

Bragg's Australia Trip: Nov. 23 – Dec. 6

After a 14.5 hour flight from LA we arrived in Sydney early Friday, Nov. 23 and by 11am we had checked into our hotel and met up with the girls (they moved out of the hostel they had been staying in and joined us at our hotel, but in a separate room as the hotel had no double/double rooms, i.e., rooms with two double/queen beds in them). After a late breakfast we all headed out on foot so Steve and I could reacquaint ourselves with the city after our last visits (over 20 years for Steve and 19 years for me). We enjoyed a stroll through the botanic gardens down to the Sydney's gorgeous harbour where we took in the iconic Opera House (the girls had enjoyed a performance of the Sydney ballet there earlier in



Sydney Cathedral



Sydney Botanic Gardens Entrance

the week), the Circular Quay, a walk across part of the Harbour Bridge, the historic "The Rocks" area and a visit to the Museum of Contemporary Art (it included a performance art installation of a young woman spending the days eating junk food and dancing - art is definitely in the eye of the beholder!). As the day was sunny and warm, we partook at one of the many gelato shops (there seems to be one on nearly every corner) before walking back to our hotel. We ate dinner that evening at a Mexican restaurant near our hotel. Steve and I definitely went to bed at a relatively early hour – not sure about the girls!



Sydney Harbor

Saturday morning (another beautiful spring day) we walked over to the local train station and rode the train back down to the main harbor area. After a short walk we enjoyed breakfast at a restaurant called "Pancakes on the Rocks" which was located, yep you guessed it, in the area known as "The Rocks." We then reversed our morning's route and took the train away from the harbor, this time going a bit farther to the Central Train Station. From there we walked to



Victoria Statue in Sydney's Hyde Park

a large indoor "market" called Paddy's Market – lots of stalls selling Australian souvenirs/trinkets (primarily made in China) as well as actual food stuffs including fresh fruits and vegetables. We loaded up at a stall that sold a wide variety of dried fruits, including some that you usually don't see dried here in the states – e.g., kiwis and strawberries. We then strolled through Sydney's Chinatown on the way to Darling Harbour – an area that was significantly developed for the 2000 Olympics and now includes the Maritime Museum,

Convention Center, lots of shops and restaurants as well as parks and outdoor gathering areas. A waterskiing Santa show was on tap for the afternoon in the actual harbor. From Darling Harbour we took the monorail back into the city proper area where we headed to The Sydney Tower (it sits atop a large, multi-storied shopping mall filled with lots of high-end retail shops and restaurants). We “did” the tower and enjoyed its the 360 degree birds-eye view of the beautiful city/harbors of Sydney. A late lunch of tropical fruit smoothies preceded our visit to a great Sydney institution, a bookstore called Dymock where we purchased some books to keep us all in reading material for the remainder of our travels. Throughout the day we all discovered that downtown Sydney on a lovely spring Saturday is chock FULL of people doing whatever they needed to do -- a degree of humanity we don't often experience. We ended the day with an Italian meal and some ice cream treats purchased while we took an after dinner stroll through some of the streets with historic Victorian row houses and their charming cast iron “filigree” work fronting balconies and front porches. The lovely purple Jacaranda trees were in bloom which added to the wonderful ambiance of it all.



At Sydney Tower 3D Film

Unfortunately Sunday was the day the family needed to split up – Victoria to head back to the states while Steve, Andrea and I took a 3.5 hour flight north to the City of Cairns in the state of Queensland. Originally we were all scheduled to fly out mid-afternoon but our flight had been cancelled and we got rebooked on a mid-morning flight so poor Victoria had to spend several hours at the airport before she flew out. While it had been springtime in Sydney (temps in high 70's), it definitely felt more like summer in Cairns with temps in the mid to high 80's. After checking into our hotel we walked down to a local pub for a late lunch – the Australians sure do love their heavy pub food, even in the tropics! That evening we headed into central Cairns for a light supper and a look-see at the “Night Markets” – a set of indoor stalls selling mostly trinkets (mostly made in China) as well as lots of food vendors providing a wide variety of international food choices.

