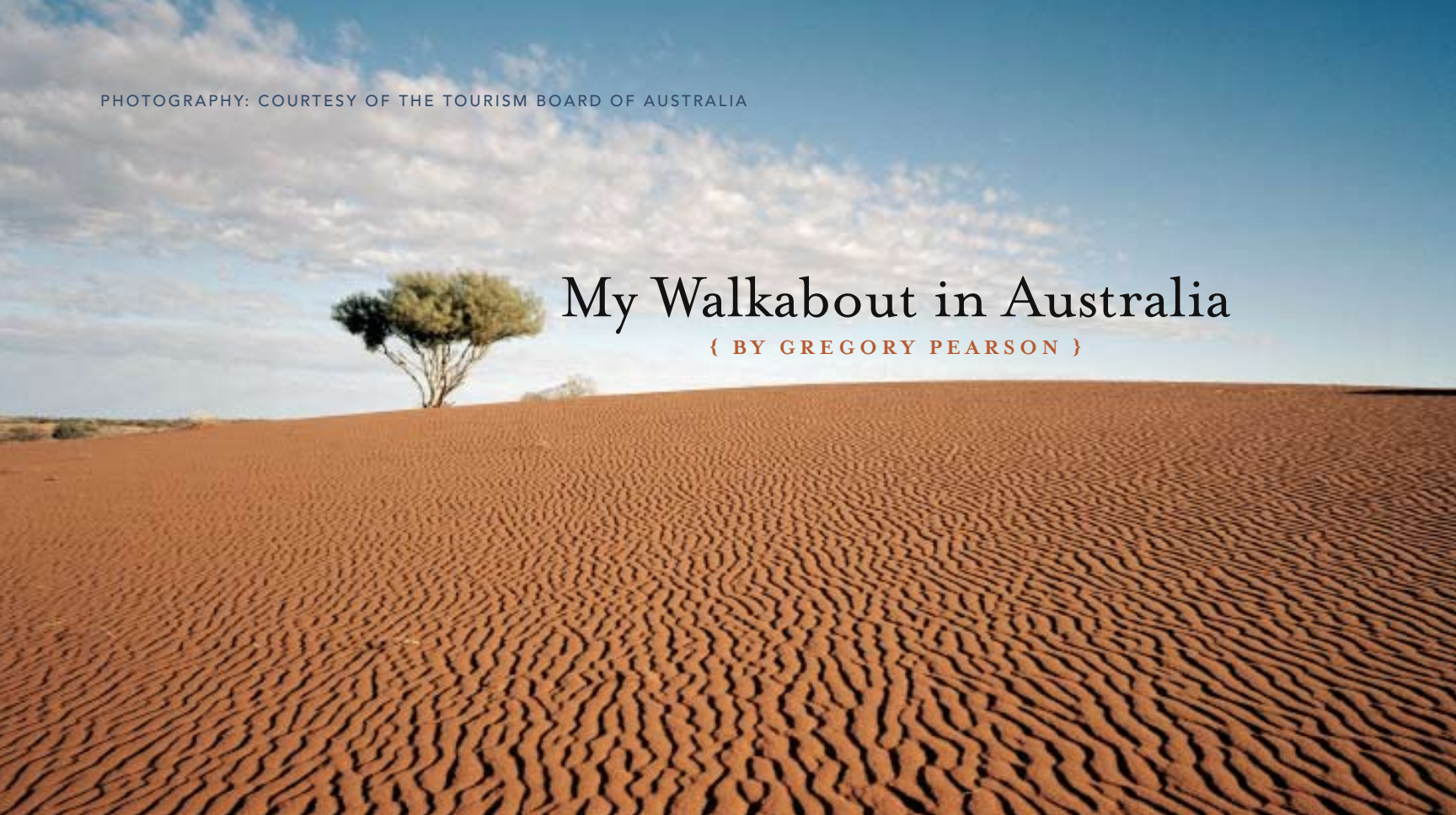


My Walkabout in Australia

{ BY GREGORY PEARSON }



Alice Springs in the Outback



Kimberley Region



Kangaroo Island

My wanderlust got the better of me a few years ago when I accepted an impromptu invitation from one of our suppliers to visit Australia. It was my opportunity to see firsthand what others were talking about when sharing their tales of wonder from the Land Down Under. I will take you through my walkabout and share the moments that took my breath away.

