

AUSTRALIA: “no wuckin’ furries?”

the first time is always the best...then Reality sets in

By Jim Stiles

EDITOR’S NOTE: Back in 1996, when the world was still young (I didn’t know it then but I do now...and isn’t that ALWAYS the case), I was invited to spend a couple months on a cross-country trip across Australia. It was an offer I couldn’t refuse. For seven weeks, I thought I’d found Paradise. It was the beginning of something for me that persists to this day.

More than a decade later, I see Australia more clearly and, sad to say, more cynically. To my everlasting sorrow, I realized (gasp!) that they are, after all—human. They even act like Americans from time to time. Since that first journey, Australia has seemed increasingly hell-bent on becoming America’s little sister in crime—the lesser half on an Unholy Duo. Still, I love the place so much, I will go back to it, again and again until I’m no longer able. But I still think back to that first journey...how sweet it was...JS

I could barely make out the shaggy visage of my Welsh friend Reggie Gubbins as I staggered bleary-eyed and jet-lagged from the Australian Customs & Immigration Area. He shook my hand and said, “Remember, Stiles, first of all...you are in a foreign country. They may speak English but that’s as far as it goes.”

I nodded vaguely, then promptly asked the first Aussie I saw where the “rest room” was.

“A ‘rest room,’ mate? Do you need a rest?” he asked scornfully.

I smiled meekly.

“Bloody hell,” the man spat. “The bloody toilets are right there, opposite the newsa-



gency...Bloody idiot Yanks,” he muttered and walked away.

(I recalled my days as a ranger abusing tourists at Arches National Park who asked similarly stupid questions...God has a funny way of punishing its sinners.)

“What’s a ‘newsagency?’” I asked, but before the True Blue Aussie could beat me senseless, Reg intervened. “Let’s get out of here...We’ll find you a toilet, but you’ll just have to hold it a while. You may not get out of here alive if we linger much longer.”

After my long ordeal I felt I deserved more sympathy than I was receiving but agreed we should ‘git while the gittin’ was still good.’ Still...any trip to Australia from practically anywhere else in the world is an ordeal—it’s why I had such hopes for the place. I figured American Influence must surely be at a minimum here, simply because of the distances involved. Even an American Entrepreneur or Politician of the ugliest stripe must be too exhausted after the trip to inflict much lasting damage to the Land Down Under and its society. And my one encounter with an Australian, while mildly unpleasant, in fact, gave me hope. If he held such intolerance for my benign stupidity, what would become of an American with true greed and malice in his heart? The bastard wouldn’t stand a chance.

This was my Dream.

Before I was released to Reggie and the general population, I had to run the Aussie Customs gauntlet. My bags were searched and the agent carefully held each pair of my fashionable Anne Urbanek tie-dyed boxers to the light, searching I suppose for contraband in the waistband. Years later, after 9/11, sophisticated new machines did the work, but it wasn’t explosives they were searching for.

“No mate...we’re searching for ‘organics,’” the agent said.

“Organics?”

“Yeah...you can bring a gun, a knife, or a very large bomb...but God help yuh if you try to smuggle in a tomato.”

And I wondered just how they thought I could hide a tomato in my underwear.

Gubbins and I wended our way out of Sydney, via surface streets, to the coast road and Wollongong. We stopped at the Cliffside Café for coffee.

“They call them ‘flat whites’ here,” Reg explained. “And bloody expensive too.” Frugal to a penny, Reggie watched while I indulged. I learned that there is no such thing as brewed coffee in Oz; they all come from the labor-intensive espresso machine.

Nor is there such a thing as the bottomless cup. If there is one aspect of American Life that I yearn for when I am away from it is the comforting sound of a waitress with a southern drawl and a pencil stuck behind her ear, saying gently, “Hon? Can I fill that up for you?”

By the second week in Australia, I had found and embraced my routine. Every morning we awakened at dawn, made our own cowboy coffee off the tailgate of Reggie’s truck, struck the tents and took off. The beauty of it was we never had any destination. It didn’t

matter. We were in no hurry. We had ‘no worries.’

