

**Exchange Information:**  
**University of Queensland**  
**Brisbane, Australia**

A Report Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for GEN E 303

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# **Abstract**

This report provides a wide range of information to the University of Waterloo Engineering undergraduate student considering an exchange at the University of Queensland in Brisbane Australia. Points related to the practical concerns of finding room and board, course equivalents, and one's way around the local culture are provided. Details related to travel tips, tricks, destinations, and costs are similarly provided.

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# 1. Getting There

## 1.1 Quick facts

The following information is provided as a basic grounding in the essential day to day affairs that are necessary to living in Australia. It is by no means exhaustive.

As the state of Queensland does not subscribe to daylight savings time, the time difference between Brisbane and Waterloo may be +15 hours or +14hours depending on the time of year.

For international dialing in Australia, the country code is 61. The local dialing code for the Brisbane area is 7. With the exception of major services and government departments, Australian phone numbers tend to be eight digits long. This means that when calling from North America, one should dial 011-61-7-xxxx-xxxx for a Brisbane number.

The Australian dollar has been reasonably steady in its valuation of about \$0.90 CDN for some time now. Cost of living is roughly equivalent if not slightly cheaper than that in Canada.

While the climate in Australia varies from temperate to tropical as one progresses from the south to the north, Brisbane itself is located in a sub-tropical rainforest area. This means that weather during the summer months (December through February) may reach as high as 40°C. Also, it should be noted that many Australian homes do not seem to believe in the use of air conditioners. During the winter period (June-August) the temperature drops significantly generally remaining above 10°C.

A large amount of information related to studying as an exchange student at the University of Queensland (UQ) can be found at: <http://www.uq.edu.au/studyabroad/>. Unfortunately, as this site has not been updated since the year 2000, it is by now somewhat dated.

## **1.2 Limited exchange space**

Due to an imbalance in the number of students being sent from the University of Waterloo (UW) to UQ in recent years, students here may find it difficult to be sent on exchange to this particular university. Spaces at this point are very limited. A second university option which might be of interest to those particularly keen on studying in Brisbane is the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), located in downtown Brisbane a fifteen minute bus ride away from UQ. In the author's opinion, however, the facilities offered at UQ are without question superior to those of QUT

## **1.3 Buying airfare to Australia**

It is definitely a good idea to shop around as much as possible for an airfare before making a purchase. Cheap return airfares for Brisbane generally will not fall much below \$2000CDN unless purchased approximately half a year in advance. Even then, the cheapest airfares available will cost no less than \$1600CDN.

When traveling to Australia, stopovers in transit are a given. These can generally be extended free of charge. For this reason, it may be of interest to pick a stopover location that is of interest such as Fiji, Auckland, Tokyo, Hong Kong, or Bangkok along the way. Generally, however, specific tickets will require specific stopover locations. Also, it should be noted that around-the-world tickets that allow up to five stopovers from the same airline alliance group, assuming travel in only one continuous direction, anywhere in the world east to west or west to east can be purchased in Australia for approximately \$2000AUD. These may be a viable option to some Canadian travelers. For more information contact Student Flights (<http://www.studentflights.com.au>) or STA Travel (<http://www.statravel.com.au/>) in Australia.

## **1.4 Visas**

Currently all foreigners save New Zealanders wishing to study in Australia must have a valid Student Visa. These can be obtained online with minimal effort and much expense once one has received a confirmation of enrollment form from the host university. Visit <http://www.immi.gov.au/study/applying/index.htm> for more information. Processing of the Internet form generally requires less than thirty seconds with an associated charge of



\$300AUD to one's credit card. Travel agents may be able to take care of this process for the purchaser.

If professional work becomes necessary to subsidise an exchange, work permits are generally obtained after arrival. Again, the processing is essentially a formality. Both the necessary forms and help in completing them can be obtained from the Student Services office at UQ after arrival. The processing fee should be about \$30AUD.

## 1.5 Researching course equivalents

UQ maintains an online calendar of all its course offerings accessible to the public at <http://www.sinet.uq.edu.au>. When reading through course offerings, it should be noted that Semester I in Australia extends from March through to June, while Semester II occurs from the end of July until the middle of November. The table below gives a listing of courses that have been approved to match Systems Design 3B core requirements

Table 1: Systems Design Course Equivalents

<b>UW Course</b>	<b>UQ Equivalent</b>
SYDE 312	MATH3201
SYDE 352	METR3200
SYDE 362	ENGG2800

Engineering courses at UQ are divided into a wide variety of disciplines. Useful course codes to examine will include CHEE, COMP, ENGG, ELEC, MECH, and METR. The variety and selection of courses outside of Engineering at UQ is vast. It should be noted here that a full course load in Australia is considered to be four courses per term. For this reason, exchange students are limited to no more than five courses per term.

## **2. Settling In**

### **2.1 Finding housing**

The most stressful part of the exchange generally occurs at the beginning. There are a variety of housing options available in and around UQ. This section will attempt to provide a brief summary of the options available. Very thorough information can be found at <http://www.accommodation.uq.edu.au/>. UQ receives enough international students on a regular basis that specific orientation sessions related to finding housing may be mandatory for those who do not yet have permanent accommodations.

#### **2.1.1 Pre-departure pick-up service**

UQ offers an airport pickup service for all incoming international students upon their arrival. The online booking form, available once enrollment at UQ is confirmed, allows for transport from the airport to either a permanent accommodation or to one of several possible temporary accommodations in colleges and hostels. This is particularly useful for those who have decided to search for off-campus housing after their arrival, as the university will take care of booking you a stay at a hostel based on a list of preferences.

#### **2.1.2 On-campus vs. off-campus housing**

On-campus residence at UQ is undertaken by one of several affiliated colleges. Each college is independently administered and tries to cater to specific student needs. College residence at UQ is far more expensive than the off-campus alternative. The cheapest available college offering one term accommodation for Semester I 2003 was Union College. The cost there was \$5000AUD for room and board for one term.

The most immediate benefit of living in a college is that one has accommodation waiting on arrival and doesn't have to cope with the stress of finding a home while at the same time adjusting to a new culture, recovering from jet lag, and participating in university orientation activities. Additionally, college residence provides an easy social atmosphere in which to make friends with local university students and a variety of exchange students. Union College and the International Student House on campus will

both have high numbers of International students attending, the former for its comparatively low cost and the latter for its philosophy.

By contrast, off-campus housing is significantly less expensive. Fully furnished single rooms with utilities included are sometimes offered for as little as \$80AUD per week. Accommodation in general can be had for anywhere between \$70AUD and \$150AUD per week. Unfurnished accommodation is not a large concern as several furniture and appliance rental firms exist in Brisbane. PABS furniture rental (<http://www.pabs.com.au/>) offers very inexpensive custom packages and also provides free delivery with the cost of rental. Very nice houses are often available to rent if several students are willing to pool their resources. The author, two classmates, and one Swedish exchange student lived comfortably in a three bedroom, two-storey unit for \$320AUD per week plus the additional cost of utilities and furniture rental, about \$60AUD per week.

### **2.1.3 Off-campus searching**

#### **Useful resources**

Finding off-campus housing is simply a matter of perseverance. Houses will continue to be placed on the market and acquired by students even during the first weeks of classes. That being said, better deals are of course easier to find for those who arrive early. UQ Accommodation Services offers orientation sessions for those looking for housing. They also maintain an up to date list of accommodations as they become available. This latter resource is invaluable and generally updated daily. Knowing the area around campus is essential for this. A street map from the internet or a small local map can easily be obtained.

Another useful resource in searching for off-campus housing may be found through real-estate agents. While the service may vary from one to the other, all should be happy to show you a variety of houses free of charge. Their payment comes from the property owners. There are several realtors near campus, including one at the corner of Sir Fred Schonell Drive and Mitre Street. Links to local realtors and to the UQ off-campus accommodations database can be found at <http://www.accommodation.uq.edu.au/index.html?page=348>.

### **Where to stay while you're looking**

While some of the colleges at UQ will offer temporary residence to those looking for housing, this service generally ends in the week or so prior to orientation. For that reason, it is generally useful to find temporary accommodation elsewhere. The Youth Hostelling Association (YHA) hostel just outside of downtown Brisbane and the one or two hostels in its immediate vicinity seemed generally clean, reliable, and were located close to a bus route leading directly back to the UQ campus in St. Lucia.

### **2.2 Setting up a bank account.**

For the duration of one's stay in Australia, a local bank account is a necessity. There is a Commonwealth Bank branch located on campus at UQ. They provide a no-fee bank account service that is likely to be the best option. Additionally, their ATMs are nearly ubiquitous in Australia. There is a grace period after initial arrival in Australia during which an account may be opened with only a passport for identification.

## **3. Living in Australia**

### **3.1 No worries**

In the same way that Canadians are always nice, Australians never worry. They pride themselves on being incapable of it. It is possibly for this reason that Australians never say, “You’re welcome,” instead substituting , “No worries.”

Australians also pride themselves on their ‘niceness’, openness, and forthrightness. This often takes on the form of a firm-handshaking, gruff, in your face, salt of the Earth type of hospitality than the more formal polite Canadian nice-guy. Cultural icons such as Ned Kelly, of whom one is guaranteed to learn much in Australia, have led to a cultural identification with the underdog and a personal joy in showing visitors just how casually tough Australians are. For this reason, Australians will generally talk in the most casual way possible about the incredibly wide variety of horribly painful, poisonous, or deadly snakes, spiders, jellyfish, and other things that ooze venom that seem to permeate their country; however, this shouldn’t worry the visitor. Having been forced to kill a red-back spider simply so as to repair a bike, the author learned in his first few weeks in Australia how to be equally casual about the local fauna. In reality, there is very little danger of anyone being stung by a box jellyfish or funnel-web spider so long as common sense prevails and warning signs are heeded.

