What we can tell you is what we have experienced. For us the civility, the friendliness, and the “fair-go for everyone” attitude of Australians has proved to be real and significant. People with dark skins who speak anything but English -- here and in Oklahoma or Texas or Massachusetts -- may have different stories to tell. Sadly, we have to recognize and admit, as some car companies say after making optimistic miles-per-gallon claims for their vehicles, your experience may be different.

### **Homophobia**

While the same caution must be raised with homosexuals considering a move to Australia, they may find life a bit easier here than in the US. Sixteen countries, I’ve read, have immigration policies that allow the sponsorship of a same-sex partner and one of those is Australia.

The “Defense of Marriage Act” of 1996 in the US prohibited federal recognition of same-sex couples, so gay Americans cannot sponsor a partner from another country wanting to immigrate. Neither gay men nor lesbian women from other countries have the option of acquiring a green card in the US by marrying an American partner, as heterosexuals usually can. Australia does not recognize gay marriage either, but “de facto marriage,” a fairly common, legally recognized reality here, seems to work in favor of same-sex couples with partners from other nations.

For up-to-date details in this area of social change, though, be sure to check out appropriate Aussie web sites before you make plans to move. Rodney Croome, a spokesperson for the Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group, has a web page that reports on issues of interest to the gay community and others ([www.rodneycroome.id.au/](http://www.rodneycroome.id.au/)), and he has positive impressions of changes in his home state and in Queensland:

Tasmania has come a long way in the past decade. Where once many Tasmanians didn’t believe there was or should be LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgendered) people in their midst, many, possibly most, now accept that we have a place in Tasmanian society and are deserving of respectful, fair and relatively equal treatment.

It is now possible, he says, to be something once almost inconceivable, “gay and Tasmanian.”

The Oscar-winning movie “Brokeback Mountain” attracted particular attention here because one of the male leads was Heath Ledger, who was born in Perth. About two young cowboys in the American West and their love for each other, the movie stirred some controversy here, but not much. Reverend

### *Moving to Australia*

Fred Nile, president of the Christian Democratic Party, called the movie immoral and said his organization would support any cinema choosing to ban the film. I haven't been able to determine that any did. The film opened here on Australia Day, 2005, and took in more money per screen than any of its competitors.

While I'm sure homophobia exists here and that same-sex partners still have a long way to go to attain rights equal to those of heterosexual couples, the prevailing view of homosexuality in Australia seems to be similar to one expressed by Ledger, quoted in "The Age" newspaper: "It's not an epidemic. It's not a plague. It's not a disease of some sort. The level of intimacy and the level of love (homosexuals) experience is the same that we would experience as heterosexual people."

#### **Violence and guns**

Racism and homophobia make me think of violence and violence makes me think of guns. You may want to know that there's a version of the National Rifle Association (NRA) here, the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia. The SSAA claims 120,000 members and wants Aussie gun laws relaxed, but it appears the gun lovers here are outnumbered by the safety lovers.

Soon after the terrible shootings at Virginia Tech in April, 2007, a newspaper editorial in "The Australian" said that, following a similar massacre in Port Arthur, Tasmania, one of Australia's most shrewd politicians did something American politicians have been unable to do. Prime Minister John Howard "resisted pressure from the gun lobby and the National Party and enacted tight uniform national gun laws." A **gun buyback** scheme that cost the government \$500 million took about 600,000 guns out of private hands. According to the editorial, Research by the Australian Institute of Criminology "has shown this to be money well invested. Rates of homicide and armed robbery have fallen, and Australia's example has been followed by other countries including Canada and Britain."

We feel safer here than in the United States and that seems to be justified by what has happened since Australia's clampdown on guns. In the 10 years before the enactment of gun-registration laws here, 11 instances of mass murder with firearms (including the Port Arthur shootings) took 112 lives. Since then? May our good fortune continue, there have been none. Australians look to the United States for leadership in all sorts of areas, but not, thank goodness, where gun control is concerned.



*Robert L. Hill*

And, while we're on the topic of behaviors we don't like, what about **littering**? There seems to be even a little less of it here, but there is still way too much.

There is a plague of "tagging," of spray-painted signs and drawings all over the place. Although I joke that my opposition to capital punishment does not extend to those who litter or deface public property, I do think the sale of paint in spray cans should be limited. In Queensland, it's supposed to be. By law, only those 18 or older can buy cans of spray paint in hardware stores, but a young clerk in a Mitre store told me, "I bought it when I was 16." Much will change when I become emperor of the world.