IT SAYS A LOT ABOUT A COUNTRY that resides on one of the driest, flattest, hottest, and climatically aggressive of all inhabited continents and can still lay claim to being one of the world's favorite travel destinations. Australia is uniquely wrapped around the culture of the original settlers and its indigenous Aboriginal people. I didn't know what to expect on my sojourn other than what I had read and seen in the movies and television. I was curious, though, and wanted to learn everything, starting with how Australia's name came to be.

The origin of Australia conjures up images of some far off place. The name comes from the Latin word "australis," meaning "southern land." Explorers from the second century would refer to this place as "terra australis incognita," or "the unknown southern land." Unknown as it may have been in early history, it is no longer that enigma wrapped inside a mystery as the early explorers had thought.

Australia is the world's sixth largest country in landmass with a population of about 21 million. In comparison to America, it is larger in size than the continental USA but with a population less than 10 percent of ours. Not only is it the world's largest island, it is the only island that is a continent, and the only continent that is also a country. If you find that confusing, then unravel this interesting bit of trivia and you will realize there is nowhere in the world quite like Australia.

My colleagues had told me that Australia was the talk of the Pacific Rim in terms of trade, tourism, food, wine, and culture. What I found was that the Australian spirit had replaced the original influence of Mother England,

which is like saying the laid-back lifestyle of California had been placed on top of the British Isles.

First Impressions

First of all, the flight is about the same as flying to Europe – you fly all night and land in the morning, except you depart from California for your 15-hour flight. My excitement got the better of me and I could not sleep on the flight. Thank goodness for an endless supply of movies and a lot of very good Shiraz.

My first stop was Melbourne, which is the second largest city behind Sydney in Australia. Since I am from the Chicago area, it is interesting to note that Melbourne is the third largest Greek populated city in the world behind Athens and Chicago. What Melbourne lacks in natural beauty, in comparison to Sydney, it makes up with its culture and events that include galleries and museums, food and wine festivals, and sporting events such as the Australian Grand Prix and the Australian Open.

The food and wine in Melbourne was as good as advertised and the dairy products on our visit to the Yarra Valley reminded me of being in the European countryside. In fact, Melbourne has a distinct European charm because of its many ethnicities from around the world.

We <who is we? Who went with you?>traveled on the Great Ocean Road, which runs the distance from Melbourne to Adelaide. Along this route is one of the most iconic pictures of Australia — the Twelve Apostles — which are limestone columns that have been carved out of the land by the sea and weather over millions of years and are standing "guard" on



Uluru



Hunter Valley

Australia's southern flank. The only place south of here is Antarctica, which is 1,500 miles away.

We stopped in a quaint fishing village called Port Fairy for an overnight stay. It was originally called Belfast and its Irish heritage did not disappoint. Our dinner was at a local pub over a pint of Kilkeny and venison pie. You really get to know the people over the food. We stayed overnight at Oscars, which is a bed and breakfast establishment right on the water, and their breakfast was out of sight. Try their Oscar benedict and you will not be disappointed.

The next stop was Adelaide, which is the fourth largest city behind Brisbane, and it has a landscape made up of beautiful gardens and churches. The north end of the city looks a lot like Lake Forest with its large homes and coach houses. Of all the cities I visited in Australia, Adelaide was the one city that could fit anywhere in England today and not be out of place. Adelaide is also the gateway to the Barossa Valley, which produces some of the best wines in all of Australia.

Kangaroo Crossings

Adelaide was our jumping-off point for a trip to Kangaroo Island. The island, which is the size of New York's Long Island, is about a 20-minute turboprop flight from Adelaide. Our local tour guide on Kangaroo Island was also the baggage handler at the airport. A visit to Kangaroo Island is a must because it is one of the most popular ecological destinations in Australia with kangaroos and wallabies in the wild, koala bears, fur seals, sea lions, and fairy penguins. It is truly a menagerie of animals, and it is a nature lover's paradise because you are seeing animals in the wild that you only see enclosed at the zoo. For example, we were standing within 10 feet of a 6-foot gray kangaroo that was eating eucalyptus leaves.

Our next adventure was also one of my favorite attractions because I love train journeys. From Adelaide we boarded The Ghan, on one of Australia's great overnight train journeys across the continent from Adelaide in the south to Darwin in the north with a stop in Alice Springs, which is right in the middle. An interesting piece of trivia is that The Ghan's logo and name are based on the camel. Early settlers found that only certain animals could survive the harsh climate with little water in the desert, and the camel was the best suited. Most of the camels that were brought to Australia came from Afghanistan, and from this historical perspective came the name "The Ghan." Even today you will see packs of camels running wild in the open dessert just as we saw when we arrived in the morning at Alice Springs. The Australian government estimates the camel population to be more than 400,000.