### **3.2 Food, barbecues, and beer**

While in Australia, a traditional Aussie Bar-b-q is not to be missed. Vegetarians beware. While the Aussies will be happy to try and accommodate by frying up any tofu or chick-pea based concoction that is brought to the event, the traditional Aussie Bar-b-q is generally very hefty on the meat. Despite this, Australia tends to be a very vegetarian-friendly environment, with vegetarian alternatives available in most restaurants and grocery stores.

Contrary to what Crocodile Dundee star Paul Hogan used to be paid to say, Australians do not drink Fosters. It’s often hard to find. Australians will tend to drink XXXX (called

“Four x”) bitter or sometimes gold, Victoria Bitter, and a variety of local brews. For anyone who appreciates a good stout, Coopers is highly recommended.

### **3.3 Sports**

In general, Australians love almost all forms of physical activity. At UQ, there are active clubs available for virtually any kind of sport activity imaginable. A few of the more interesting ones include Sailing, Scuba Diving, Rock Climbing, and Fencing. A good anecdotal conception of just how varied the sporting activity is in Australia can be gleaned from the fact that in Cairns, the most tropical large city in Queensland, there is an ice rink across from the main shopping complex. Interestingly, lawn bowling is an extremely popular activity in Australia. For those interested, beginners can try themselves at both bowling and an all you can eat breakfast on the first Sunday of every month at the Toowong bowling club.

Popular spectator sports in Australia are Rugby and Aussie Rules football. Both are a must see while in Australia. There is a fair bit of contention over whether Rugby Union or National Rugby League rules provide for a better game, but the general consensus is that the level of play in Rugby Union is much higher. Also, one shouldn't allow oneself to be intimidated by the seemingly incomprehensible rules of Australian Football. The basics are not difficult to learn and the game itself may actually be more fun to watch when one can't figure out what exactly is happening or why.

### **3.4 Turns of phrase**

The Australian dialect is full of interesting turns of phrase. Half the fun of living in Australia is trying to understand what is being said at any given time. In general, incomprehensibility increases as one reaches smaller and small towns or goes further into the Outback. For this reason, only a small number of the many words and phrases to learn are included in the table below.

Table 2: Australian Words and Slang

<b>Australian Word / Phrase</b>	<b>Canadian Equivalent</b>
Capsicum	Green Pepper / Sweet Pepper
Courgette	Zucchini
How you going?	How's it going? / How are you?
Mate	Buddy
Esky	Cooler
Sheila	Girl
Cheers	Thank you
Ta	Thank you
Drama	An overblown problem / situation
Seppo	American
Pom	Englishman

The origins of some of these words are almost as odd as the words themselves. Virtually no Australian will ever actually use the word Seppo as its origin is extremely insulting. This word is generally kept alive in order to impress the tourists. It comes from the fact that 'Yank' rhymes with 'Tank' and septic tanks resemble Yanks..

### **3.5 Educational style in Australia**

Australia has gained a reputation amongst Engineers at UW as being an easy place in which to study. This is not entirely the case. While the atmosphere is more laid back in Australian Engineering education as compared to that at UW, the workload itself is comparable. As an exchange student, however, one is not responsible for achieving a high grade. As far as UW is concerned, all courses taken on exchange are strictly a for credit pass or fail matter. Thus, it is generally possible to reduce one's efforts while on exchange. Additionally, it should be noted that as four courses are considered a full load in Australia, those attempting to take five may potentially find the workload more difficult than at home.

One item of definite benefit to the exchange student is the frequent number of university holidays in Australia. In Semester I, a week long vacation is taken during

Easter. The exam period in June lasts the entire month, and exams may not begin until a week or more after lectures have ended. Similarly, there is a roughly one month break during the month of July, in between the end of Semester I exams and the start of Semester II classes.

The actual curriculum of Engineering education in Australia tends to be more practically oriented. Underlying concepts are taught but generally only in a very broad sense. Assignments will tend to focus on application of practical solutions to a given Engineering problem. As a general rule, Matlab skills may prove very useful in completing assignments in a number of Engineering courses. Project courses taken at UQ will tend to emphasise the performance of one's final product for at least 50% of one's final grade. Projects and project groups are assigned rather than chosen; however, as group assignments are primarily based on previous academic standing, exchange students with unknown records are often placed together.

### **3.6 Phone calls**

Australian phone lines are charged for local calls. Long distance rates will apply for calls between land lines and mobile phones. This is not the case for calls made between two mobile phones using the same carrier. A number of good long distance calling cards are available for making cheap calls to Canada. UQ sells its own phone card, occasionally offering \$5 free with every \$20 added onto the card and charging 5.9¢ per minute for calls to Canada. Cheaper phone cards charging one or two cents less can often be found, however, the cumulative addition of the bonus five dollars on every twenty and the convenience of being able to add credit to one's account on campus make this an excellent option.

### **3.7 Prejudice**

While Australia does have something of a reputation for occasional bouts of prejudice, sexism, or xenophobia, students are unlikely to encounter any serious problems while traveling. Australians pride themselves on an ideal in which everyone receives a 'fair go.' In general, the worst incidences of racism that one will encounter in Australia will be based more on ignorance of outside cultures than on genuine malevolence. That being



said, racism and sexism do still exist in Australia in arguably larger amounts than in Canada. This prejudice is generally sustained by the older generations and can be likened to some of the attitudes still common throughout smaller towns and communities in Canada.

## 4. Traveling

Participating in an exchange means taking the time to travel. Having gone as far as Brisbane, there's no sense in missing the incredible sights throughout Australia. No matter how good the educational program may be at UQ, no one can possibly justify going on exchange from UW for purely academic reasons.

A backpacker's guidebook is an invaluable resource. Both the Australia editions of Lonely Planet and Let's Go tend to be reliable and frequently updated; though the comment regarding reliability is not always applicable to their street maps.

With the possible exception of Alice Springs, which lies at the very heart of Australia, major cities in Australia tend to lie directly along the coast. This is largely due to the fact that the land more than a few hundred kilometers from the coast begins to form part of the great red desert outback surprisingly quickly.

Distances between large cities in Australia are vast. To give an idea, traveling clockwise from the North East coast, the distance from Cairns to Brisbane is approximately 1000km, the distance from Brisbane to Sydney is approximately 1000km, as is the distance from Sydney to Melbourne, and the distance from Melbourne to Adelaide. Alice Springs is just under 2000km due North of Adelaide. Perth is roughly another 4000km around the coast to the West of Adelaide.

Another extremely useful resource is provided by travel agents. Better deals on airline tickets, tours, and more can often be obtained through local agents. Student Flights is particularly recommended (<http://www.studentflights.com.au>). They provide student specific discounts on most packages. They also have an office open in St. Lucia village near to the UQ campus and another just down the street from the Indooroopilly shopping centre.

### 4.1 Planes, trains, and buses

Given the vast distances involved, travel by air is often the best option. The two major domestic air carriers in Australia are Qantas (<http://www.qantas.com.au>), and Virgin Blue (<http://www.virginblue.com.au>). The Virgin Blue service is similar to that of Easy Jet in Europe. Tickets tend to be very inexpensive if ordered well in advance. If cancelled,

they may be partially refunded as credit towards a future Virgin Blue flight. Qantas is a more established airline offering greater comfort and customer service. In general, Qantas flights will be more expensive than those of Virgin Blue; however, this is not always necessarily the case.

The two major bus carriers in Australia are Premier and McCafferty's. The latter is a subsidiary of Greyhound and operates in a similar and familiar manner. Premier operates along a limited number of routes between major cities, sending one bus daily per route and stopping at a number of small towns along the way. A single Premier bus ticket generally entitles the bearer to up to three stopovers along the route free of charge. Bookings must be made in advance, however, to insure a seat on the bus for any given day. This service is especially useful when traveling up or down the Queensland coast as there are a number of fun travel stops between Brisbane and Cairns.

Train routes are not as easily analysed. Fares will tend to vary, sometimes higher and sometimes lower than bus fares. Routes are not centrally administered throughout the country, so again it is difficult to make one single comparison. It is often advisable to check train routes while traveling, however, as they may provide faster and less expensive service than the buses. Additionally, travel agent information may not always be completely reliable as regards train schedules and fares. While their information on flights, tours, and buses is almost always perfectly reliable, it may not be entirely accurate for train service.

## **4.2 When to travel to which destination**

Both the seasons and the cardinal directions of hot and cold are reversed in Australia. This means that it is generally best to travel to colder locations in the south of the country during the summer months of December through February and to warmer locations in the north of the country during the remaining cooler months.

Bearing in mind that it is a vast desert, any trips made through the central outback will be hot during the day and cold at night. The effect does however become more extreme as the seasons change. For this reason, the days are likely to be scorching during the summer months and the nights quite cool during the winter months. To give some idea,

daytime temperatures are in the high twenties while night temperatures reach about 4°C in the central outback during the time of the April Easter Break.

### **4.3 Visa extensions**

Student Visas will generally remain valid for the period of study plus a certain grace period depending on the original date of application. If this does not provide enough time to complete travels after the study period has ended, an extension is needed. As the extension requires a change from student to tourist status, this extension can not be granted over the Internet. Be warned that those answering helpline and web inquiry questions on behalf of the Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs are not always well-informed. They gave the author nearly disastrously incorrect advice on two separate occasions. While actual visa processing is a comparatively simple process involving a small fee, it is generally advisable to make sure that the application process is taken care of in person at a local office. One such office is available in Brisbane on the 13th Floor of 313 Adelaide Street. It can be reached by phone at 131-881 followed by 140.

### **4.4 Destinations**

For a full first first-hand account of visits to most of the places outlined in this report, see Appendix A. It contains the travelogue of the author over his time in Australia and should hopefully provide a fun and funny way of learning more about both UQ and Australia in general.

#### **4.4.1 Around Brisbane**

Brisbane is a prime location from which to begin one's travels. Following in the footsteps of Claudia Schiffer and Queen Elizabeth II's attendants, for \$20AUD one can have a photo taken while holding a Koala at the Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary. The sanctuary also features an open petting and feeding area complete with kangaroos, wallabies, and emus.