### **More Land of Oz language lessons**

Enough of power-trip fantasies. Back in October 2006, we were attending to more mundane concerns in our "Chronicles:"

Kristi: I have been slow to understand why local folks refer to Australia as "the land of Oz." I just thought it was because people love this place and consider it magical, like the Land of Oz in the famous children's story about Dorothy, her little dog, Toto, and their friends on the yellow brick road. Now I've wised up. I hadn't understood the true origins of Australia's nickname because I was pronouncing the "s" sounds normally when I said "Aussies." In this word (but not in others such as "buses"), people here replace the "s" sounds with "z" sounds. They pronounce "Aussie" as "Ahhzze" or "Ozzie." So, it's the land of Oz.

Bob: Who knew?

Kristi: Everybody but us.

Too bad. There are so many situations in which it would be appropriate to paraphrase Dorothy's remark to Toto about not being in Kansas anymore. Oh, well. This is all part of our continuing struggle to learn to speak a little more Aussie-like. So far, I've perfected the pronunciation of exactly one uniquely Aussie expression, one word I can say with confidence: "yea," meaning yes. Kristi was right when she wrote about the way that word is said here:

"Yea" does not sound the same as the American "yeah." The Aussie version seems to end in the back of the throat. It is a distinctive sound.

The Aussie accent has some things in common with Boston accents. People in both places are fond of omitting "r" sounds or at least making them very soft. Bob ordered coffee yesterday at the farmer's market, and when one of the vendors set out a cup and called

*Moving to Australia*

out “Baahb,” Bob thought his coffee was ready. It wasn’t. That cup was for somebody named Barb.

Sometimes, having saved so many “r” sounds from places where you would expect them, both Bostonians and Aussies use them in places where you would not expect to hear them. John F. Kennedy, who grew up around Boston, spoke of “Cuber.” Here, Mater Hospital is pronounced “Marta.” I am working on omitting r’s to see if I can sound more Aussie. My officemate is helping me, but I’m having difficulty learning to say “our” Aussie style. It is more difficult than you might think. Talking Aussie is not easy.

Many British pronunciations show up here. Controversy, for example, which I pronounce as "contro versy" with the emphasis on the first part, is pronounced “con trauv eh see” here, with the emphasis on the “trauv.” And Steinbeck’s great novel, The Grapes of Wrath? Here, “wrath” is pronounced just like the last name of another American writer, Philip Roth. The first time I heard somebody mention The Grapes of Roth, I had no idea what he was talking about.

“**Tucker**,” which means “food,” is a word that caught the fancy of Kit Denton, who became a radio personality in Perth many years ago after he immigrated from England. In a book about his adjustment to Aussie life he wrote that “tucker,” a “most marvelous word,” is the best of Australianisms and the easiest to understand. For him it called to mind “old fat Friar Tuck.” It surely lends itself to variations such as “tuck shop” or lunchroom and “tuck into,” meaning to eat heartily. My Aussie dictionary says the British coined the term “just making tucker,” or just getting by.

The American use of “tucker out,” meaning to become exhausted, is noted by the same authority, which offers a sample sentence introducing yet another useful Aussie word: “I’m tuckered out after all that hard yakka.” I’ve heard “yakka” spoken only once, on the radio, but I have read it in newspapers. It means “work” and may be derived from an Aboriginal word, “yaga.”

In our “Chronicles” for that first October, Kristi wrote:

The **Commonwealth Games** are now on in Melbourne. This event is as big as the Sydney Olympics for Australia, and it looks like Aussies will win quite a few medals, which is big news here. Even the Queen of England will be in that fair city.

That gives me a chance to note another language difference that strikes my ears as strange. If I say, “Sport matters a lot here,” I’ll be saying something that is both true and correctly phrased, Aussie style. Here, it’s sport, not

*Robert L. Hill*

sports. The “s” that is saved gets applied to “math,” so it’s also correct to say: Many maths students are interested in sport.

And **we Americans** do have our own odd ways of expressing ourselves. My friends who post comments on the "ozinamerica" bulletin board complain that Americans are hard to understand because “they put ‘d’ sounds in words that don’t have d’s.” I thought better of telling them they shudent say that.

