

## AUSTRALIA: The Land Down Under

### Day 1: Thursday, March 15

We left LA Thursday night at around 10 pm.

I hate United. International flights are worse than domestic. Momo and I had the 3-seat row to ourselves and we were so tired we fell asleep almost immediately.

### Day 2: Friday, March 16

Still asleep. Even in those damn uncomfortable seats. We must've been exhausted. That, and the featured movie "Night at the Museum" did little to keep me awake.

### Day 3: Saturday, March 17

Because of the time change, we didn't land until ~6 a.m. on Saturday. We passed out for 10 hours of the 14-hour flight. Damn.

\*On a side note, the food was disgusting. And we didn't even get those sleeping socks or blindfolds that come with the "fancy" flights. Even Philippines Airlines gives you those.

\*\* Exchange rate: US\$1 = Australian\$0.78

Jeremy came to pick us up at the airport in **Sydney**. What a sweetheart. Even though he laughed at me for trying to get in the driver side as a passenger.

The weather was pretty gray and cloudy. Indicative of the rest of our stay in Sydney.

Taryn and Jeremy took us out for lunch at a yummy café on **Bronte Beach**, where I had my first and probably only taste of Australian favorite, Vegemite, a spread Aussies like to use on bread. The bread, butter, and coffee in Aussie-land was delish, but Vegemite... well... if you're brave, try it, and I'll let you be the judge. Yuck.

We later checked out **Paddington Markets**, a collection of market stalls open each Saturday that includes samples from do-it-yourself fashion designers, artists, and tasty farmer's market produce.

Monica and I decided to venture out to **Manly Beach** on a rainy day (very brave of us, I must say)... and the **Manly Wharf Hotel** was great for people-watching and specialty drinks. Too bad it started pouring during our walk to **Shelley Beach**.

After the rain died down, we took the ferry from Manly to Circular Quay. Jeremy picked us up, and we got ready for our first night out....

Per Jeremy/Taryn's recommendation, we checked out **Long Grain**, an amazing Thai fusion restaurant. It was worth the 2-hour wait, especially with the vast cocktail selection, such as the "stick drinks", which are fresh fruit chunks grinded by a bartender with a wooden stick. The result is a refreshing alcoholic beverage in which you could use the provided wooden chopstick to pick out the mini-chunks (such as lychee, watermelon, kiwi...). Even the cocktails without the fruit chunks were to die for, such as the Kiwi mist. The soft shell crab and fresh snapper dishes were wonderful... family style was the way to go at this popular local gourmet-ish restaurant.

Day 4: Sunday, March 18

The weather wasn't much better when we woke up bright and early our second day in Oz. Though it was about 70 degrees Fahrenheit, it was still overcast and drizzling. Lovely...

We walked from the apartment down to **Tamarama Beach** and had soy lattes near the shore. Damn, do Americans realize how LAME the coffee is in the States?

We walked down to **Bondi Beach**, taking a bunch of pictures along the way and noting that Australians even *walk* on the left side of the road. (Duh, that makes sense, since they *drive* that way.) Monica and I got into a conversation about how backwards Americans are.... I mean, Fahrenheit vs. Celsius, feet vs. meters, miles vs. kilometers? Did we LITERALLY take what the rest of the world did and just say... we need to be different?

We checked out **Darling Harbour** with our hosts, which was pretty packed with locals due to the **Sydney Harbour Bridge 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration**. We had lunch at a brewery on **Kings St Wharf**... and the potato wedges I ordered came with sides of sour cream and Thai sweet chili sauce! (*Go figure, Jeremy told us that many Asians reside in Australia, and there are many good Thai restaurants in Sydney.*) We chatted for a while, enjoying the city skyline.

Momo and I left the group to explore the **Circular Quay** when it wasn't pouring rain... the gelato was Y-U-M-M-Y!

We then headed off to the **Rocks** (an older section of Sydney with a bunch of quaint shops and restaurants), and, despite my "sickness", we made it to our dusk appointment at the **Sydney Harbour Bridge Climb**.

The panoramic view of the city at night was breathtaking... the top of the arch was ~450 feet high and 1,149 steps up, not bad for someone like me who is afraid of heights! The Climb is expensive and takes about 3.5 hours of your time, but it's a MUST for tourists... and actually, Momo and I were the only tourists in our group of 8!

Day 5: Monday, March 19

We took **Jet Star** (the Aussie version of Southwest Airlines) to **Cairns**, where the weather was hot, humid, and overcast... again. After checking into our quaint hotel (**Discovery Resort Cairns**), a bus picked us up and we were on our way to **SkyRail**, a means of transportation via a gondola to access the Barron River, "fly" over the rainforest, and view the Butterfly and Koala exhibits in **Kuranda**. Honestly, the rainforests weren't that impressive and the falls were... well, they were muddy!

But holding the chubby, adorable, lazy koalas made the gondola trip worth it. That, the Golden Drop **mango wine** we came across, and the sweet Aussie couple we met in our gondola on the way back down.

(I have to say, I felt pretty bad about giving money to a corporation to take a picture with a koala. I know they were bred in captivity, but still... it didn't seem right...)

After a long day in Kuranda, Momo and I checked out the Cairns "nightlife" (if you can call it that). Cairns is kinda... well... country. But we had dinner at **Raw Prawns** where Momo enjoyed her Baramuda fish and I my yummy "mud crab."