Further outside of Brisbane is the Australia Zoo, owned and operated by the Crocodile Hunter himself, Steve Irwin, and his wife Terri. The Irwins are difficult to track down

and never guarantee their appearances at the zoo in advance. In general one is more likely to find them there on public holidays than at other times. The Zoo itself features live crocodile feedings and specimens of all of Australia's most venomous snakes, as well as another kangaroo feeding area.

Also surrounding Brisbane are several national parks. Lamington is vast and provides a first taste of Australian rainforest. The summit of Mt. Warning is the first point in Australia to be hit by the sunrise. The Glasshouse Mountains are reasonably close and provide a fairly unusual site that should not be missed. Although after settling into Brisbane life these sites can all be easily reached by rental car, an initial taste and some small education in rainforest ecology can be obtained from Rob's Rainforest Tours for \$50AUD per person daytrip.

Finding beaches in the area around Brisbane is easier than shooting fish in a barrel. A free public beach is available in the city at South Bank. While it is a nice place to spend an afternoon, it is nevertheless a glorified swimming pool with sand surrounding it. Surfer's Paradise can be reached via an hour long train ride. This is, however, a very commercial establishment with mediocre surfing by most popular accounts. Almost as close, far prettier, and less exploited is Noosa where the surfing is apparently better and the scenery certainly is. To the south of Brisbane, Byron Bay is the hippy capital of Australia, full of alternative art, good surfing, relaxed atmosphere, and ample supplies of marijuana.

#### **4.4.2 Sydney**

For the surfers again, Sydney is home to the famous Bondi Beach. It also features the famous Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge. The bridge is large and impressive but otherwise unremarkable unless one pays the roughly \$100AUD necessary to be allowed to climb it. The Opera House by contrast is truly very impressive in person. Along with Melbourne, Sydney is home to one of the world's largest IMAX screens. For a chance to see more of the ridiculous creatures that call Australia home, visit the Sydney Aquarium. The cost is an expensive \$14AUD but well worth every cent if only for the platypus, underwater shark observation walk, mudskippers, and plentiful eels. The famous red light district in King's Cross is not particularly impressive; though also in that

area, Govinda's all-you can eat Indian restaurant and movie theatre is supposed to be quite worthwhile. For die-hard Simpsons fans, a trip around Sydney's downtown monorail is a must.

#### **4.4.3 Melbourne**

Melbourne is known in Australia not for its massive tourist sites but rather for the quality of its restaurants. The artsy restaurants and cafes available in the St. Kilda area of Melbourne should not be missed. Also worth a visit are the Melbourne Zoo, of a size smaller than but comparable to the Toronto one, and the old Melbourne Gaol, where Ned Kelly was incarcerated and hung after his famous shootout with a trainload of police officers.

Phillip Island is located a short distance outside of town. It is home to some spectacularly beautiful beaches. These are unfortunately mostly unsafe for swimming. It is also home to a wide variety of wildlife, most notably the penguin parade. Each evening hundreds of tourists file in to a small section of beach to watch Phillip Island's blue penguins return from a day of hunting in the ocean to their burrows on the island. Photographing this event is strictly prohibited. Camera flashes can do irreparable harm to the penguins' vision. For this reason the rule is stringently enforced.

Comprising part of the highway between Melbourne and Adelaide is the Great Ocean Road, begun as a make-work project for returning war veterans and today touted as the world's most beautiful stretch of highway. It passes along miles of shining beach, under rainforests, and through small wildlife sanctuaries, colonies, and idyllic tourist towns. While common consensus among the author and his fellow travelers was that many stretches of road in coastal New Zealand were as beautiful or more so than this one, it is nevertheless a must visit site while in this part of the country.

#### **4.4.4 Adelaide**

Adelaide doesn't have any single major tourist attraction. The old Adelaide market can be a good source for a number of cheap deals on souvenirs; however, so can the flea large flea market in downtown Sydney. Also of note, Adelaide provides a cheap means by which to reach Alice Springs via the, "Legendary Ghan," train route. Nearby Kangaroo

Island is supposed to be quite beautiful teeming with Australian wildlife including penguins and seals.

#### **4.4.5 Alice Springs and Central Australia**

The impressive thing about Alice Springs is the simple fact that it exists. Surrounded for hundreds of miles on all sides by nothing but desert, it is an impressive outpost, roughly the size of Waterloo without the other two members of the tri-city area attached, surrounded by empty desert scrubland. Tourists come here as a stop on their way to the most famous sites of the desert outback: Uluru also known as Ayer's Rock, and Kata Tjuta also known as the Olgas.

Uluru is the world's largest monolith. It is one of those sights whose value is hard to place into words but leaves an indelible impression nevertheless. Kata Tjuta has a similar effect. They are lone sudden massive outcroppings in the midst of nothingness. It should be noted that both are very sacred to local aboriginals who, while they are unable to prevent tourists from climbing to the summit of Uluru due to obligations placed upon them by the Australian government, nevertheless request that visitors observe the rock without climbing it or taking anything away from it. For them the effect of tourists climbing over the rock seems as it would to a Catholic forced to watch tourists attempting to scramble up the sides of St. Peter's Square in Rome.

The highways leading to and from Alice Springs are simple straight two-lane affairs that can continue for hundreds of kilometers without a change in direction or scenery. A water mirage appearing on the road just under the horizon is a common sight along this route. Also, for those driving enthusiasts, the highway has no speed limit. Approximately 400km to the north of Alice Springs are the Devil's Marbles, a grouping of giant smoothly rounded boulders, the results of nearly a billion years of wind erosion.

Also worthy of note in this area are the various sites of the outback accessible as part of organized tours running between Adelaide and Alice Springs. The mining town of Coober Pedy is constructed almost entirely underground out of used mines. It is rich with both opal and very eccentric miners from throughout the globe.

#### **4.4.6 Northeast Queensland**

The northeast coast of Queensland provides ample opportunities for surfing and Scuba Diving. Extremely cheap but thorough scuba courses as well as accommodation are offered by Salty's in Bundaberg. If given the option, paying a little extra to complete one's course on the nearby artificial reef is well worth the small additional expense. Bundaberg is also the Australian capital for backpackers looking for extra through fruit picking. Four-wheel drive adventures can be found on Frazer Island. Sailing adventures through the beautiful Whitsunday Islands onboard world class yachts are available in Airlie Beach. The Whitsundays also provide better scuba diving than can arguably be found along the Great Barrier Reef outside Cairns. Townsville is home to one of the world's best underwater shipwreck dives. Lastly, with more tourist agencies per capita than virtually anywhere else on Earth, Cairns provides a useful base of operations from which to visit the Great Barrier Reef, the rainforests of Cape Tribulation, the national parks of the Northern Territory, or just about anywhere in Queensland.



## **5. New Zealand**

No visit to Australia would be complete without a visit to New Zealand. Many have found this smaller nation to be more beautiful and worthwhile than its larger neighbour. It's hard to argue the point. In general, while parts of the country can be seen in only two weeks, at least a month is necessary to fully appreciate the sites available, and two months would be more appropriate.

### **5.1 Cheap flights from Australia**

It may be possible to route one's return flight to Brisbane via New Zealand. If not, cheap flights to and from New Zealand are readily available in Australia. With a lot of luck, a round trip flight from Brisbane to Auckland may cost as little as \$400AUD. More realistically, the flight will have a base charge of around \$550AUD or more. Again, good deals are often available through Student Flights.

### **5.2 North island**

The North Island is home to New Zealand's sheep and cattle. They are as numerous as sand on the beach. The towering Kauri trees of the area north of Auckland, including the famous Lord of the Forest, Tane Mahuta, are worth a visit. History and culture buffs may also be interested in the treaty ground at Waitangi and the most northerly point in New Zealand, Cape Reinga, from which the native Maori believe that the spirits of their deceased begin the trip to the afterlife. The area around Auckland also houses a number of thermal beaches, fun for both their novelty and their relaxation properties. Exploring the glow worm caves in the area around Waitomo is an otherworldly experience not to be missed.

The traditional Maori way of life is showcased at ceremonial dinners known as Hangi. These are often found in the town of Rotorua, a town pervaded by a horrible stench stemming from its proximity to a number of nearby geysers and sulfurous springs. Compensating for the smell, however, the geysers and springs make for a very interesting

sight. The nearby Tongariro Crossing hike is meant to be one of the world's most beautiful day hikes. While more difficult in winter, it is not necessarily inaccessible.

Also of note for those fans of history and science is the national museum in Wellington. The museum houses a variety of fun and interactive exhibits on New Zealand's history and culture. Travel between the south and the north island can be accomplished via ferry, operating multiple times each day for a cost of approximately \$50NZD.

### **5.3 South island**

The South Island has fewer individual sites of interest than the north. It is however generally considered to be the more beautiful and impressive of the two. A variety of wildlife preserves can be found upon it as can some of the world's most beautiful nature trails, the three day Milford trail being a prime example.

Not to be missed on the south island is a visit to either the Fox or Franz Josef glacier and a trip to Milford Sound in Fiordland National Park. The glacier can be experienced first hand via a day long guided trek. Half day long hikes generally do not reach far enough to be worthwhile, while helicopter flights are quite expensive. In Milford Sound, kayak tours of the surrounding fjords costing approximately \$80NZD allow one to observe wild seals and sometimes penguins as they swim within arm's length of the boat.

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

Studying, traveling, and living in Australia can be the experience of a lifetime. The adventure can be as big or as small as one wants. The information given in this report is hardly meant to be exhaustive. If you have any questions regarding the report or Australian travel in general, please don't hesitate to contact the author at: [aj2kaufm@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:aj2kaufm@uwaterloo.ca). Good luck.

# Appendix A: Travel E-mail Log

## Hong Kong and Brisbane:

Hello Family and Friends!