I learned that “no worries” is practically an Aussie Motto--wherever we went, the advice and admonition was always the same: “No worries, mate,” and they did their best to live up by that high standard.

Other words and phrases, however, confused and bewildered me. It’s as if those Australians have a different word for *everything*. “Cookies” are “biscuits” and “trucks” are “utes” and a “dust devil” is a “willy willy.” I once heard an ABC Radio news reader solemnly announce that “a willy willy has struck the North Perth area with devastating consequences.”

Once, a grizzled old trucker with yellow teeth told us he was taking his last road train across the Oodnadata Track and asked us to wish him luck. I said, “We’ll be rooting for you.” The bloke stopped suddenly, spun around on his work boots and said, “Hey mate, you root for yourself, ok? I don’t need any bloody Yank to do my rooting for me!” As he stomped off and climbed into his rig, I turned to Reggie and shrugged, “What was that all about?”

“Having a ‘root’ means having sex.”

We moved slowly down the coast toward Melbourne. Very slowly. To maximize fuel efficiency, we never traveled faster than 80 km/hr, or 48 mph. Other drivers were not pleased, but Reggie didn’t care.

“NO WORRIES!” Reggie would exclaim regularly. “No Davey Murrays! No wuckin’ furries!”

Every three hours we stopped for tea. Reggie would not patronize the occasional road-houses we passed, not after he discovered the cost to be more than a dollar per cup (and no refills). Gubbins calculated he could brew the tea himself for less than 13 cents a serving. I’m sure he was right. To the penny.

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“Besides,” he explained, “the Australians really don’t know how to brew tea. They never prepare it quite the way I like it.” The truth is, I came to look forward to tea time, almost as much as Reggie, although I couldn’t consume the massive quantities that Reggie gulped down.

Or “quaffed,” as Reggie liked to say. “Ahhh...this is the perfect quaffing temperature,” he’d moan contentedly as he finished his fourth cup of the morning. He actually moaned.

No worries.

But what about all these wuckin’ flies?

I’d heard the stories, seen the bush hats with the dangling corks that Aussies supposedly wear to keep the flies at bay, laughed at the rumors that the bush fly was the national bird, and that those same flies had gained access via his ear canal to the brain of Prime Minister Howard and eaten all his compassionate parts, but then I experienced it for myself.

Conrad was right. *The horror. The Horror.*

On a four day backpack trip into the Budawang Mountains, the flies found us and never said goodbye. Over the next few weeks, as they physically and mentally wore me down, I began to wonder if the continent was really inhabited by trillions of these evil insects, or if it was the same five to seven thousand that had “discovered” me back in New South Wales and stayed with me for the entire journey.

But I hated them and they hated me. Once, walking into a strong headwind along the Southern Ocean coast near Melbourne, I thought I’d lost them. Then I looked behind me and saw that they were actually *tacking* in the wind to stay with me. No horror film I’ve ever seen measured up to the Reality of the Flies.

It is almost impossible to avoid inadvertently swallowing at least one fly during an extended Aussie stay. During the course of normal conversation, the odds are that, sooner or later, your open mouth will match the trajectory of a fly and the two will intersect, to the detriment of both human and bug. And Aussies spend much of their time blowing the flies away from their mouths, with assorted puffs and snorts that Gubbins has labeled either, “labial fricatures” or “dental expulsives.” My notes from the trip fail to recognize the subtle differences.

Of course, the Australians, the white Aussies, that is, have no one to blame but themselves. When the Brits first laid claim to the continent, flies hardly had a foothold, simply because most of the native fauna possessed very efficient digestive systems in this hot and hostile climate and their pellet-like feces were poor hosts for egg-laying flies.

But when the “bloody Poms” arrived (to borrow a popular derisive description of their ancestors), they brought their Holstein cows along too, and with them, subsequently, billions of wet, soft, mushy meadow wafer breeding areas. The flies were ecstatic and have been for 200 years. Assisted by a temperate climate where it rarely freezes, flies may some day control the Parliament. Some think that might be an improvement.