Day 6: Tuesday, March 20

The showers continued, and Momo and I were a bit apprehensive when we woke up Tuesday morning to get ready for our **Great Barrier Reef** adventure.

We booked a “**Frankland Day Cruise**” in advance, which included:

- Guided snorkeling tours
- Guided island walks
- Coral viewing tours
- Glass bottom boat tours
- Mulgrave River cruise
- Morning / afternoon tee
- Lunch
- Entry fee to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park

Um, well, it *sounds* nice enough.

And overall, yes, I can now say it was an enjoyable experience... but.....

- Mo and I got terrible seasick, along with 20 others on the boat.
- And I gotta say, hanging out in a boat after a few kids have puked multiple times, well... it's not so pleasant.
- The water wasn't clear enough to really observe the sea life when snorkeling and the water was too choppy to go diving.
- I did enjoy the island walk and coral viewing. And the weather did lighten up for about 15 minutes, enough for me to get some color so I could “look” like I was on vacation.
- We skipped out on the glass bottom boat tour. We decided being on a boat in choppy water wasn't really our thing.
- I meditated the entire hour ride back to Cairns from the Island to avoid puking. Ah, the power of meditation.

Mo and I were exhausted but headed out to an Italian Restaurant on the pier, **Villa Romana**, to celebrate her 27th birthday.

*Note to self: Cairns late night doesn't seem so safe. It didn't help that the main news headline was about a Japanese tourist who was assaulted by a local right by where we were residing.*

Day 7: Wednesday, March 21

We returned to Sydney in the afternoon and stopped by the house to get ready for an afternoon in the Circular Quay. We hung out on the Opera House steps and took some nice pictures of the city skyline.

My colleague Andrew met up with us at the **Opera Bar**, a great place for drinks and people watching prior to the Opera.

A few shots of Maker's Mark, “stick” drinks, and glasses of wine later, Momo and I headed to the Opera House to see “Rusalka.” Momo passed out about 5 minutes into the performance, so at intermission we decided we both weren't really into the opera and headed home early.

## NEW ZEALAND: The Land of the Kiwis

### Day 8: Thursday, March 22

After a frustrating time trying to flag down a cab (*note that calling a cab service in Aussieland doesn't necessarily mean they'll come to you*), Momo and I finally got to the airport in time for our Air New Zealand flight to Auckland.

Air New Zealand rocks! The food was yummy and we got to try Hokey Pokey ice cream, a popular New Zealand flavor.

After we arrived at the Auckland International Airport and survived the interrogations of 4 airport officials, we picked up our rental car, a Toyota Corolla, which we named "Puke" (pronounced Poo-kay). Long story.

The weather in New Zealand was warm, sunny, and gorgeous, thankfully, much better than Sydney's.

We were a bit nervous driving on the "wrong" side of the road, but Momo stepped up to the plate and bravely drove from the airport to our hotel on Queen St. in downtown Auckland.

After checking into our hotel, we did some window shopping on Queens St. and were surprised by the number of Asian restaurants and markets. Our hotel was smack dab in the middle of Chinatown.

We checked out the **Sky City Tower** and ate at a seafood buffet. We weren't that impressed, especially given all of the awesome food we had had so far...

\* Exchange rate: US\$1 = NZ\$0.73

### Day 9: Friday, March 23

We woke up bright and early on Friday morning to start our road trip around the North Island. The street signs on the highway were pretty intimidating ("Arrive Alive!" and "Don't Crash!"... Seriously. The kiwis certainly don't beat around the bush.)

We drove down to **Matamata** and took the **Hobbiton Tour** to view 1 of the 178 locations where the "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy was filmed. Like the rest of New Zealand we had seen so far, it was beautiful. Since I'm a fan of the films, it was pretty cool checking out the Shire, the Party Tree, and the little Hobbit houses.

We headed down to Taupo and checked into our delightful, cozy hotel located on the lakefront. We walked down the harbour and ate **Waterside Restaurant** for dinner and drinks.

### Day 10: Saturday, March 24

We started the day with a 2-hour hike around **Huka Falls & the Arriatata Dam...** in our flip flops. Long story.

It was beautiful and relaxing. New Zealand really is breathtaking...

After an unbelievable cup of Chai coffee at the **Pub 'N' Grub**, we started our retreat back North. We stopped in **Waitomo** for our "**Rap, Raft, and Rock**" tour, a 5-hour journey which included abseiling (aka *rappelling*) a few hundred feet down into a cave, learning / seeing the glowworms

(aka bright maggots, yuk!), black water *rafting* (aka tubing in a cave in the dark), spelunking, and *rock climbing*. Momo and I both definitely faced our fears: she of claustrophobia, me of heights.

Exhausted after the day's activities, we drove back to Auckland and enjoyed some yummy bi-bim-bap at a late-night Korean joint near our hotel.

**Day 11: Sunday: March 25**

Since our flight wasn't until the evening, Momo and I took a ferry to **Davenport** for our last day. We walked to **North Head** and took some beautiful pictures of the beach and volcano.

We returned downtown and ate lunch at **Orbit**, a rotating restaurant at the top level of the Sky Tower, where we enjoyed a spectacular view of Auckland.

Before checking out of our hotel, we did some last minute shopping in Chinatown.

Although our vacation ended on a strange note (who knew that Air New Zealand had insanely strict security?!?), Momo and I left exhausted yet refreshed, rejuvenated and ready for our next trip abroad!