Welcome to my bulk e-mail list for Australia. I know that I've promised just about all of you that I'd keep in touch. This is the easiest way I've found for me to do it. For those who are new to my bulk e-mails, here are the rules:

- 1) I will respond to individual mails, it just takes longer.
- 2) I don't expect you to read all of it. (These e-mails tend to be very long, as they're really just a personal travel diary for my own benefit, and a way of letting the rest of the world know that I'm not dead by demonstrating that I occasionally send e-mails). My advice is to skim for what seem like the good parts.
- 3) If you know of anyone that I neglected to add to the list, write me and let me know.
- 4) If you want to be removed from the list, write me and let me know.

For those of you interested in contacting me this term, the number from North America is 011 61 7 33 713 407. The address is Unit 2 / 116 Sir Fred Schonell Drive, St. Lucia QLD, 4067, Australia. It may take me a few more days to get through all my accumulated e-mails from the past week as I'm still having problems getting Outlook Express properly working on the network here.

It's now been a little over a week since I left Toronto. In that time, I've managed to stopover in Anchorage, to see a fair-sized chunk of Hong Kong, to get pulled-over by Australian cops for dope-smoking, and thankfully to find a reasonably nice house in which to stay in Brisbane.

The adventure starts in Toronto on February 20<sup>th</sup>. My late check-in at the airport that evening had forced me to take a middle seat, instead of the aisle seat that I had booked for my twenty-hour long flight to Hong Kong. I tried various schemes at first to trade seats with someone. None of the people sitting around me spoke any English. Needless to say, I was caught in the middle seat for the rest of the flight. My one chance to really stand and stretch my legs took place around 4am Toronto time when we stopped over in Anchorage Alaska for refueling.

It could have been worse though. On the same flight were my classmates Melanie and Jay. Melanie had checked in early enough to get the window seat that she wanted. Jay checked in just a little before me. He got his aisle seat, but unfortunately, he got it right in the last row of the plane where all the food was kept refrigerated. I'm told he spent the whole flight shivering under two layers of airline blankets.

February 21 was uneventful. Thanks to the international dateline, it lasted only about three hours, throughout most of which I was unconscious. We arrived in Hong Kong at about 7:00am local time. It then took us three hours of losing people in bathrooms at customs, of searching for a restaurant in the Hong Kong airport where I could eat something without meat in it, and of debating where to go in Hong Kong before we actually left.

Hone Kong is a conglomeration of several islands. Our first stop was the Po Lin monastery on Lantau Island, home of the largest outdoor Buddha statue in the world. The bus ride from the airport is nearly an hour long and was actually something of a highlight itself. The route proceeds up a steep mountain ridge, down the other side, along the coast, past some small lakes, and back up a new slope. When going uphill the bus struggles in first gear, going so slowly that we joked half-seriously about needing to get out to push

it. When going downhill, the road winds dangerously around a series of 180-degree twists bouncing heavily over potholes throughout. The end result feels something like a roller coaster.

The views along the way were beautiful: green hillsides, clouds crawling over mountains that tower over the seaside, and huge numbers of construction workers. We guessed that the whole region must be prone to mudslides as all of the embankments along the side of the bus route were filled with evenly spaced lengths of hollow metal cylinders. Construction workers, dressed in an interesting combination of standard orange-yellow vests, and hard hats or traditional straw hats, lined the route every few hundred meters working on sections of the embankment. Safety on Hong Kong construction sites seems to be much looser than it is in North America. At one point, about two-thirds of the way to the monastery, the Buddha can be seen from across a wide flat lake, towering up in the distance on top of one of the highest mountain peaks.

The monastery itself was an interesting experience. The roads leading up to the various shrines and pagodas were all lined with large incense burners for those bringing offerings. We viewed the different statues of deities and bodhisattvas, each with its own kneelers and stands for offerings of fruit and incense, took some pictures of the traditional archway, and proceeded on to the Buddha itself.

The main statue itself dominates the rest of the monastery. Reaching the base of the statue requires about a two-minute climb up a long straight stairway. The statue is the height of about seven people, perched on a pedestal, surrounded by statues of lesser bodhisattvas. The view from the pedestal shows the surrounding lakes, hillsides, and islands leading out to the sea. Again, needless to say, it's a wonderful view.

After a bumpy bus ride and a brief stint of getting lost, we arrived back at the airport. We then took a bus to Kowloon Island to walk down Nathan Street. Nathan Street is the central shopping street in Hong Kong. It is like a stereotype of the crowded Asian downtown come to life. Stores selling phone cards, magazines, watches, electronics, clothes, and foodstuffs spring off in every direction. Large neon signs point the way to various stores day and night. As you travel from the north end of the street to the south end along the shoreline, the number of non-Asian foreigners begins to grow and the street begins to look less like Asia and more like a North American Chinatown with very heavily overpriced hotels.

Throughout the whole stretch there is a press of other human beings trying to get from one place to another. Construction and repair work are fairly continuous throughout the whole area, with bamboo scaffolding along the side of a building every hundred meters or so. Safety being what it was, at one point, we passed a construction worker in a hole in the sidewalk, trying to remove an electrical cable from where it had been buried by yanking on it repeatedly as hard as he could.

From Kowloon we took a ferry across to the main island, taking photos and admiring the views of the Hong Kong skyline along the way. Once there, we wandered the streets in search of Man Mo monastery, the oldest monastery in Hong Kong. Getting lost along the way we passed once or twice down side streets crammed full of vendors selling more wristwatches than even a Hindu statue would ever need, cheap children's toys that made bleeping sounds, and of course t-shirts.

The Man Mo monastery appeared old and a little dilapidated from the outside. It was filled with smoke and incense to a point that made the eyes itch. Hanging from the roof in layers were hundreds of burning incense spirals, shaped like stretched-out mosquito coils and anywhere from ten centimeters to half of a meter in diameter. Leaning against a wall to take a picture caused my shirt to be covered in a thick layer of ash. There was an old man present whose only job was continually to sweep up the ashes of incense from the altars and from the floor. A large bell and drum were placed just inside one of the two entrances so that worshippers could ring in the new year as they passed.

By the time we were done visiting Man Mo, night was beginning to fall. We made our way at Jay's suggestion to the Shangri-La hotel in downtown Hong Kong, where a bar on one of the upper floors was supposed to offer a spectacular view of the city. Our plan to view the sunset went a little awry when we realized that the bar faced east rather than west. The view, however, was as spectacular as promised.

From the window of the bar, one could see the skyscrapers of Honk Kong, with the water passing through the middle of them, and a continual stream of traffic winding its way between the buildings on land and

sea. We sat there sipping our unfortunately expensive drinks, munching on complimentary nuts, and admiring the view until nightfall.

After that, it was back across the ferry to Kowloon, up the bus to the airport, and through some very poor quality dinner food before we boarded the plane for the final leg of our trip to Brisbane. This flight, except for a brief stopover in Cairns was comparatively quick and uneventful. We were greeted at the Brisbane airport by quarantine sniffing dogs. One dog became convinced that there was fruit in my backpack. Human quarantine agents also became concerned that Melanie's stuffed bear might pose a risk to Australian health and safety. Luckily we made it through customs without too much hassle, met with our driver and were dropped off into a sweltering 30°C nearly 100% humidity day.

Melanie and I met with our friend, Evgueni, as we were being dropped off at the youth hostel where we would be staying for the next few nights. Jay had enrolled at one of the on-campus college residences, Union College, and continued on with our driver to be dropped off there.

Accents and slang terms aside, Australia is remarkably similar to Canada. The same fast-food and clothing chains are everywhere. K-mart is still in business here. The real difference is in the climate and the local wildlife. No two types of plant seem to repeat themselves wherever you walk. Squirrels are replaced by lizards. Robins and other small birds are replaced by giant bats called flying foxes. At night, the bats have a tendency to take off unexpectedly within two feet of one's head without warning.

We spent the first four days or so trying to balance our time unsuccessfully between orientation sessions, house hunting, and getting our courses in order. It was stressful and essentially typical of the process for most school terms back home, with the added benefits of having been unable to start looking for a house until one week before the start of the fall term, and needing to find a place within the first five days or so or risk being in breach of our student visas.

The great drought that had been plaguing the locals had finally broken the previous day. The rain was pretty consistent after we arrived. Usually it waited until about five minutes after we'd exited any given building to start pouring again. Needless to say, we were all pretty stressed during this time.

For the past year, Marc, another classmate of ours, has been traveling and studying at the Sydney University of Technology. Marc is an extremely nice, fun guy, with some crazy curly hair and a penchant for travel. We arranged to meet with him during our third day of house hunting in Brisbane. After much telephone tag we tracked each other down on the side of the road. Marc is currently driving a very sickly looking hippie-mobile running on its last-legs. It sports a child's drawing of a happy sunlit day along one side, a big mattress in the rear covered in old clothes, and some tie-dyed drapes on the inner-roof with a large ohm at their center.

That evening, we all attended a party for new international students at the Regatta, a local pub. We chatted for a few hours, until eventually we realized that if Marc was going to get back to some friends of his in Byron Bay, a nearby beach town, on time, we'd all have to go home. Evgueni hopped into the passenger seat, and Melanie and I went in the back. About five minutes later, the cops pulled us over.

Melanie and I lay down on top of the mattress in the back, trying our best to be unnoticeable as Marc answered the following questions: "Do you know why we pulled you over?", "Had anything to drink tonight sir?", "Been smoking at all then?", and of course, "Would you please breathe in here?" Marc was told that they'd been following us for some time before pulling us over for driving without headlights. Melanie and I were very obviously trying to be subtle about our presence without seatbelts in the car, but having already made eye contact with one of the cops and subsequently been ignored during Marc's inspection, I was becoming progressively less worried. The cops then waived us on for the night with a simple, "Thank you very much sir. Have a good even... are those people in the rear wearing any seatbelts?!"