#### **Something’s always blooming**

Learning about Aussie expressions and customs is not hard yakka. For us, it’s fun and deeply interesting. And there are lots of other things that make this a pleasant place to be. Kristi ended that October’s "Chronicles" by saying, "The trees here just keep blooming. **Every season** seems to bring out flowers on trees of one kind or another." Our frangipanis, not native to this country, were continuing to bloom into October even as they showed signs of starting to do a non-Aussie thing: shed their leaves and get naked for the winter. At the same time, a neighbor’s indigenous “blooming gum tree” had beautiful, red, bottle-brush-like flowers that attracted the chattering Rainbow Lorikeets that are so common here.

No matter how long we stay down under, no matter how blasé we get about the constant presence of blossoms, I think we’ll always love to see and hear these birds, in pairs or in flocks, clinging to flowers, adding color to color. They live up to their name.

## Chapter 12

### MOVING TOWARD DUAL CITIZENSHIP?

A big step for migrants: permanent residency

This may be a fine time to consider moving here. In a 12-month period ending in March 2007, Australia admitted a record number of migrants, about 152,000 of them. Seventy percent or so of these were skilled workers, and Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews cited the aging of the local folk and the booming economy as the reasons for letting in so many. Growing during that period faster than at any time since 1990, Australia's population increased a percent and a half to 20.9 million.

If you have a skill or a profession that is needed here, your path to a life down under, short term or long term, can be smoothed considerably. Signing a contract with an Australian company or institution is not the only way to migrate, but it is a good one and you may be able to swing it. The "General Skilled Migration programme," under which we came here, requires applicants to have a three-year employment contract, to have "good English language ability," and to be between 18 and 45 years of age. I could claim only one of those three qualifications (acceptable English), but since Kristi met all three we were both given work visas.

Google and other search engines will take you to government web sites with pages of information about the professions, talents, and skills that are currently most in demand here. They will also offer you ways to assess your skills in terms of Australia's needs and advise you on how to make those skills known to potential employers. You may be surprised to find that your education, training, or experience is being sought after down under. Know anything about mining? Hairdressing? Painting cars? Ophthalmology? Cooking pastry? Fabricating metal? **Australia may want you.**

If you can drive a bus, Brisbane may want you. Our bus service is being hampered seriously by a shortage of drivers. A formerly retired neighbor of ours is driving a bus now and a young female friend is in a salaried training program that will soon put her behind a steering wheel.

The unemployment rate is currently low, in part because of the mining boom in Western Australia (WA) that is being fueled by economic growth in China and India. WA authorities say 400,000 workers will be needed in the next 10 years and that 85 per cent of WA's new workers are migrants from

overseas. Mining is big in Queensland, too, but you don't have to be in mining to benefit from the strong economy.

In times past, teachers and others with special skills were given generous

**New Zealand** has just passed Britain as the country supplying the most migrants to Australia. For the 12 months prior to March 2007, 23,906 came from New Zealand and 23,223 came from Britain, according to "The Australian."

government incentives for coming here to work. One American we met immigrated in the 1970s to be a teacher because he was offered a cash bonus and, for his first few years here, exemption from income tax. Now he's happily retired south of Brisbane and

chairing a motorcycle club. I am not aware of similar government-backed inducements being offered these days, although we have read of bonuses being paid by private companies to get workers to move west for jobs in or related to the mining industry.

A 46-year-old British woman reported recently to an on-line discussion group ([www.pomsinoz.com](http://www.pomsinoz.com)) that her efforts to pre-arrange, from England, sponsorship for a temporary visa to work in Australia were unsuccessful. Being a year older than the stated upper limit for immigrants, she worried that she had little chance, but she decided to do "a reccie," a reconnaissance visit. It was an expensive risk to take, but it paid off. She was able to arrange four job interviews and she received four job offers, two in Perth and two in rural areas nearby. Although government immigration programs favor people willing to live in rural areas, she said she learned that the "rural" doesn't have to mean "a remote town well inland and with not much going on." It can mean, she said, "a lovely, large, well developed town on the coast and less than an hour from Perth."

Visiting bulletin board sites such as that one for British citizens and a Yahoo group, OzinAmerica, for Aussies in the US, is a great way to learn about the personal experiences of people seeking to move to, and/or living in, cultures other than their own. Seeing things from the eyes of Brits and Aussies is good practice for the adjustments of being here, far from the US. And to learn how some Americans are doing in Australia, visit the friendly folks at <http://yankdownunder.net>. Join. Interact.