We were up and out fairly early Monday morning as we had an 8:45am reservation to take the seven kilometer “Skyrail” to Kuranda (we had a shuttle from our hotel to the Skyrail terminal). The Skyrail is a



Andrea w/ bird friend, Kuranda

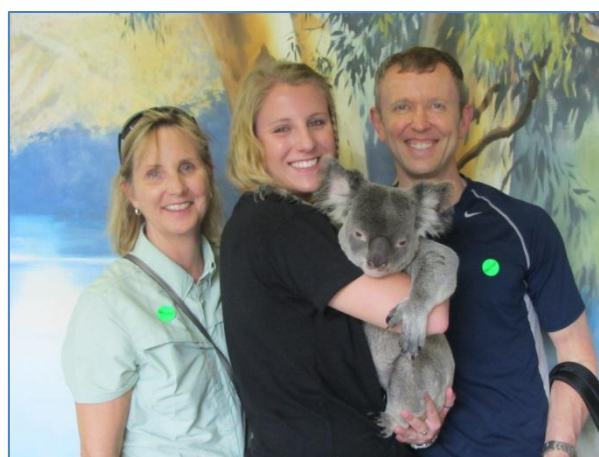
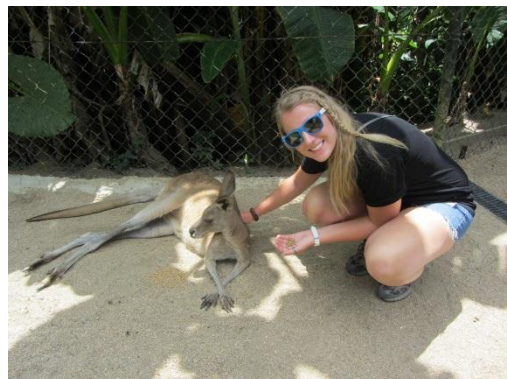


Andrea in Butterfly House, Kuranda

gondola system that takes its riders up from the coastal valley to the rainforest and the village of Kuranda– there are two points

along the route where you exit the gondola and take short walks to lookout areas – total trip time is about 1hr 15min. Kuranda was first settled by Europeans in the

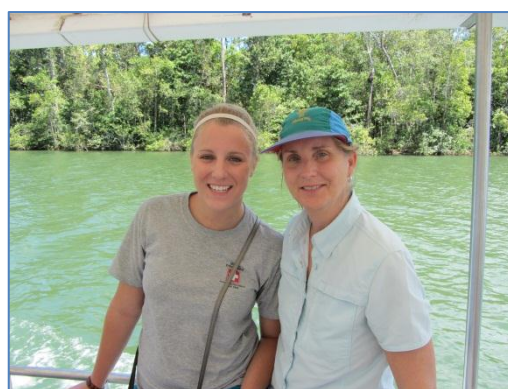
1880's. We spent several hours in Kuranda including visits to the butterfly house, the bird aviary, and the small wildlife park where Andrea got to cuddle a Koala named Freddie and we petted kangaroos and wallaby's. We also visited a variety of shops selling Aboriginal art (Aboriginal people have lived in the area for 10,000 years) as well as the mandatory souvenirs/trinkets. In the late afternoon we rode the historic Kuranda Scenic Railroad back down to the Cairns area – an engineering marvel finished in 1891 that includes 15 tunnels, 93 curves, dozens of bridges, and steep drops all along 75 km of track within dense rainforest and along very steep cliffs. The trip took about 1hr 30min – we then shuttled back to our hotel. A Chinese dinner from a place in the Night Markets rounded out the day.