This led to a whole new world of fun. The second cop now opened the rear door to find us lying down trying to stay out of sight. We were quite obviously not wearing any seatbelts. So, when the cop, already knowing the answer, asked us directly whether we were wearing any seatbelts, not wanting to get our friend

in trouble we responded with the obvious, dead silence followed by "... Er," "...Um," and "...Uhhh." We got lucky. Seeing as the van didn't reek of pot and we were all reasonably sober, we were let off with a two-minute speech about how often they have to scrape stupid people like us off the road after traffic accidents. None of us were complaining, especially when Marc told us that the Australian penalty for driving without a seatbelt was \$600/passenger and loss of license for the driver.

As far as the house hunt goes, we eventually found ourselves a really nice place to stay on our fourth day in town. It's a nice two-story unit with three bedrooms and two and a half bathrooms. Evgueni and I are splitting the master bedroom. We've taken in a fourth housemate, a Swedish girl named Josefin, to offset the cost. All told, having just rented our furnishings yesterday, we're paying about \$360CDN/month for a really nice place within walking distance of the campus and the shops.

Yesterday we took a tour of the city offered by the university. The highlight was a visit to the Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary. Melanie, Evgueni, and I all now have cards with pictures of each of us holding a real live koala. We also got the chance to feed kangaroos, have a look at some genuine dingoes, and try without success to photograph a very hyperactive Tasmanian devil.

Beyond that, we've been doing the usual international travel setup stuff. Today I purchased a five-dollar bike from the Salvation Army. Both wheels were flat so I was forced to walk it home from the store. The walk took about ninety minutes. It poured for about thirty of those. At one point lightning struck within a few hundred meters of me. The rain was a relief though in the sweltering heat.

I've just removed one of the old inner tubes from the bike and will be buying some replacements tomorrow. While I was getting the bike home, Evgueni and Melanie were purchasing an inflatable pool. It's about a third of the way inflated as I write.

All in all, with the initial stress of getting settled in starting to subside, the summer is looking up. I'll be sending out more of these bulk e-mails if and when anything interesting happens. Hope everyone's doing well back home,

Adam

## **In and Around Brisbane:**

Hello again everyone,

I've decided to send out the next two bulk e-mails in rapid succession over the next week as schoolwork has started to pile up enough that pretty soon interesting stories may be few and far between for a little while. Thanks to popular demand this e-mail comes with illustrations courtesy of Melanie's camera. Before I get to the good stuff though, for anyone new to the list, here are the rules:

- 1) I will respond to individual mails, it just takes longer.
- 2) I don't expect you to read all of it. (These e-mails tend to be very long, as they're really just a personal travel diary for my own benefit, and a way of letting the rest of the world know that I'm not dead by demonstrating that I occasionally send e-mails). My advice is to skim for what seem like the good parts.
- 3) If you know of anyone that I neglected to add to the list, write me and let me know.
- 4) If you want to be removed from the list, write me and let me know.

At the end of my last e-mail, Melanie, Evgueni, and I were just settling into our new house, while Jay got set up in Union College. Thanks to creative scheduling, the four of us have managed to avoid any form of class on Tuesdays. So it was that on the second day of classes, we decided along with a few of Jay's new friends from Union College to try and make a trip to the beach at Surfer's Paradise about an hour outside of Brisbane.

As some of you may remember from my previous correspondence, we arrived in Brisbane right at the end of a drought, and smack in the middle of the rainy season. Because of this we were making our journey with a little trepidation. I didn't help things much as we reached the train station by loudly informing the whole world, "So what's the worst that could happen? As if it's actually going to rain." My only excuse is that I was in such a good mood at the time that I didn't realize that I was jinxing the whole excursion with my careless remarks. I was quickly told to shut-up.

The train ride took an hour. I tried to be sociable, but after discovering that I could just as easily fall asleep on some extra seats, I chose the latter. I normally make it a policy to avoid fast food at all costs, especially when I'm overseas and could potentially eat somewhere at least more interesting if not more environmentally friendly but when we arrived in Surfer's Paradise it was already just after 2pm and we were all very hungry. Predictably, once the train-ride ended, we had a quick bus trip, grabbed a bite to eat at the local Subway, and made a beeline for the seashore.

The beach at Surfer's Paradise is not nearly as spectacular as its name would lead you to believe. It seems to me, based on my limited experience, very nice as beaches go, but again nothing spectacular. Luckily, despite brief torrential downpours during our bus trip it wasn't raining at this point. We all stripped off our shoes and hopped happily onto the sand. About five steps in, I remembered that my bathing suit was still in my backpack and not around my waist as it should have been. This necessitated a quick reversal of the shoe-stripping and another quick beeline, this one past the front desk of the nearby Novotel hotel with its clerks all wearing slightly questioning expressions into their bathroom for a quick change.

By the time I returned to the beach, swimming had already begun. Jay and his friends Jason and Joy decided for the most part to stay on the sand and bask in the sun a little. Melanie, Evgueni, and Faiza, an exchange student from UBC were already in the water when I got to the beach. All along the entrances to the beach were signs warning that swimmers must only swim between the flags. This didn't appear to be a particularly difficult thing to do though as there were flags all along the beach. As it turned out, after a while, one begins to notice that the flags do seem to come in pairs, often with a couple of lifeguards sitting in a pickup truck along the beach observing from between them.

Despite a few short rest breaks, during which Melanie occasionally attempted to bury herself in the sand, we all frolicked (there's really no better word for what we were doing) in the waves for about an hour.



We'd sometimes swim out just past the point where the waves broke in a shower of white caps, and then try to ride them in to shore. I'm still not sure how I managed to do it, but at one point I propelled myself with my upper-body suspended out the front of a wave, arms spread-eagled in front of me, for across about twenty meters of surf. After running to shore I garnered some interest from Melanie and Faiza by exclaiming "Lookee-what-I-can-do," as much as seemed necessary. My subsequent attempts to repeat the experience ended in a ridiculous combination of at best, complete failure, and at worst, being tossed head-over-heels with a bit of spine twisting for good measure a few more yards towards the shore.

Eventually we headed for shore and crawled out of the water. Figuring out the system of flags had been fairly difficult at first and we'd thoroughly enjoyed swimming as far out as seemed safe. It's probably for these two reasons that by this point, Melanie had accumulated three warnings from the lifeguards for swimming where she shouldn't, and Faiza and I were both tied at two. For purposes of comparison I don't remember any of the locals getting warned once during our time in the ocean.

On shore, we snapped a few photographs, noticed that it was about to rain and made a dash through the ensuing downpour towards the bus stop. Remember my comment from the beginning of the trip regarding rain? I certainly did then.

Over the next little while, with the beach out of the way, we started sampling other fun things to do outdoors in the Brisbane area. Melanie had noticed earlier that the university's rock climbing club had a free outing for those thinking of joining on Sunday morning. It must have been a really good ad because Evgueni, Melanie, Josefine, our Swedish flatmate, and I all somehow managed to drag ourselves out of bed on Sunday morning and across the Brisbane River and towards a series of cliffs on the opposite shore.

When we arrived at the cliffs we were treated to free harnesses, free instruction, free optional helmets, free soft drinks, and even a free Bar-b-q. Unfortunately there were no free climbing shoes, so a couple of my toes got nicely cut up that morning. The three of us from Waterloo decided to wait in line for a slightly more difficult course near the main meeting area, while Josefine walked a little further to find her own route.

Our course consisted of a reasonably difficult beginning, followed by a large overhang that somehow managed to be constantly wet, without a visible source of water, and then a reasonably easy climb to the top. An organizer from the climbing club could be heard reading from his guide book to another group of passers-by that this course was called "Slippery when Wet." Melanie went first and was the only one of us to make it all the way to the top. Evgueni and I both had to admit defeat after a while. After my failed attempt, to compensate my bruised ego, I made sure that I climbed all the way to the top of an easier course before we left.

From the whole experience, I think that I can now safely say that outdoor climbing is worlds away from the world of screwed-in store-bought handholds and footholds to which most of us are more accustomed. I can also safely say that harder courses have shorter lineups. (Jay and Faiza arrived about twenty minutes after us, and still hadn't had a chance to climb by the time we were leaving about three hours later.)

After climbing, we walked to a public manmade beach on the campus of Griffith University, another local place of study. We relaxed, read a little, swam a little, and explored a little. I winced in pain once or twice throughout all of the above from the cuts on my toes. Melanie invented a game that involved one of us propelling another into the air by letting the first person stand on the shoulders of the second, while the first jumped up off underwater from the bottom very quickly. The beach was divided up into a series of smaller pools all separated by bridges and pathways. At one point, I joined Evgueni and Melanie for some clandestine bridge-crossing, pool-hopping, and exploring.

We crossed barefoot, in our bathing suits, through a small artificial rainforest, down some steps, and into a square with a Burmese pagoda, an intricately carved two story wooden structure. Every crevice had been worked into a pattern, a face, or a representation of a Burmese deity of some kind. Melanie grew bored with this faster than Evgueni and I did, so we emerged from the pagoda to find her tightrope walking up and down the banister of a nearby flight of steps. All of us being barefoot clad in only bathing suits in a

public place seemed to add to the strangeness of the situation. Evgueni and I began laughing out loud. This distracted Melanie and made her lose her balance, falling off the banister. Throughout this little escapade none of the passing local folk so much as raised an eyebrow. Apparently this sort of activity is common enough to go unnoticed here. Another reason I really enjoy living in Brisbane. Over the next week we managed to take things easy and not do too much. The following Monday Evgueni, Melanie, Jay, and I decided that enough sitting around the house was enough and decided to book a spot with Rob's Rainforest Tours, a brochure for which we'd found at the Youth Hostel we'd initially been staying at in Brisbane.

To really appreciate what follows, one needs to be aware that all of Brisbane was originally sub-tropical rainforest. Back home we have Maples and Cedars, here we have Strangling Figs and Palms. I've come across spiders as big as my fist in my kitchen, in my garage, and spinning webs in front of the back door to the house. To really get the point across, as I was making the point form notes for this e-mail I stepped outside into our backyard for a breath of fresh air. In our backyard I spotted a beautiful red, green, and yellow bird about the size of sparrow that may or may not have been a parrot. As I started to daydream, it took off, flew within a foot of my face, and disappeared over my neighbor's roof.