Ancestral History Lessons

After Alice we went to Uluru, which is the Aboriginal word for Ayers Rock. Uluru is the center of the entire continent and the spiritual home to many of the Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal culture is the bedrock for every other culture in Australia, but its culture has also been subject to racial persecution.

The Aboriginal history is communicated through songs (ancestral history lessons) that are passed down from generation to generation, and their culture is learned through a walkabout with the tribal elders. The recent movie Australia accurately showed this part of the Aboriginal culture.

The first amazing personal experience at Uluru occurred at sunset at a "Sounds of Silence" dinner in the open desert as we viewed the sun setting on Uluru. The colors went from orange, to green, to blue, and then to black. At the conclusion of dinner, all the candles and lights were extinguished, which left only the light of the moon and stars. Remember, you are now in the Southern Hemisphere and are seeing constellations, the Milky Way, and planets not visible in Chicago, especially with the light pollution from the city. Here you are in the middle of the desert. Through a telescope, we saw Jupiter, the rings of Saturn, and Venus just to name a few. The stars were alive with their heavenly glory and put on a show of fantastic proportions. I never knew astronomy could be this much fun.

The second amazing experience occurred on a sunrise tour of Uluru that was led by a recent Australian college graduate who had returned from living six months with an Aboriginal family in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Besides the incredible color changes on Uluru as the sun was rising, the guide proceeded to share the spirituality of what made Uluru special and why it should be revered. We were led in and out of the base of Uluru



The Great Barrier Reef

over three hours, and at each turn there was another story of the songs on Aboriginal history.

It was magical because we could not get enough of what made Uluru special. At the right moment, the guide then switched over to the geography, or secular side of Uluru, and proceeded to explain how it was created. Uluru is considered the tip of a mountain that is buried in sediment that was created millions of years ago. The mountain range, which supposedly stretched the length of the continent, was considered the tallest in the world but climate changes weathered down the mountain range to create the vast dessert you find today. All that is left is Uluru and some other small monoliths.

Our guide turned out to be the best tour conductor that I have been around. Her presentation reminded me of how a great tour conductor can make a unique travel experience come alive and be remembered for years to come. She begrudgingly accepted a handsome gratuity from the travel professionals in my group who lined up insisting that she take what we were offering. That experience was truly a wow!

The Great Dividing Range

Our next stop was the Blue Mountains north of Sydney. The Blue Mountains are considered older and deeper than the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and they get their name because of the great concentration of eucalyptus trees growing in the valleys and the oil from the trees that is released by the sunlight and rises in the air. Most recently scientists have identified various forms of eucalyptus trees that were thought to have been extinct but are thriving today in this microclimate.

The Blue Mountains form the Great Dividing Range on the eastern side of Australia. They run from north to south, separating the coastal plains and the wine growing regions such as the Hunter Valley from the vast desert interior that is commonly called the Outback.



Kangaroo Island

We explored the wine-growing region of Hunter Valley, which is one of several top producing wine regions in Australia. I was fascinated by the region's history but was particularly captivated by an individual who we met that put Australian wines on the world map. His name is Len Evans and he is considered the godfather of Australian wine. I shared this information with Jim Bryant of Barrington who regularly writes "Down Cellar" in Quintessential Barrington. It turns out that Jim was a close friend of Len and had stayed at his home in Tower Lodge. Unfortunately Len passed away a few months after we had the pleasure of meeting him.

We saved the best for last by ending our excursion in Sydney. This world-class city is an amazing array of natural beauty from its harbor and beaches to the two icons of what Sydney is known for around the world: the Opera House and the Sydney Harbor Bridge. A must for every visitor is to carve out an afternoon and climb the bridge because the view is breathtaking. I had the pleasure of doing the climb to the top of the bridge, and as we made it to the top, a camera crew in a helicopter from the local TV station filmed our group for an afternoon broadcast. It was one of life's serendipities.

Australia took my breath away, but what really set it apart is her people – fun loving, free spirited, and filled with tall tales of life. The country offers ecology, culture, and spirituality of its ancestors, sandwiched in between great food and wine. My walkabout gave me a lasting impression of the Aboriginal people and their ancestral family as they saw their Australia. I was amazed, but what will be your walkabout?

G'day!



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