And take what you read on any of these sites with a grain of salt. Sometimes the messages are not easy to interpret. One "Pom in Oz" correspondent, replying to a fellow Brit who wondered if moving to Australia would be worthwhile, warned that there are no streets paved with gold here.

*Moving to Australia*

Making ends meet can be difficult, she said, and there's crime just like everywhere else. Then she listed these Aussie problems: "taxes and lots of them," costs parents have to meet to send children to school, the need for private healthcare insurance, "unbelievably expensive" dental care, drug problems and drink driving, bike gangs, "the usual drunken thugs on a Saturday night," water restrictions, and brush fires. And then she said that, after a year and a half of being here, "I am very glad we came to Oz." Life, she said, is better when the sun is shining.

**Pay ranges**

You can find web pages offering "indications" of what you might earn in Australia for each type of work that is in demand. Some of the relative pay levels seem surprising. Podiatrists here are likely to earn less than general electricians, who should expect to make less than registered nurses, tillers (roof or floor), stonemasons, toolmakers, or physiotherapists.

Your best bet for what financial planners call "asset accumulation," according to one web list, is to be a computer pro with a specialty in security issues related to e-commerce or networks. You may also clean up if you have skills in computer fields identified by acronyms that, unfortunately, mean nothing at all to me. An Aussie IT (information technology) recruiting firm, Candle, reported a 23 per cent increase in hourly IT contract rates during a recent 12 month period. Over the same time, Candle said, demand for fulltime IT staff increased by almost 20 per cent. If you have the requisite computer skills, one web site says, your salary can range from \$35,000 to \$180,000 per year.

While UQ researchers in human movement studies are far from the upper end of that range, Kristi's position brought us here, it is sustaining us, and it is supporting my recently rediscovered writing habit. Perhaps **our story** of deciding that we wanted permanent residency, asking for the backing of an employer, and moving toward that goal will encourage you to take a similar path -- or a different one -- leading to a life down under.

**Median Brisbane Incomes**

business services	\$32,000
risk consulting	\$32,000
management consulting	\$36,000
bookkeeper	\$42,000
assistant. to partner	\$42,000
collections officer	\$44,000
office manager	\$48,000
accountant	\$50,000
marketing analyst	\$60,000
internal auditor	\$75,000
tax accountant	\$78,000
finance manager	\$100,000
commercial manager	\$130,000

-- "City News," 2007

Because Kristi was deemed capable of doing work for which no available Australian was qualified, she came here on a work visa and because I am her husband, I was allowed that status, too. These work visas gave us permission to live and work in Australia for the three years specified in Kristi's contract with the University of Queensland before we'd have had to return to the United States.

We discovered, though, that without permanent residency or citizenship, Kristi could not be the lead researcher on grant applications, we could not join the national health-care system, and we couldn't retain ownership of real estate beyond the time of our residency here. We'd have been required to sell our house under strict time constraints as we were leaving the country. For these reasons, Kristi approached her employer about help with our getting permanent residency.

Permanent residency did not seem to us to be a sure thing. We did not know if the university would agree to sponsor us or whether, if it did, we would pass all the medical exams and get over the other hurdles that stood between us and the attainment of that status. The university wouldn't consider our request for sponsorship until Kristi had got through her six-month probation period. Then uni officials and Kristi had to agree to the new three-year employment contract required for permanent residency. This had the effect of extending our minimum stay here, but by this point the prospect of tacking on extra months did not deter us at all.

#### **UQ signs on**

We got good news on May 8 in a letter from a human resources officer for the Faculty of Health Sciences: UQ authorities had agreed to sponsor us. The letter advised: "You will need to apply for a visa. A visa application for a permanent residence visa under Employer Nomination (Residence) (Class AN) Subclass 121 may now be lodged by the nominee at this office using Form 47ES. The letter below should be attached to your application. As part of the application process Form 26 and Form 160 must be completed and taken to the panel doctor for the medical examination." More details and instructions followed, including the fact that we had six months to complete the application process. Failing that, we'd have to start over from scratch.

