

Bye Bye Sydney

My attitude prior to going to Australia, and you have to imagine this in the voice of the Michael Keaton's character from the movie "Night Shift", was, "Hey, we're Americans. All we have to do is show up anywhere in the world and they will give us a 30 day visa." Since we only planned to stay 21 days, we'd be happy to give them back the extra 10 days at no cost to them.

Then on the Friday before we left --- we left on a Monday --- Cindy said, "Are you sure we don't need a visa for Australia?" I told her she was barking up the wrong tree, but as soon as she left the room, I hoped on the computer and checked out the Australian Immigration web site. There I discovered persons from those countries, of which the US was one, that didn't require a visa outright, must nevertheless be prescreened. What that came down to was to enter some information on-line, such as nationality, passport number, etc., which would then be checked against their database. If everything was in order, you'd get an acknowledgment. This didn't mean your papers wouldn't be rechecked upon arrival. The cost of this service was around \$12/person, which could conveniently be charged to your credit card. Both Cindy and I came up clean.

When we got to Sydney, I asked the immigration official what would have happened if we had not completed the prescreening and he said that either the airline would have done it and charged us a premium, or the airline would have been fined for not performing the validation prior to boarding.

As we drove in from the airport on the shuttle --- the driver could have been Zakov Smiroff given that accent --- I noticed something we hadn't seen before, a MacCafe. We stopped in one day just to check it out, only to find it was a coffee bar attached to a regular MacDonald's. Do they have these in the US? When we were in the Blue Mountains, we came across a sign that declared the area a MacDonald's Free Zone, with a circle and strike through around the golden arches. Chalk up one for the Aussies.

Aussies seem to like the game of cricket. Frankly I don't understand it at all, though we were teated with endless summaries during the sports news on TV. The scores were in the hundreds, over 400 in one case. My view is that any game in which you can score 400 points can't be very difficult. Or is it the lack of a defense?



The other thing we had to contend with is the coinage. When the shuffling through currency that is unfamiliar anyway, I would think it advantageous if the larger coins represented larger denominations. But not in Australia. The largest coin on the right is 50 cents, then 20 cents, then 5 cents. So far so good. The next coin is \$2.00, the last one is \$1.00. OK, gold trumps silver, but how does a \$2.00 coin get to be smaller than a \$1.00 coin? Someone told me the \$1.00 coin was once a note. Don't know if that helps.

In addition to the major miscalculation with the auto rental, upon arrival I discovered that I had booked the hotel for the night we left rather than the day we were to arrive. No, I'm not senile! Our plane left at 12:15 AM on the April 10 and I had booked the room for the 10th. We arrived at 6:30 AM local time on the 10th. This did, however, work to our favor, because we didn't have to wait for normal check-in, which might not have been until that afternoon, and were able to crash for 5 hours right then and there. We certainly didn't get much sleep on the plane, so this worked out OK.

I don't know if you want to file this under, "It's About Time", or "An ounce of Prevention ...", but Australia does random drunk driving/drug tests along it's highways. In the state of Victoria, Australia is

composed of six states, since the program was restructured in 1989 (after being introduced in 1976), the fatality rate per 100,000 drivers is 8.6, compared to the US rate of 16.0. They must be doing something right. Also, learners has specially colored license plates so one can steer clear (;>).

Our plan had been to rent a car and travel up the Sunshine Coast from Sydney to Cairns, a distance of 1,600 miles each way. This would certainly have been a punishing and expensive, given the cost of gas, which was the equivalent of \$3.70/gal, journey. Perhaps our inability secure a vehicle during the busy Easter holiday was a blessing in disguise, because Cindy talked to someone at the train station and when she mentioned our original plan the person said, "You wouldn't want to do that. That could prove dangerous along that coastal highway."



So plan "B" called for modifying our itinerary to go about half the original distance up the coast, to Brisbane, pronounced Brisbin, via train. That was a 12 hour journey in itself, but allowed us to enjoy the countryside along the way. It was while on the train that we were able to partake in that great Aussie fetish, the meat pie. Australians eat 260 million of them a year, around 13 per person. These pies are not unlike our chicken pot pies, without the pot, of course, but the crust is flakier and the filling less soupy. I ate a bunch of them. Some are nationally famous. Wash one down with a Coke Zero, zero sugar, one calorie, and you're all set.



Though we knew about it in advance, we were a little concerned when our train terminated in a town called Casino and we had to collect our bags and board a bus for the remaining 90 minute ride to Brisbane. Why hadn't we been able to go the entire distance by train? This troubled me for our entire stay. When I asked people about this, they said that Australia began as separate states and only later formed a single nation. The railroads only operated within the states initially and there was no interoperability between them. During our journey we had just crossed the line separating New South Wales (Sydney) into Queens-

land (Brisbane). It had to do with the gage of the track I was told.



I figured we would have to change trains in Casino again on our way back (no bus this time). As it turned out, we didn't have to change trains at all. Could this mean that the tracks only ran all the way from Brisbane to Sydney in one direction? Surely that couldn't be the case ... or could it? Further inquiries disclosed that the train always stopped at Casino on the way up so the buses could serve the beach communities in the area, while the train running from Brisbane could collect people at Casino who took buses back to this central location. Another Cold Case solved.