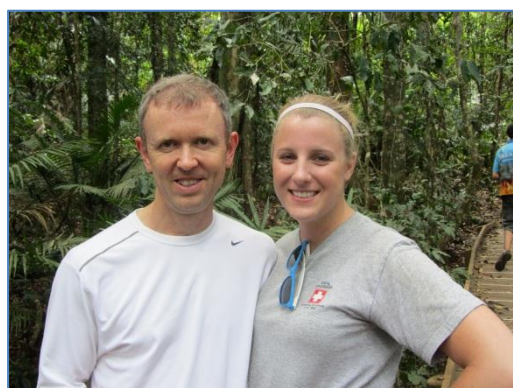
With Koala Freddie

Tuesday morning we were picked up at 7:15am for a day long tour to the areas north of Cairns, specifically the Daintree Rainforest/National Park, much of which is an UNESCO World Heritage site. The day's activities included traveling the coastal Captain Cook highway, a boat ride on the Daintree River to learn about its flora and fauna, a nature walk in the rainforest, a sampling of unusual tropical fruits (yum), a cooling off in a crystal clear freshwater rainforest stream (complete with swimming snakes), exploration of the Cape Tribulation area, and a stop at the Daintree Ice Cream Company for a treat of the 3

flavors of the day: wattle seed, coconut, and jackfruit (triple yum) – all fruits grown locally. We returned to our hotel about 6pm so walked to another local pub for dinner that evening.



On Daintree River



In Daintree National Park

The next day, Wednesday, was a nice easy day with no planned activities so we slept-in, lounged by the pool, did laundry, organized things for the upcoming dive boat, and generally “veg’d.” That evening we again headed to central Cairns where, before dinner, we did a bit of shopping at the local Woolworths (the Australian version which is a supermarket chain)

and then Andrea and I got a bit of pampering at one of the “Thai massage” places in the Night Markets (herbal foot soak and foot massage followed by a 20min back massage – all for \$20Aus. A dinner at “Outback Jack’s” finished off the evening.

We arranged a late check-out of the hotel for Thursday so we enjoyed some poolside reading time (in the shade) before dropping all our gear off at the dive boat office a bit after noon. We then checked out Cairns' air-conditioned indoor mall (complete with a Santa for pixs with the kids) for a bite of lunch before taking in a matinee movie (saw and enjoyed "Perks of Being a Wallflower"). Late in the afternoon we met up with our fellow dive boat passengers for an early dinner at a Cuban restaurant before walking the few block to where the boat was moored. Once on board, we were introduced to our crew, enjoyed a champagne and snack "welcome" party and settled into our cabins. Steve and Andrea took their Dramamine promptly as the plan was to get underway and we had a long, overnight cruise to our first dive site, "Pixie Gardens" at the Great Barrier Reef's ribbon reef #9. The Ribbon Reefs are long, thin strips of reef, which form the outer edges of the Great Barrier Reef. The outer edges of the reef have the most variety and quantities of sea life due to the currents which bring nutrients in and the distance away from the shoreline which is subject to sediment runoffs which reduce visibility as well as choke off nutrients, thus limiting sea life.

Our home for the next week was the "Spoilsport," a 100' long, 36' wide catamaran, designed to be a live aboard dive boat for up to 28 divers and 11 staff. We had a full boat. Our fellow divers were from Germany, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Australia, Canada, and the States. We were in the "club cabins" which were interior cabins with a set of bunk beds with a private bath – just fine for sleeping in and



Abroad the Spoilsport

changing in a dry bathing suit between dives. Otherwise, when not diving, our time was spent in the spacious dining hall/lounge or on the alfresco deck or the top sun deck (when there, it was usually UNDER the sun shade area – that sun is very intense!). The normal routine day's routine was:



- 6:30am: "Wakie, wakie time" as announced by our upbeat cruise director, Kieran who hailed from New Zealand ... a continental breakfast was laid out in the dining hall for those who wished a bite before the first dive of the day
- 7am: Briefing on first dive site followed by dive. There were several dive masters that took turns guiding groups in the water if you wanted to follow them – sometimes we did but usually the 3 of us just followed the recommended "route" on our own
- 9am: Full hot, sit down breakfast – menu changed daily so could be eggs, bacon and sausage one day and pancakes the next
- 10:30am: 2nd dive – sometimes in same area as 1st dive if in large area and sometimes the boat moved to a different dive site
- 12:30pm: Buffet lunch which always included a delicious hot soup and a variety of dishes; each day's lunch had a different theme, i.e., Mexican, Asian, Italian, etc.