Along with the good-news letter came another from someone with a decidedly non-Australian name, Orlando Vargas. Describing himself as "a delegate of the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs for the purposes of sub-regulation 5.19(1B) of the Migration Regulations," Mr. Vargas advised us of forms we would need, including two for us to take to a doctor from a list at <http://www.immi.gov.au/allforms/doctors>.

*Moving to Australia*

That web site was only one of many we visited as we sorted out just what would be required of us. One major task was to prove that we had been law-abiding citizens, both in the US and on this continent. Or, more precisely, we needed to prove that we'd avoided being caught and convicted of doing anything illegal.

**On June 1**, Kristi and I visited a state police station in the Brisbane CBD and waited until we could see a young Constable who carefully fingerprinted us, rolling our fingers in ink and then applying them to specified forms printed on paper of specified thickness. He also verified our places of birth from our passports. The per-person fee was only \$10, and the officer volunteered a second set of prints for each of us without additional charge, a kindness that turned out to be helpful later on.

**On June 5**, we wrote to the Record Request section of the FBI CJIS Division in Clarksburg, West Virginia, (our letter began hopefully with "Dear Friends") to request a criminal history records check ASAP. We enclosed:

- our completed Queensland Police Service Fingerprint Forms,
- certified copies of relevant pages from our passports,
- our Brisbane mailing address,
- and a credit card form authorizing a Visa Card charge of US\$36 (\$18x2).

In my letter, I pointed out that "we need your report in our hands within two months, by August 15, 2006, please. Please note that only the most expedited mail service (air mail or better) reaches Australia in less than a month."

I showed considerable restraint by using the word "please" only twice. We had tried to arrange to pre-pay for courier service from Clarksburg, but we couldn't locate a company willing to do that. We were fearful that the FBI's reports on our past might travel back here, as one or more pieces of our mail from the US has, by way of Austria.

For our **June 21 "Chronicles,"** I wrote:

I'm happy to be able to announce breaking news: We've cleared the medical-exam hurdle for Permanent Residency, or almost so. I need to get a letter from my doctor, which should be routine, and then we'll be home free on that part of the process. Now we have to wait for police reports, including one from the FBI in the US, and we have a time limit to worry about. If any of the required reports don't get back to us in time, we'll have to start all over, we're told, seeking a whole new set of reports, getting new examinations, and so on. Yes, wish us



*Robert L. Hill*

luck. Cross your fingers. Toss coins in a wishing well. Whatever you can do, do, please.

Note that I was still capitalizing permanent residency then. It continued to be, for us, a Holy Grail.

### **Worries**

Much to our delight, our FBI clearances appeared in our mailbox in less than a month. One more item checked off our list! Time was getting away, though, and we were worried. For an issue of our “Chronicles,” Kristi wrote:

I had to order a duplicate diploma from the University of Texas because the original is in a storage unit in Oklahoma City. The bureaucrats at UT do not seem attentive, so I’m a little concerned. We also have to supply copies of birth certificates, our marriage license, passports, and my undergraduate and graduate-school transcripts. We’ve had to complete a lengthy form. We’ve already gone to an office in downtown Brisbane for chest ex-rays to make sure we don’t have tuberculosis and then to the same office another time for a blood sample to make sure we don’t have HIV. We’ve now got three and a half more months to get all the materials we need to Immigration.

In the Immigration Office one day, I met a medical doctor from France who couldn’t meet the basic contract requirement because, although he has one-year agreements with three different hospitals, he did not have the required three-year contract from a single sponsoring entity. Australia needs doctors and he said he wants to move here, but he believed he won’t get in. His take on the situation was that he’d be better off if he were a hairdresser, another profession on the government’s list of workers in short supply.

We were learning that being sponsored had unexpected **fringe benefits**. Kristi wrote:

The office we’ve had to visit in the Immigration Department building is for business people, and its small waiting area has cushy chairs. On some visits we didn’t have to wait at all and when we did, the wait was not long. In the same building one floor below is a bigger office for everyone not sponsored by an employer, and it didn’t look nearly as pleasant. I didn’t see any cushy chairs, and every time we passed by there, we saw long lines of people waiting for the chance to see an immigration clerk.