Still, the flies had the decency to go away at night, although I never figured out just where they went, and to be fair, not all of Australia was as fly-bad as most of it.

One glorious evening, we camped nearly fly-free just down the coast from a small communit called Bateman’s Bay. Later we encountered four locals coming up the beach. They all had fishing poles and cans of a beer called Toohy’s Old, kept cold in their little neoprene stubby holders. Reggie was nursing a beer himself. I introduced myself to Ted, Bobbie, Dougie and Larry. Ted said, “Hey Little Man, do you want a beer?”

Well...yes I wanted a beer, I thought, but that's a bit rude, I thought. I mean, 5 feet 8 inches is a respectable height. How dare he! And we've barely met.

Then Ted turned to Larry and said, "Hey Little Man, are you ready for another beer too?"

"Sure Little Man," said Larry to Ted, "But give me a Fosters this time."

Dougie walked up. "Did Little Man drink the last Fosters, Little Man?"

Ted started to answer. Although it was hard to tell, I think Dougie was talking to him. But Larry jumped up and said, "Yeah, Little Man, what are you going to do about it?"

Dougie laughed and said, "You're lucky I'm in a good mood Little Man."

It became apparent that we had fallen in with a group known among themselves at least as the Little Men, although they varied in height by more than a foot. All of them were cordial and interested in our trip. One of them, Bobbie, had been to the States recently, to Boise, Idaho, in fact. And it was plain to see that Ted, Dougie, and Bobbie were there to fish and drink and have a good time.

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I came to appreciate the casual way many Aussies embrace their pastimes. They don't mind being amateurs.

mind being amateurs. An activity like fishing is a social experience more than anything else. They haven't been seduced by the very American "You must have the outfit" Syndrome." They don't care if they look silly or don't have top notch gear. They're not there to impress anybody; they just want to enjoy themselves and perhaps drink massive quantities of beer.

Product marketing, the packaging of fun itself, is slowly making its way into Aussie Life, but it doesn't own the Little Men yet. They still have a little time left to be human.

All of them but Larry. He'd been examining us closely, I'd noticed, and I don't think he liked the cut of our gib. Larry bore the scars of an unhappy man. Finally he said, "So what do you think of the Aboriginal situation over here? Do you think they're a bunch of dole bludgers? Or are you a couple of bleedin' hearts?"

Gubbins and I looked at each other. Did we really want to get into this? And isn't there something annoying about a couple of tourists passing judgement on 200 years of history that neither knew much about? But then again, aren't there some moral issues that require a response?



We drove a corrugated two track at a maximum 10 mph for almost 1000 miles, in 100 degree heat. I lost 20 pounds, just sitting and bouncing in the front seat of the ute.

When James Cook sailed into Botany Bay under the Queen's flag in 1770, as many as half a million Aboriginals occupied the Australian continent. More than 300 scattered tribes lived in relative harmony with each other, despite significant language and cultural differences, for more than 40,000 years. They were a spiritual people, tied to the land by their own belief that they came from the land. Having been descended from a plant or an animal, they believed they would return to that state some day. Indeed, the land they nurtured and loved might well be their parents.

Cook saw something in the lifestyle of the Aboriginal people that contradicted popular

opinion. Reporting to the Queen, several months later, Cook wrote:

They may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon the earth: but in reality they are far more happy than we Europeans: being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing of them. They live in Tranquility which is not disturbed by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and the sea of their own accord furnishes them all the things necessary for life; they covet not Magnificent Houses, Household stuff, they live in a warm & fine climate and enjoy a very wholesome Air...

"In short seems to set not value upon anything we gave them nor would they ever part with any thing of their own for any article we could offer them. This in my opinion argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessaries of Life and that they have no superfluities.

Cook's report was widely derided by the British press. The subsequent colonization of Australia and its transformation as a continental penal colony paid little notice to the fact they were occupying someone else's land. Just as Americans believed it was their God-given "manifest destiny" to subdue and control the North American continent, the British similarly viewed the Aboriginal "problem." That is to say—the Aboriginals were there and they needed to move. It was, in fact, God's will. The idea that God might prefer the dark-skinned "savages" occurred to very few.