- 2:30pm: 3rd dive briefing/dive – the boat always moved to a new dive spot for the 3rd dive
- 4pm: Afternoon tea – goodies of some sort, usually baked goods, were available in the dining area.
- 4:30pm: 4th dive– sometimes in same area as 3rd dive if in large area and sometimes the boat moved to a different dive site.
- 6:30pm: Night dive – we ended up not doing any night dives this trip. We usually enjoyed a Diet Coke “happy hour” in the lounge with fellow passengers
- 8pm: Full sit down dinner w/ wine. Our chef Laura and her assistant Bex turned out consistently tasty offerings at all meals and they nicely accommodated our dietary needs (e.g., no peanuts for Steve and no seafood for Andrea and me). Plus, the cookie jar was always filled and available!
- 10pm: Lights out by this time, often a bit earlier. Several nights we had fairly substantial crossings so we were often “rocked” to sleep – sometimes more aggressively than others! Both Steve and Andrea kept our with their Dramamine dosses.

Our week long dive trip covered a total of over 460 miles. From Cairns we cruised north-east to the outer barrier reef and then crossed into the Coral Sea where we had some awesome dives on the Osprey Reef before returning back to the Great Barrier Reef area. We had a wonderful variety of dive types, including:

- Sandy bottom dives where we saw such sea life as sea cucumbers, blue-spotted stingrays, reef sharks, and garden eels. At one such dive we got up close and personal with large “potato cods” – they are quite curious and will let you get right next to them.
- Coral “bommies” (i.e., spires) where you start your exploration at its bottom and slowly work your way to the top (in a clockwise manner to keep things organized). These structures house a cornucopia of fish and sea life – we especially enjoyed seeing the anemone fish as they are only found in Pacific waters. It is quite the experience to slowly wind your way through multiple schools of beautiful fish and then stop to get eye-to-eye with the resident turtle at his/her favorite napping spot!
- Wall dives – for one such dive we went out in small groups via a zodiac (small rubber pontoon boat) and then entered the water



Steve, Andrea, and Melissa

via simultaneous backward rolls. As the walls go down several hundreds or thousands of feet, we don't go to their bottoms. Instead we just dive along them taking in different corals and sea life. The large clams with their unique and beautiful "lips" we always a treat. While wall diving you are not only looking at the wall but also looking out into the deep blue off the wall as that is where we saw sharks, manta rays, and other large fish,



Andrea & Anemone Fish

- Coral gardens where huge variety of corals in a rainbow of colors surround you. We saw corals a full range of colors -- some that looked almost artificial they were so bright. I especially liked the "bouquets" of periwinkle blue corals. Of course, besides the colorful corals in the gardens, we were treated to multitudes of colorful tropical fish.
- Shark feed dive - one afternoon we all got into the water and made our way to a natural rock amphitheater where we took our "seats" and then watched the show - a trash barrel filled with fish heads was brought down from the surface and then opened (via a long hooked device) for the dining pleasure of several white tip sharks (and our viewing pleasure).



Melissa & Sea Turtle

By the end of the week, Steve had done 21 dives while Andrea and I were in the range of 16 to 17 dives. Steve and I were in new wetsuits and found them to be just perfect for keeping us cozy in the approx... 80 degree waters. In addition to all the diving (and eating and sleeping we did), we also enjoyed other aspects of the dive trip ...

- A hike on Lizard Island where we saw the world's 2nd largest lizard species, the Goannes.
- BBQ night on the boat where Captain "Pirate" Pete played a mean guitar and we all joined in on for some sing-alongs. When we all sang "Country Roads" the Czech Republic group sang along completely in Czech.
- Taking in the southern night sky from the boat's sun deck - a beautiful sight - unfortunately we couldn't see the Southern Cross as it was below our horizon



Andrea

On Thursday, Dec. 6 the boat arrived back in Cairns in the early hours of the morning. We were the first off at 5am (ugh) so we could catch our 6:45am flight back to Sydney (our original flight at 9:20am had been cancelled and our options were to rebook on the 6:45am flight or take a later one and miss our connection to the states). After a brief time in the Sydney airport (we took the train from the domestic airport to the international airport) we boarded our flight to LAX – only a 12.5 hour flight on the eastern leg. From LA, it was a quick flight (relatively) back to Denver and home sweet home.



Steve and Melissa



Andrea