Finally, we got all the paper work completed, gathered together, checked, re-checked, placed in appropriately addressed envelopes, and mailed away. Then, metaphorically at least, we sat and twiddled our thumbs, waiting and hoping that people in various places would move quickly. Life went on and

*Moving to Australia*

what Kristi reported in August in our “Chronicles” had nothing to do with our application:

More good news. We’ve had rain! All day yesterday and into last night, we had light rain that was occasionally more substantial. We hope it helped local reservoirs that are down to 30 per cent capacity, but at least our plants got a drink. We’re under buckets-only water restrictions now. The weather’s very pleasant here, though, with temperatures around 50 degrees F in the morning and about 70 or 75 F by noon.

Soon, 30 per cent reservoir levels would be a pleasant memory.

**We got it!**

**On September 5**, from someone named Dagmar Baker at the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), we received an email headed, “Permanent residency granted, congratulations!”

Actually, we were not quite through. We still had to present our passports to the DIMA office “endorsed with Residence Visa (Subclass 856 Employer Nomination),” but Kristi was soon sending out a happy new “Chronicles” message:

We took more than four months to collect all the **paperwork** we needed to include with the form, but we did it. We delivered a large collection of materials to the immigration office downtown a week

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Bring these</b></p> <p>If you may want to apply for permanent residency, be sure to bring these with you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• transcripts from schools,</li><li>• diplomas,</li><li>• proof of special training and job qualification,</li><li>• employment records,</li><li>• addresses of your places of residence for 10 years,</li><li>• proof of marriage, divorce, the adoption of children,</li><li>• all current licenses, including driver’s.</li></ul>
--

and half ago. On the following Monday the person handling our file emailed us to say that we needed to fill out just one more form called “character assessment.” This required us to spend that evening tracking down all of the addresses of the places where we’ve lived in the last 10 years. Before we put most of our records in storage in Oklahoma City that would have been an easier task, but, here, we had to find our old addresses in odd places like a Unitarian Universalist

hymn book Bob has carried with us ever since he left the UUA in 1994.

It took us a while to recall that each time we moved in the US, we'd bought rubber stamps of our new addresses and I'd stamped them onto the front page of that hymnal, which I had shipped here.

Kristi: That didn't solve the whole problem, though. We still had to figure out the dates of our several moves, when we moved into and out of each place. You can imagine how hard this was:

-- Hmm, when did we move from the apartment in Houston to the condo we rented before we bought the other condo in the same building while I was in graduate school?

-- Well, it was cold, I'm sure, because the heater was on high in the condo on moving day, but it wasn't Christmas time and I don't think it was after Christmas, either.

-- Must have been November... What year was that?

Don't tell anybody, but we guesstimated a few of the long ago dates. Soon, though, our permanent residency status was final and Kristi wrote:

As of Tuesday, we are permanent residences of Australia! We are now allowed to work here as long as we want and at any jobs we may be offered (not just the one that got us here on a work permit visa). We can buy/sell property without restrictions other than little things like having sufficient funds. If we were going to raise a family here, our children would now be Australian citizens at birth. If are offered government jobs, we can take them. We can travel to New Zealand without a visa from that country. Best of all, we are now free to stay here **the rest of our lives** if we choose to do so.

After Bob delivered the final form to the immigration office in downtown Brisbane on Tuesday, he walked to the Central Train Station and caught a train for the 15-minute ride to the Fairfield stop. Before he got there, while he was still on the train, I called his cell phone with great news: I'd received an email saying that our application had been approved. I couldn't believe it happened so fast. I was hoping for a response in about two weeks, the time it took an American colleague here to get approval. Getting it less than an hour after delivering the final documents? Big surprise!

If we want to vote, however, we have to become citizens, just as immigrants to the US do. Australian authorities seem to want permanent residents to apply for citizenship as soon as possible, which is after at least two years of permanent residency. Right across the hall from the immigration

### *Moving to Australia*

office is the citizenship office. We picked up printed information about what is required, thinking that having dual citizenship may not be a bad thing in today's world. Some people carry several passports, with dual US/Aussie and English/Aussie, and Elsewhere/Aussie citizenships. Just be sure to remember, we've been warned, to have the appropriate passport in hand when you approach customs.

#### **Health coverage**

We'd spent a little more than \$1,000 each getting permanent residency, but we were happy. The benefit of most interest to us from the first was the chance to become covered by the national health plan, which turns out to be in two parts. Telling about our experience of getting permanent residency, Kristi continued in our "Chronicles" by saying:

As soon as we could, we went straight to the Medicare office, but this is not Medicare in the US sense of that term. Here, Medicare is the national health care system and it is available to any permanent resident or citizen. It pays a large portion of doctor-visit costs and for stays in public hospitals. It is funded by a 1.5 per cent levy on everyone's income, a bargain, we think.

