

Mullimbimby Madness and Laughing Kookaburras

Story and Photos John Blanchette

Creators Syndicate

2009-06-27

It was 6:00 a.m. June 1, the first day of winter. The evening rain that had moved in off the South Pacific ceased and the sun dawned. I was sleeping in the rain forest near Byron Bay when a choir rose to meet the day and the new season.

The plaintiff song of the Butcherbirds, the squawking of the red bellied Rosella Parrots and cockatoos in the shedding gum trees, the childlike crying of the Green Catbird, cackling of the Bush

Turkeys, melodious tunes of black and white magpies, thrushes, and yellow beaked mynahs as they fed on the nectar of the bottle brush were all disturbed by the lunatic cacophony of the plump and amusing Laughing Kookaburras. I woke to winter with a smile.

The strangely formed menagerie of land-bound hoppers, burrowers, birds, eucalyptus munchers and mixed breed creatures were dumb, satisfied to leave the morning air to the high-flying vocalists and unable or unwilling to join the chorus.

I was in New South Wales in the land down under and flora, fauna, time and season were out of joint. Lying on the southeast coast of Australia, the

state enjoys a Mediterranean climate (ranging between 40 and 75 degrees in winter), the country's largest population (7 million of a total 30 million) and fosters sophisticated and alternative lifestyles.

Its capital is Sydney, the oldest and most beautiful city in the country (although Melbournians will dispute this claim, I don't think they have an argument). Situated on one of the world's great harbors, its shore is adorned by a massive bridge that gates and spans the seaway entrance and the revolutionary architecture of the Opera House sails onto the water edge, ringed by pristine city buildings and million dollar homes.

It was the countries first colony, established

January 26, 1788 when the fleet commanded by Captain Arthur Phillip landed in Sydney Harbour with about 750 convicts and 250 officials and their families to settle and claim the continent for Great Britain.

Following the Revolutionary War the U.S. had rejected British prisoner settlement in the south, so now it was off to the land that Captain Cook had discovered with its unwanted cargo. As in American history, the indigenous population would suffer deeply from this incursion, but that is always the cost of exploration and settlement. The event is commemorated every year as “Australia Day” and celebrated in the blistering heat of January 26, most heavily in the “convict city” of Sydney.

I arrived in Sydney on the country's signature airline, Qantas, which has non-stop direct flights from Los Angeles and San Francisco that take about fifteen hours. You cross the international dateline and lose a day, reason enough to extend your visit.

I booked my tour through Virtuoso, which specially selects hotels, restaurants and attractions for its clients. They have a working relationship with the Australian Tourism Office and receive special amenities and offers, which they pass along to travelers.

Some Virtuoso hotel recommendations in Sydney include the InterContinental, Four Seasons,

Park Hyatt and The Observatory. All have great spas, pools and restaurants, but The Observatory has the top Sommelier in Australia, Christian, who matched and explained some beautiful Australian wines with my dinner. The best meal I had was prepared by the two Michelin star chef Hugh Whitehouse at Darley's Restaurant in Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort and Spa.

In Sydney I got a behind-the-scenes tour of the Opera House and dined in the employee restaurant. English artist/musician Brian Eno had just installed his evening light show, which flashed numerous images on the outside sails of the Opera House, and

he filmed the event for future use.

I sped around Sydney Harbour on Sea Sydney Cruises 52-foot motor yacht, had lunch in a quiet bay aboard ship, docked at the enormous Taronga Zoo and met koalas, emus, kangaroos, Tasmanian Devils and most of the other odd creatures that inhabit this lost world of the animal phylum. There are more peculiar and lethal animals in Australia than anywhere else.

The day I arrived in Sydney I had breakfast and lunch in Bondi Beach, the great surfing Mecca, and met two young American women who were waitressing at Nick's and Trio Café on one-year work

visas. It's a government program for 18-30 year old students to take a "Gap" year from college and experience life in Australia and be able to make a little money (very little, Australians usually don't tip).

For information www.australia.com/workinoz.

Travelers on a shorter timetable should also know that they need to purchase a three-month visa from the Australian government for \$25 before entering the country.

Australians love their coffee and drink it more than tea. Some coffee shop terms to know if you want to succeed as an Australian barista on the work visa program: "Long black" is espresso with water,

“flat white” espresso with frothy milk.

For Sydneysiders the wine country means Hunter Valley, a two-hour journey to the north. Grab a copy of the Hunter Valley Wine Country Visitor Guide from the Tourist Center to check out some of the 140 vineyards, primarily producing Shiraz and Semillon. Be wary if you are imbibing in wine country. Australians drive on the left side of the road.

Some I visited were Audrey Wilkinson, Hungerford Hill, Lindemans, which also has vineyards in the Barossa, McGuigan Cellars, Wyndham Estate, which introduced Shiraz to Australia back in the late 1800s, and my favorite

Pepper Tree Estate. On the vineyard grounds are Robert's Restaurant, The Convent guesthouse and Tower Lodge.

For a glass of beer in wine country visit the Bluetongue Brewery and try their tasting. My favorite beer in Australia was Coopers, nice and hoppy. For local cheese sample across the street at Binnoire Dairy.

In the Hunter Valley I stayed on the expansive grounds of Peppers Guest House, on which wild kangaroos also resided and Internet usage was free.

On my journey north to the Hunter Valley, I

passed through bush country to visit the World Heritage Site of the Blue Mountains. These intriguing formations gain their color from vapors rising off the eucalyptus forest. There are spectacular views from the lookout ledge, but this is not the best place for an acrophobe, the stone platform plunges straight down over 1,000 feet.