By the mid-19th century, the Aboriginal population had been decimated by disease, famine and outright murder.

A century later, the population has come back, but the number of indigenous people dependent on government welfare has skyrocketed, unemployment is rampant, crime and family violence statistics are shocking. Aboriginal Australians simply don't know whether to assimilate or stay traditional. Clearly, trying to be a bit of both is not working.

But it's a story that has been repeated again and again around the world, as Northern Europeans invaded every corner of it, bringing with them, the seductive products of a "modern society." Then it was sugar and liquor. Today? Ipods and plasma tv and Paris Hilton.

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For Aussies like Larry, there is no ambiguity.

"So I'll ask you again, mate," Larry snarled. "Are you a bleedin' heart?"

I had developed this analogy in my head while Larry ranted. Imagine, I wanted to explain to him, that Aboriginals were kangaroos and white people are horses. For 50,000 years the Aboriginals flourished as kangaroos; now they were being forced to become horses and it isn't that easy to change who you are and who you've been for millennia. It's as if we were asking them to change their own skin.

But the 'horse vs 'roo' simile went nowhere with Larry. Frustrated with that debate, Larry asked us if we were 'poofters.' We were stumped for a moment but Ted explained. "Now he's asking if you're gay."

Reggie laughed. "No Larry...but we're willing to learn!"

We moved on.

We drove down the coast road, almost to Melbourne, then cut inland and into the heat of the Australian interior. The traffic thinned to almost nothing. The landscape turned golden. ("Sunburnt country, wisely named," sings the Aussie folksinger/poet, John Williamson.)

The pace of life seemed somehow slower and freer. While the radio kept us informed of world news, we weren't immersed in it. And the news was real news—not the mindless drivel of American pop culture. We went weeks without any word at all on the recent shenanigans of Britney Spears. We, in fact, forgot she existed

At a newsagency in a little Victorian town called Morgan, I stopped to buy a high liner pen to mark our route west in my road atlas. When I approached the clerk to pay, she held the pen in her hand and asked, "Did you get this from the shelf or the table display?"

"I got it from the shelf," I explained.

"Well," she said, "If you buy one from the table they're half price."

Huh? I asked her if there was a difference in the quality of the pen.

"No," she said. "It's the same pen, but the ones that are on the table? We got them for a cheaper price."

Wow. I thought. "And...you're passing the savings onto us?"

She looked puzzled. "Well, we could hardly charge you more for pens we bought at a much lower price. When the table pens are gone, of course, then all the pens will be higher in price."

Of course, I realized. As they say even in Australia—It just wouldn't be cricket.

As we walked out the door, Reggie noted, "These people have a lot to learn about capitalism."

The next day, we left the paved roads—the bitumen to Aussies—and rarely returned to it for the next three weeks. We drove a corrugated two track at a maximum 10 mph for almost 1000 miles, in 100 degree heat. Reggie and I almost killed each other on several occasions. I lost 20 pounds, just sitting and bouncing in the front seat of the ute. My body started to shut down from dehydration and I could not process food—a can of diced pineapples came out looking almost exactly the way they went in.

But I also stood in the middle of the Great Sandy Desert, as far removed from humans as I have ever felt and did not feel the least bit lonely. Each night I stared at a star field so full of lights that even Orion, turned upside down in the Southern Hemisphere was lost in it. I felt the exhilaration of a place still empty enough to discover solitude without having to book a tour for it.

When we finally reached Geraldton, on the Indian Ocean, I was not the same man who stumbled out of airport customs in Sydney, just six weeks earlier. Reggie went north, I caught a bus to Perth, and a few days later, took the Indian Pacific railroad across the Nullarbor, back to Sydney and the long flight 'home.'

But for the first time in decades, I wasn't sure where 'home' was anymore. More than a decade later, I'm still confused.

NEXT TIME: Reality DOES set in...it always does.