After a short wait in line at the Medicare office, we signed up and then headed across the hall in the shopping center to MediBank Private, a supplementary health insurance company. The government will rebate 35 per cent of the cost of our private health insurance, and we wanted to get private insurance for several reasons, including the fact that it will fill in some gaps of coverage in Medicare. It will also let us choose private hospitals, select our own doctors, and seek top specialists.

There are many such plans but **MediBank** seemed to us to be the most extensive one and it gets good reviews from doctors. We are looking at getting the second-most costly plan MediBank offers because it covers "extras" like dental and eye care, prescriptions, chiropractic care, acupuncture, naturopathy, and physiotherapy. We will have to pay \$200 for every admittance to a private hospital but that doesn't sound bad.

For private insurance and Medicare here, including the tax levy, we are paying **about a third less** than we were paying, while Kristi was on the staff of Oklahoma University, for group health insurance in the US. As permanent residents we pay \$276 per month for MediBank supplemental coverage, which is exactly what we were paying IMAN Group for health coverage as temporary residents. Now, though, we have more coverage.

*Robert L. Hill*

The one thing that is different for us is that we cannot just go straight to a specialist. For any condition, you have to get a referral from a general practitioner (true, of course, in many US health plans now also, HMOs in particular). Neither Medicare nor private insurance pays for ambulance service in Queensland, but our taxes do. So there's no reason, in Queensland, not to call an ambulance if there is an emergency and as the local folks say "we'll be right."

As we've noted, Australia's health care system is two-tiered, with those who can afford supplementary coverage getting better service. There seems to be a doctor shortage, especially in the rural areas, and there's lots of political debate about how to solve that problem. Australia's health care system is not perfect, but it is generally considered to be one of the best in the world. Here, once you're a permanent resident and you sign up, you're covered. We like that a lot. I added to the "Chronicles" report:

Our income tax bill is going to be a little higher in Australia, we believe, but the wonderful, well-maintained parks that are everywhere would just about make that acceptable. The health care system will keep me from complaining, I'm pretty sure. I am very relieved that we finally "made the cut."

#### **An early permanent residency benefit**

Between the time I got my first flu shot here and the time for a second one, we began to be covered under the Aussie health care system, thanks to our new status. In our first year's "Chronicles," Kristi wrote:

Bob and I got our first Aussie **flu shots** this past week. March and April are the time to get them here. The shot seem to be bigger and to hurt more than the ones we got in the US and my arm was sore for two days. I was lucky to get mine for free at work, but, since we're not on the national health plan, Bob had to go to his doctor and pay up front for his. His flu shot was \$20 and he got a pneumonia shot at the same time for \$40. The doctor visit cost another \$35, so the total came to \$95 or about US\$70.

A year later, covered by the national health care plan and Medibank private health insurance, I paid \$15 (US\$12) for the office call and my flu shot cost us nothing. Big difference.

#### **Read carefully, double check**

We hope our story and what we've learned from our experiences will be useful to you as you consider Australia as a place to live. For the latest information about jobs or immigration regulations, though, your favorite search engine is your best bet. Google or others will lead you to more than

### *Moving to Australia*

enough on-line reading material. Deciphering it and filtering out which rules apply and which do not apply to you can be difficult.

Even information routinely provided by the Department of Immigration requires careful reading. In the material we received from the department, for example, was this sentence, “All migrants/permanent residents will have immediate access to Medicare health services.” Elsewhere the department defines “migrants” as *people seeking to live permanently in Australia*. So, if you come here to settle permanently, will you have immediate access to Medicare? Will you be covered by the health care system from the time of your arrival?

The sentence above seems to say that such generosity is, in fact the case, especially if “migrant/permanent residents” means “migrants or permanent residents.” No worries, right? A UQ contact we trusted advised us that we would be eligible for Medicare as soon as we were given work visas and Kristi signed her contract. Great, we thought; no drama.

In fact, however, “migrants/permanent residents” in the sentence above is evidently used to designate a legal status that is approximately as difficult to attain as permanent residency. All those who come here to stay may be migrants, but the coverage promised is available only to people who have passed lots of tests, filled out many forms, and paid the required permanent residency fees. Kristi believes this means that you’re eligible for Medicare when your permanent residency application and all its forms have been correctly submitted. If so, that would have made only three weeks’ difference to us. Our experience tells us you should not expect to have “immediate access to Medicare health services.”