We were picked up by Rob, a jovial slight middle-aged man who seems to thoroughly enjoy his work, from in front of the Hilton Hotel downtown just after 8am on Tuesday morning. Driving to our first stop, Rob regaled us with the story of how he'd come to work in the tour business as a means of furthering his backpacking for three months every year, and engaged all of us in a big conversation about where we came from and what travels we'd done. It was immediately obvious that Rob had a knack for interacting with groups of people. We were joined on the tour by a Danish couple, and a Swiss-German girl named Claudia.

Our first stop was at a lookout spot just outside of town. It offered a great view of the valley in which Brisbane lies. We stopped there at a small picnic table for coffee, tea, and cake while Rob pulled out a series of maps and had us all point to the cities from which we came, often comparing notes on what had changed since the last time he'd visited that particular part of the globe. He was very well traveled.

The next few stops offered varying views of the Glasshouse Mountains, a series of volcanic caps leftover from a point some many millions of years ago when Australia's tectonic plate was passing over a particularly hot part of the earth's core. As the millennia passed, the softer outer rock that formed these mountains was worn away, while the hard volcanic core remained. This left a range of mountains with a gentle smooth appearance suddenly interrupted for the top quarter or third of their height by a vertical jump to their peaks. The local aborigines used to think of them as a family owing to the appearance of seemingly giant facial features on several of the peaks, known as the father, mother, son, and twins respectively.

At one stop, to get a better view, Melanie decided to climb a concrete tank by the side of the road. Evgueni and I joined her. This got Rob's attention as apparently no one had ever thought to do this before and he was afraid that the tank would not support our weight at the center of its lid. Anyone who knows Melanie probably won't be that surprised by this. As we were leaving, a group of Japanese tourists, having seen our display, decided to try it for themselves. For all I know, Melanie's trend of climbing the tank continues still.

After several stops we arrived at our final destination, the rainforest of Kondalilla Falls National Park. Subtropical rainforests are strange places. They are very cozy and similar to our own forests back home in the ways in which I suppose all forests are similar, and yet completely fundamentally different in others. Rob highlighted the tour by pointing out the more interesting differences. About five minutes in, he whipped out a Swiss army knife blade and lifted a small invisible flap about two centimeters by three from the ridge wall at the side of the path. This was the lair of a Trapdoor Spider, a creature that rather than spinning a web, uses its thread to support the walls of a small tunnel and simply opens the door and lets dinner come in when it's hungry.

Further down the path we came to several other tunnels, these without trapdoors, some of them small enough to barely fit the size of a sewing needle. These were the lairs of the Trapdoors Spider's cousin, the

Funnel Web spider, whose urge to tunnel is so strong that often a newly hatched spider's first act will be to build its own small tunnel. Rob let us know to be careful as these ones were venomous and often the bane of local home gardeners who had to rush to hospital after digging too near to one.

At this point, I think it's necessary to get across an interesting point, hopefully without scaring many of my relatives. Australia has the largest proportion of deadly venomous creatures of any continent on Earth. The Box Jellyfish in off the coasts is globally the most venomous and stunningly painful creature there is. Crocodile's abound in smaller less used waterways. In the top ten list of most venomous snakes, Australia account for over half. As I may have mentioned in my previous bulk e-mail, I've had to kill a potentially lethal Redback Spider that I found spinning its web between my bikewheel spokes. Josefine apparently found a large angry lizard within a foot of her face earlier today while stepping around our backyard, a place whose safety some of you may be beginning to question. It's for this reason that I was only half-surprised about three days later when I read in Bill Bryson's book, "A Sunburned Country," that the Funnel Web Spider is the most venomous spider on Earth. Yes, that includes Tarantulas and other wimpy creatures from the Amazon.

As we walked along the rainforest path, we encountered a two-foot long Lace Monitor Lizard followed by a series of Strangling Fig trees, a common tree here which starts as a seed high up in a host tree, grows roots around its host to the ground, begins to envelope the host while stealing its light, and eventually is left a hundred feet in the air with a hollow spot at its center as a testament to how it grew up. Another tree, whose name escapes me, had a perfectly circular trunk often well over two meters around, and dropped huge pineapple looking cases of nuts only every third year while in it was in bloom. At the base of the path we ate lunch under a fifty-meter series of waterfalls and admired the view, as well as the local water dragon lizards who seemed to enjoy the view themselves.

On the way to the rainforest, Rob had showed us fields of pineapples and macadamia nuts. They were both interesting for different reasons. Pineapples apparently don't grow on trees as I'd thought, but rather as the centerpiece on top of a very short piece of scrub. Macadamia nuts are just interesting in that apparently they originated as a species in Australia. On the way home, we stopped off at a rural produce stand, where I managed to purchase some Australian delicacies: fresh figs, a pineapple, honey roasted macadamia nuts, and something called a custard apple, which appears nothing like an apple, tastes nothing like an apple, is eaten with a spoon, but is otherwise a pretty tasty fruit.

That evening, Melanie, Evgueni, and I arranged to meet back with Claudia, the Swiss German girl from the tour to catch a showing of the movie, *The Pianist* downtown. I highly recommend the movie to anyone who hasn't seen it yet. I'm still processing much of what I saw in it a few weeks ago. By the time the movie finished, bus service had stopped. Luckily, we managed to convince Claudia that it was cheaper and safer to take the hour long walk back to our place and sleep in a sleeping bag on our couch than to try to make her way back to her hostel in another part of town.

As a small interesting aside, there's currently an ad campaign throughout Brisbane showing a poster of the Hong Kong skyline with the slogan, "Hong Kong: The Ultimate Travel Experience." I'm still trying to figure out how the people of Hong Kong are trying to convince the people of Brisbane that they live in the more exciting and interesting of the two places...

Now as for the bit about me shaving my head: First off, I'd like to thank everyone who either donated online or asked me to donate on their behalf. The story of the head shaving isn't too exciting. On Friday March 14, after my classes had ended, Melanie, Evgueni, Josefine, and I went to a small hotel and pub across from the local shopping center. I signed in with the people running the event. After about fifteen minutes my turn was called. I went onto a stage, had a quick chitchat with the master of ceremonies and a girl with some hair clipper and promptly had all but about three millimeters of my hair shaved off. This wasn't really all that exciting for me and felt a little anticlimactic. I think that this is the reason that I asked Evgueni after we returned from grocery shopping to help me shave off the rest of my hair stubble with my beard razor. Pictures of bald me, courtesy of Melanie, are attached as are some other pictures of things described in this e-mail and the previous one.

Anyway, that's more than I had time to type just now. In the next further exciting bulk e-mail I'll be sending you our exploits on St. Paddy's day with an Irish international student, as well as our weekend of hiking, camping, and bird-watching in the mountains and forests around Brisbane. All the best to everyone back home,

Adam

## Of Sailing and Irishmen:

Hey again everyone,

As promised here's the next installment in the bulk e-mailings. I wrote this back on Tuesday to help keep ahead of my other responsibilities. Luckily nothing interesting has happened since then. To those of you whose e-mail inboxes I crashed last time, I'm sorry. This one's got a lot fewer pictures. As usual, the rules:

- 1) I will respond to individual mails, it just takes longer.
- 2) I don't expect you to read all of it. (These e-mails tend to be very long, as they're really just a personal travel diary for my own benefit, and a way of letting the rest of the world know that I'm not dead by demonstrating that I occasionally send e-mails). My advice is to skim for what seem like the good parts.
- 3) If you know of anyone that I neglected to add to the list, write me and let me know.
- 4) If you want to be removed from the list, write me and let me know.

The weekend after the rainforest tour was a bit of a trip down memory lane for me. Evgueni and I managed to reserve some spots with the University of Queensland Sailing Club for the excursion to Radcliffe on Sunday. About twenty of us packed ourselves into four cars with five sailboats and a motorboat attached to trailers at the back and headed for the beach. The sailing club here at UQ is very well equipped. They've got a fleet of about half a dozen windsurfers, as well as about ten sailboats: three Lasers, a couple of Catamarans, some classes whose name escapes me, and a couple of Tasers, which I suspect are Laser 2s but haven't seen one to be sure. On this particular day we brought out the Catamarans and the Lasers.

En route to the trip I ran into a friend of mine from some of the orientation sessions, Philine, a Dutch architecture exchange grad student. Both of us used to sail regularly for years and neither of us had actually set foot in a boat for about five years. Philine's sailing experience was almost exclusively in Catamarans. (For those of you unfamiliar with sailing terms, these are the boats that rather than one continuous hull, have two small hulls connected by a trampoline like net.) I'd never sailed in one before. We struck a deal to try and get one of the Cats to ourselves have her teach me a bit about them.

Unfortunately, it didn't appear that this plan was going to work. With about twenty people wanting to sail, and only five boats available, there simply wasn't room. Lasers are ideally solo boats. One of the Cats was a learner's boat that was meant to hold up to about six people. The other was a very well rigged racing boat designed for two. Fitting twenty people on these boats involved a bit of over-crowding and some waiting. We lucked out in discovering that one of the lasers, a rundown used boat that had recently been purchased for only \$200 complete with all the rigging and a trailer for the car, wasn't half as rundown as it looked. This meant that while other people were cramming onto the other boats at much more than their normal capacity, Philine and I managed to get one of the Lasers ourselves.

There was very little wind. By this I mean that there was next to no wind at all. Despite this, having been away from sailing for far too long, I was having a great time. I hogged control of the tiller and the main sail for the next ninety minutes until it was almost time for us to return to shore. Philine didn't seem to mind. Lasers didn't interest her as much as Cats and, like me, she was just glad to be back on the water.