Byron Bay, population 9,000, was my favorite area in New South Wales. The most easterly town in Australia, it lies two hours north of Sydney by plane at the edge of a rain forest. It's a surfer's paradise and artist colony. Many of the artist's workplaces are also shops. Make sure to visit the local glassworks

and travel into the hills to meditate and renew at the alternative lifestyle Crystal Castle retreat.

In the 60s and 70s the counterculture cultivated high-test “Mullimbimby Madness” in these hills and there’s a little bit of that culture still around. Lots of lively pubs and restaurants in Byron Bay keep the town rocking. The best restaurant is Dish and Paul Hogan opened the town’s largest bar. On occasion you’ll also see a celebrity like Paul, Gweneth Paltrow, Russell Crowe and Olivia Newton John, who own homes in the area.

I stayed at the Byron at Byron Resort and Spa, built inside the coastal rainforest. They offer several

spa treatments and have a lovely pool and restaurant, where I had dinner with the town Mayor and proprietors Lyn and John Parche my final night. This is a spectacular property that you must see and hear, especially as I did, at 6 a.m. when the morning choir begins, no matter the season.

For information on travel accommodations, special events, sightseeing, dining options, bargain hunting, etc., www.australia.com, www.sydney.com and www.virtuoso.com.

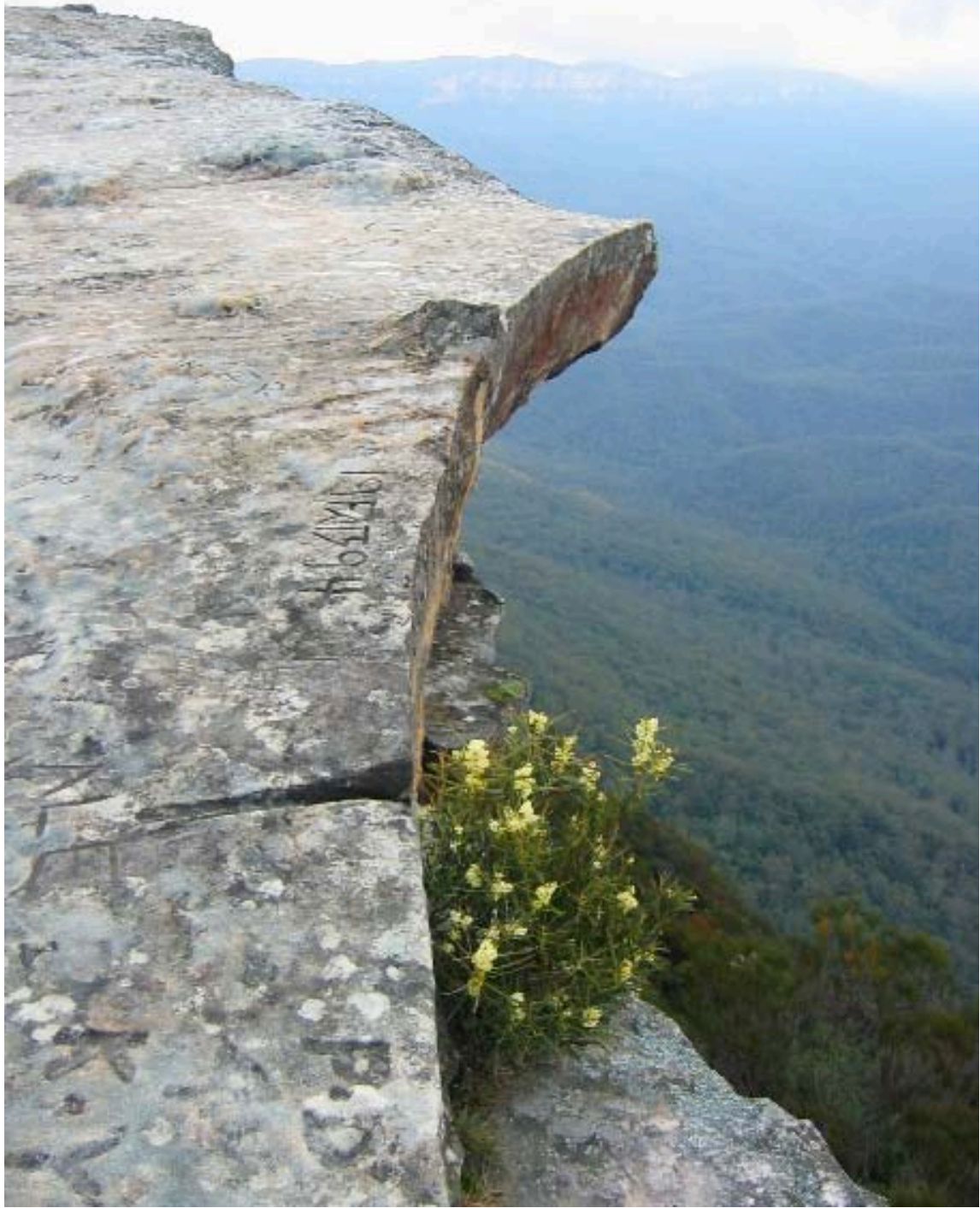
#

PHOTOS:

1) Sydney Harbour is the center of the city.



2) Blue Mountains get their hue from the eucalyptus trees. Acrophobes turn blue on lookout ledge.



3) Beautiful Byron Bay is a surfer's paradise and alternative lifestyle destination.