You may want to hire an immigration agent to help you through such confusions. We decided not to pay an agent’s fees because we were already settled here before we started the permanent residency process and we believed we could find our way through the bureaucratic thicket on our own. We did.

#### **One URL you may need**

This web site is a great place to start if you’re looking for information about moving to Australia: <http://www.immi.gov.au>. Here you’ll find lots of helpful information, including a list of approved doctors and radiologists in many countries whose reports will be accepted after you’ve gone to them for the required examinations and x-rays. You’ll be able to find the addresses and phone numbers of Australian embassies and consulates in various countries around the world and for immigration offices in all the regions of Australia. This, for example, is an address you’ll need if you’re moving to Brisbane:

*Robert L. Hill*

Australian Government, Dept. of Immigration and Multicultural  
Affairs

313 Adelaide Street Brisbane QLD 4000

or

GPO Box 9984 Brisbane QLD 4001

The telephone number is (07) 131 881.

For information on citizenship: (07) 131 880.

For sending a fax: (07) 3360 5819.

Be warned, though, that this office seems to be chronically understaffed. We have never been willing to wait long enough to finally get through to an operator at either of the phone numbers given above. Maybe you'll have better luck.

You'll find other sites to check in the "Resources" section at the back of this book.

#### **Citizenship test questions challenged**

Some critics of a new citizenship test that has just gone into effect say those who seek to become Australian citizens are now being called upon to answer "pretty obscure" questions. There'll be 20 on the test, drawn from a larger collection drawn up by the Immigration Department.

Democrats leader and Senator Lyn Allison says the test may require one to know in what sport Sir Donald Bradman was great (cricket) and the name of Australia's floral emblem (golden wattle). She also complains that the test requires potential citizens wishing to give the "right" answer to assert that everyone in Australia has equality of opportunity when, in fact, refugees are locked up and indigenous people have a life expectancy 17 years shorter than that of other Australians. In a YouTube video, she describes the test as "stupid."

News reports indicate, however, that more than eight out of ten people who "sat the test" in its first use passed by answering at least 12 questions correctly or, if you prefer, in the manner deemed correct by the Immigration Department.

#### **P.S. about plants and animals**

If you're a plant or a four-legged animal, you probably won't be allowed into Australia. A government web site says, "We do not allow most animal and plant material," and at the international terminal of any airport here you can count on having dogs sniff your luggage for a variety of banned substances, including vegetable matter of any kind, such as the carrot sticks you packed for your flight but forgot to eat.

### *Moving to Australia*

If you have anything in your luggage that you're not sure about, declare it. Life will be easier.

Because rabbits, foxes, cane toads, and other non-native wild creatures have caused great damage to this country, governments impose strict rules intended to prevent any new imported horrors. Diseases are a major worry, too, so if you want to bring a pet here, expect to consign Fluffy or Spot to quarantine for 30 days and to pay for her or his time in lock-up.

An "ozinamerica" correspondent named Dave reported early this year that it took eight months of effort and cost him US\$2,000 to get a cat onto a plane for a trip from the US to New Zealand. He anticipated additional costs of about US\$1,200 once the cat arrived. Kiwi and Aussie regulations are so similar, though, that emigrating to Australia won't require another quarantine period if the cat decides to keep on moving.

We had no pets, but we did have **two hiking poles** one of us admires so much that he insisted on shipping them along with our other goods on the slow boat to Australia. They are made of the stalks of a plant that grows in the deserts of the American Southwest, sotol.

Customs officials here delayed their delivery, fumigated them, and charged us for the service. If one of us, the one who didn't want to ship the poles in the first place, had seen the bill we received for that fumigation, she probably would have been upset. Perhaps it's best if we don't mention those hiking poles at all, even though they are lightweight and strong, even though it is likely that there are no others like them on this continent.

Anyway, we can be sure now that they are bug free. Or at least they were when Customs released them. Any bugs residing in them today must be Aussie.



This guidebook, wrapped in the story of two Americans who flew away to Queensland in 2005, moves from the price of bananas and housing to the costs of being far from family. It celebrates Australia's civility and natural beauty.

MOVING TO AUSTRALIA: Two Texans Down Under

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