After trading off our Laser to a few folks on shore, Philine noticed a jellyfish stranded and baking on the beach. The jellyfish was not at all what I expected it to be. For those of you who have never seen one and happen to be Jewish, jellyfish look like nothing so much as a big glob of the gelatinous stuff you find in gefilte fish cans. For the non-Jews amongst you, this means that they're halfway between the stuff at the center of a jellybean and a sizeable helping of nose mucous. This one was about this size of a fist. If it hadn't been for the fact that it appeared to be very shallowly and slowly breathing when I poked it with a rock, I might have thought that someone on the beach had recently come down with the worst cold in recorded history.

I decided to be nice and put it back in the water. Being very careful, as we had no idea if it was poisonous, using two rocks that I found on the beach, I scraped it up and carried it to the ocean. Once it was back in the water, it immediately became apparent that thing did in fact have a mouth. I say this because it began opening and closing it repeatedly. Beyond that one feature though, it didn't seem to have any other identifiable ones. We decided to leave well enough alone and went on shore for lunch.

It was a quick lunch. Just as I was halfway finished eating, one of the Catamarans returned to shore. It seemed that Philine and I were the only ones interested in sailing right then as everyone else was either eating or just returning to eat. When we left this time, the wind was strong enough for some real sailing. I let Philine do most of the work while I handled the jib, the smaller of the two sails, and played around by seeing how far over the side of the boat I could hike. In sailing, hiking means to wrap your feet around a strap or any other available means of support, stick your butt over the side, and maybe even arch your back and try to tip your head straight down towards the water. I arched and tipped for all that I was worth and promptly lost my beloved Tilley hat from off my head. Philine performed a textbook man-overboard manoeuver to get the hat back as we both called out encouragement to our lost shipmate as you're supposed to during such activities. "You're doing okay. We'll be right there to pick you up. Can you swim? Keep kicking!" You get the idea. Either way, we both had a good laugh and I got my hat back.

Philine was more gracious than I had been that morning and actually gave me a little time at the tiller while she handled the jib sail. I soon discovered that steering in one of these boats has less to do with where you point the tiller and the rudder, and more to do with how you position your sails. It's also extremely difficult to turn a catamaran through the wind. They're incredibly speedy but they handle like irritable donkeys. I was having the time of my life out there. Unfortunately, we eventually had to come back to shore to be fair to other people who might want a turn.

We did get out one more time that afternoon near the end of the outing. Philine, Evgueni, about three other members of the club, and I all went out in the same Catamaran again. This was the learner boat, so it wasn't too overloaded by having six people in it. Philine and I started by giving a lesson for some of the beginners. This stopped when Philine decided it was her turn to lose a hat over the side. Unfortunately, my man overboard manoeuver was anything but textbook. We got caught facing into the wind and missed the hat entirely. Worse still, when I gave the tiller to Philine to have a try, she was unable to get the boat to point out of the wind again. Neither was I. Several minutes later when we finally got to sailing again, we'd totally lost sight of the hat. This resulted in a lot of apologies from me and an interesting exchange with one of the other boats that was out that day: "Have you seen a red hat anywhere?" "No ... have you seen a tiller extension anywhere?" We were losing fashion accessories. This guy was losing pieces of his boat.

The next day was St. Paddy's day. Various people in our circle having recently run into another friend of ours, Dan, an Irish exchange student, we all found ourselves invited to a party at his house. Though Dan is a Catholic Englishman by descent, he's lived in Dublin his whole life. He was quick to explain to all of us the true meaning of St. Patrick's holiday. Apparently that meaning is to be passed out on the floor of a dank pub in the middle of Dublin by 4pm. He further explained to us that, neglecting relative time zones, it was now 8pm and we were neither in Dublin, nor passed out, nor even in a dank pub. We had been neglectful on at least four counts. The situation, it seems, had to be rectified by the repeated serving of copious amounts of spiked punch and Australian beer while Dan and his American roommates expounded to us the virtues of lawn bowling.

To describe him in short, Dan is an English-Catholic, Dublin-Irish Paleologist with a penchant for lawn bowling, bird watching, and cricket. For those of you unsure what Paleology is, you aren't alone. My spell-checker in Microsoft Word doesn't even recognize it. We had a good few laughs trying to figure out what exactly it was throughout the start of the evening. Apparently it's something like paleobotany, only relating to much less complex organisms. In other words, studying fossils of things like algae. Dan is a sociable, generous, good-natured, and fun guy. He can also be, as some of you may have guessed, very easy to make fun of.

Eventually when the punch ran out we went down to the local pub where Dan insisted on buying round after round of beer and Irish Cream for the lot of us. Evgueni and I left a little early. We got Dan a bottle of Canadian Club as we left. From what I hear, Melanie began break-dancing about an hour after we left and Dan eventually stumbled off into downtown Brisbane looking for an Irish pub.

It was during St. Paddy's Day that in between drinks we began forming a plan to rent a car and go camping for the weekend. Evgueni would arrange the car rental. Dan would book the campsites. Melanie, Dan's flatmate Josh, and I would all take care of other business. In my case, this involved researching everything to do with purchasing a car in Queensland as well as airline tickets to Sydney and Melbourne during our Easter Week break. We'd found an '85 Ford Falcon that the owner was willing to part with for only \$1200AUD but in the end decided that it would be cheaper just to rent cars when we needed one.

Dan had been backpacking in the area last year so the plan he made was a good one based on some experience. We were to spend that night at a hostel in a small town called Murwillumbah before waking up first thing the next morning to hike to the top of Mt. Warning, the first place in Australia from which you can see the sunrise. After that, we would drive to Lamington National Park where we would camp on Saturday night. We would be treated to free ice cream courtesy of the hostel owner if we arrived before 9pm.

We got the free ice cream and about four hours sleep before leaving the next morning at 3am to start our hike. The hike to the top of Mt. Warning requires a recommended two hours in daylight to make a nearly 750m ascent. We were doing this through rainforest paths in the dark. Better still, we had only four flashlights for five people. This meant that Evgueni had no flashlight throughout the hike. My batteries died quickly, so I had no flashlight for over half of the hike. A lot of stumbling, foot blistering, and stubbed toes ensued. At one point, Evgueni nearly fell off the path but luckily was able to regain his balance.

The hike was an adventure. Along the way we spotted a wild bandicoot, briefly stunned by the bright glare from our flashlights. Mt. Warning is a volcanic cap similar to the Glasshouse Mountains, so the last fifteen minutes or so of the climb is an almost perfect vertical climb up some craggy rocks with a small guide chain nailed along the side of the route for support.

The view at the top was unfortunately pretty cloudy. Nevertheless, it was spectacular. About half an hour after our arrival, the sun arose out of the ocean spread its rays and briefly painted the whole horizon a fiery red before being obscured by some low-lying clouds. A minute or two after this, it popped its head above the clouds, providing light enough to see a view of smaller mountains and green valleys spreading out towards the seacoast. In some ways, the clouds actually made the view a little more interesting and fun to look at.

On the way up our pace had been frantically quick as we were afraid of missing the sunrise. We had climbed the two-hour hike in just over an hour. On the way down, we took our leisurely time. Dan stopped every so often to view the local bird life. His knowledge of the names of local birds was encyclopedic. He would be able to look at a dot in the distance, pause for a minute, and say confidently, "That's a spotted Lewis' Honey Eater." Other fun names included things like Laughing Kookaburra, Speckled Lyre Bird, and Dove-Tailed Thrush.

At first I found it a little difficult to get enthusiastic about bird watching as an activity while we hiked down the mountain. Somehow though, it becomes a lot more exciting when you're doing it in a rainforest. The birds are either extremely colorful, extremely odd-looking, or just plain weird, as was the case with the Laughing Kookaburra whose call genuinely sounds like it's cackling at something else's expense. Evgueni managed to pick up the necessary skills in no time, spotting birds from a mile away and promptly checking them out in Dan's binoculars. I was not so skillful. The few times that I borrowed the binoculars I'd have just enough time to see a vague blur as I tried to focus before the bird flew away and I was left with the sound of Dan's voice proclaiming, "Incredibly beautiful green plumage on that Mudnester," or something equally incomprehensible to let me know just what an event I'd missed.

Of course we did more than bird watch on the way down. Josh hiked on ahead. Mel and I sat by a small stream and sang tunes ranging from God Save the Queen to The Piano Man. Mel, fancying herself something of a Tarzana, made swings out of hanging U-shaped vines, and climbed one creeper for about twenty feet of its roughly one hundred foot height before we had to ask her very nicely to please come down as everyone else was a little scared. For the last bit of the trek Dan, Evgueni, and I left the track to look for snakes along a mostly dry streambed. Going off the track, I began to feel for the first time like I was in the kind of rainforest that you seen in the movies. Huge towering trees covered in moss with their roots wrapped around boulders lined the route. Sadly there were no snakes though.

From Mt. Warning we drove to Lamington National Park where we set up camp. Melanie, Evgueni, and I had invested in two \$25 two-man tents from K-mart and so we felt very well prepared. We were exhausted when we arrived. Mel went to sleep immediately. The rest of us went through yet another rainforest trek. As usual, we admired some spectacular views while Dan regaled us with tales of the local avian wildlife.

The one species of bird that Dan wasn't able to make us appreciate while we were camping was the Australian Turkey. Frankly, I don't think he appreciated it much himself. As birds go, they're quite ugly. They're also pests. As soon as food appears, they head straight for it. No amount of threatening gestures or shouting will make them go away. If you drive one away, an Australian Turkey will try to sneak up behind you to steal your food. Drive it away from behind you and the stupid bird will decide that maybe it should try walking right up in front of you the next time. This continues until either you eat the food, or the bird dies of a heart attack from the exertion of trying to steal it. Over the course of the weekend I managed to lose first a slice of bread after turning my back to get something to spread onto it, and then later an entire apple after walking away for about twenty seconds to fill up my water bottle at a nearby tap.

That night we all ate dinner at a picnic bench under a small shelter. As it turned out, the turkeys aren't the only local wildlife used to feeding from human meals. At one point a possum casually strolled up to the picnic table, hopped onto a seat, looked at what was available, looked inquiringly beside him at Evgueni, made his selection, and tried to eat Evgueni's food. Evgueni was having none of this and swatted the possum away. It stayed around for about five minutes, huddling in the corner of the shelter, staring at us with curious and reproachful eyes that seemed to ask, "Is that any way to treat a guest at your dinner table?"

As we were finishing dinner, it began to rain. By rain, I mean that what started as some dry heat lightning, moved into steady drizzle, and eventually expanded to a full out tropical deluge. We had left our umbrellas in the car. We were also painfully aware that \$25 tents from K-mart have trouble keeping out a thick mist, let alone a full thunderstorm. Gradually Josh and Melanie decided one by one to make dashes for their tents and try to get some sleep. I gave my camera to Josh for safekeeping, as I didn't want to risk it in a K-mart tent.

At one point, as one bolt of lightning struck less than a hundred yards away, a couple of local women leapt out of the rain and into our shelter, joining Dan, Evgueni, and me at our picnic table. We borrowed their umbrella to get ours out of the car. When Evgueni and I returned to the tent that we were sharing, there were puddles all over the bottom of the tent. Evgueni from what I gather spent a miserable night in the middle of a puddle. I was luckier, having brought along a small Thermo-rest air mattress that kept me just above the waterline. Better still, neither my books, nor Evgueni's camera, nor anything else of value was soaked that night. The tent held up far better than I would have expected in such a storm.

We woke up the next morning to the sound of Kookaburras laughing. At first, I felt certain that they must have been cackling at us for three reasons: we were wet, we were unable to sleep anymore because of their laughter, and they wouldn't stop doing it. The laughing Kookaburra was added to my list of irritating local wildlife along with Crocodiles, Box Jellyfish, and those damn Turkeys.

Once we were fully woken up and had put a little food in us we packed up our tents and went for one last hike. This one was to the base of some nearby waterfalls. The water was cool when we went for a swim in it. The view, as I've come to almost take for granted views should be here, was beautiful. The hike back



up was grueling, of course, but all in all, it was worth it. On the ride back home, with the exception of Evgueni who had to drive, we all collapsed from exhaustion and slept most of the way back to Brisbane.

It's now two days later and I'm starting to get bogged down with some serious schoolwork. From the look of things we likely won't be having many more adventures until the Easter Break starts on April 18. For that week plans are still sketchy, but it's looking like we'll be renting a car and traveling from Sydney to Melbourne and along the Great Ocean Road on the South Coast. I'll keep you all posted,

Adam

## Sydney: Easter Break Begins

Hi all,

Easter week break was a big success, ten days worth of excitement. Unfortunately, since then, keeping up with schoolwork has proven to be very time-consuming. So this one's about two weeks behind schedule. Technically I should probably be working on one of my assignments right now. Anyway, in case anyone blinked and forgot it, here's how the bulk e-mail system works:

- 1) I will respond to individual mails, it just takes longer.
- 2) I don't expect you to read all of it. (These e-mails tend to be very long, as they're really just a personal travel diary for my own benefit, and a way of letting the rest of the world know that I'm not dead by demonstrating that I occasionally send e-mails). My advice is to skim for what seem like the good parts.
- 3) If you know of anyone that I neglected to add to the list, write me and let me know.
- 4) If you want to be removed from the list, write me and let me know.

Evgueni had left for Sydney to visit with our friend, Marc Rizkallah, a little over a week before Melanie and I departed on Good Friday, April 18. In an event that would have been more typical of my father than of me, I was wrong about the departure time of the plane by half an hour. We arrived with only ten minutes to spare. It probably didn't help matters when having forgotten to remove my Swiss army knife from my key chain before passing through security, I had to run back to the ticket counter to get it checked with our luggage.

We met Evgueni in Sydney at our Hostel soon after we'd checked in there. Marc had left to go to New Zealand the previous day. Evgueni had made use of his extra time in Sydney to book us as part of an evening group at the old Sydney observatory. That would be happening three hours later though. In the meanwhile, he took the time to guide us in a scenic stroll through downtown Sydney. We passed through Hyde Park, where tall trees crisscross branches with undersides covered in long streams of white lights in a continuous arch over a path wide enough for twenty people to walk abreast. We passed by a small fountain designed like a waterfall where Melanie and I hopped in, with our umbrellas out, for a photo just as soon as a couple of cops had passed out of sight. We even passed the familiar face of Porcellino, the Arts Boar.

For those of you who have never visited the Waterloo campus, a quick explanation is in order. Outside of the Modern Languages building sits a copper statue of a boar. It's a replica of a sculpture that was first carved in Greece in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, later replicated in Rome, and eventually somehow sent all over the world. I now have photos of this same statue in the Louvre in Paris, two spots in Florence, in Rome, and in Munich. It's not the least bit famous; but it is omnipresent. Because it's considered good luck to rub its snout and/or ears, when seen outdoors it also tends to have a brightly polished snout and/or ears despite a rusty body.

After the boar came a trip to the harbour area, home of the famous harbour bridge, and still more famous Sydney Opera House. I was prepared for just another famous landmark. I can honestly say, however, that although it's not worth a trip around the world just to see it, the Sydney Opera House is truly one of the most beautifully designed modern buildings that I have ever seen. You can't tell from the postcards but seen from the proper angle, it gives the impression of a fleet of sails pulled taut in a strong wind as the architect intended. I didn't see the interior until the next afternoon, but I was suitably impressed then as well. The bar for intermissions is placed at the rear of the building, with a glass wall, giving a beautiful view of the surrounding harbour and the city on the opposite shore. The passages follow the arc of the sails on the outside creating sets of strange arches that give a wood-paneled cave-like quality to the building. Very cool.

We took a slightly unusual route on our way from the harbour to the observatory, crossing over a six-lane freeway in the rain on foot to get there. We were more concerned about the rain than the freeway though. It tends to interfere with stargazing.

Upon arrival, we met up with one of Marc's flatmates who had made the booking with Evgueni in the first place, Frederique, a fun French Canadian in Australia to unwind after finishing his degree. To compensate for the rain, we were allowed to wander the exhibits at the observatory, including taped aboriginal stories about the stars, the original observatory telescope from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and interactive educational games about radio astronomy that didn't quite work. We also got to see a nifty 3-D presentation of the solar system, in which one of the observatory workers gave us a guided tour of the planets and their orbits.

After the observatory had worn out all of their stall-and-wait-for-the-rain-to-go-away tactics, they finally took us upstairs to the telescopes. The guide did his best to be accommodating, but when the window was opened, clouds were still covering the whole sky. We gazed at a very distant clock tower instead of stars and planets. Not too exciting. It started raining again. The guide hastily closed the observation window. A few minutes later Evgueni noticed Jupiter through a glass window in the observatory dome. The guide hastily turned the telescope around and opened the observatory window. This was Jupiter's cue to hide behind a cloud. It started to rain again. The window was closed. As it was closing, right on cue Jupiter popped out again to unanswered cries of, "Wait! It's back!!" The guide had already had to clean off the telescope lens once that day, and understandably wasn't keen to risk dirtying it again.

After that, the night was essentially over. We did get one more ride in Marc's van though. Frederique had brought it along. This time, while he drove and Evgueni sat up front, Melanie and I wisely shut the blinds over the rear windows so as to avoid unwanted police scrutiny. We did try looking for a pub to while away a few hours after returning to our hostel but on Good Friday most such places were closed early. The only open bars were in Kingscross, Sydney's equivalent to Toronto's Yonge Street. Needless to say, while a few drinks would have been nice, after a quick glance at the selection of venues we weren't too keen on the entertainment that would have come with them.

The next morning, Mel slept in and Evgueni did laundry. This left me free to explore the world famous Sydney Aquarium, a spectacular place. It now has the distinction of being the only \$14 tourist attraction on Earth that I've visited and not felt like I was being forced to overpay.

The first attraction when you walk in is a genuine duck-billed platypus. Of all God's ridiculous creatures, this one must be king. It lays eggs, has about the same size and build as a possum, is covered in fur, with a bill like a duck's as well as webbed feet. This particular one also alternates throughout its day between two minute bouts of hiding behind a tree root at the bottom of its tank, and ten second stints floating half-above and half-below the water's surface while coming up for air. This routine makes it possibly the most unphotogenic platypus who ever lived. I wasted five pictures just trying to get a good shot of the thing before giving up.

After the platypus came piles of Australian wildlife, eels, snakes, crocodiles, tropical fish, sea horses, and coral. Among the more interesting stuff were the mudskippers, a fish so small that it took me five minutes and two or three inquiries with other tourists before one woman could point it out to me. It survives on the moisture it can trap in its gills while hopping between mud puddles. Pointing it out to me she said, "Funny. Usually there are more of them, and they can't stop hopping about." Next-door to the mudskipper was the croc. Regarding this specimen, the same woman told me, "Now this guy never moves. It's almost creepy the way he just stays there in the same position all day." The croc chose that moment to swim away. I became skeptical about my newfound guide's expertise.

Another fun example of just plain weird looking sea-life was the weedy seadragon, a small creature, something like a seahorse, that looks like one of those long Chinese dragons used in parades, with pairs of flippers sticking out above and below it in alternating groups. I also got treated to the spectacle of touch pools in which you can place your hand and feel what the various kelps, corals, and anemones actually feel like, a shark tank containing multiple kinds of shark, stingrays, and giant tropical fish that can be viewed through a rectangular tunnel underneath it, and an old racist Australian woman.

I was sitting down in front of the last tank, watching some children playing, when I somehow struck up a conversation with her. Hearing my voice, she asked me if I was Irish. I've had two Australians thus far

confuse my Canadian accent for an Irish one. I'm not sure why. This somehow led to a conversation about Australia's proud Irish roots to which I listened with some interest as the woman watched her granddaughter. She decided she liked me as Canada has a respectable Scottish background.

That conversation led to one about how the damn migrants were taking over the country, to which I still found myself listening. So far, I'd seen nothing but hospitality from most Australians but I'd also heard that there is a strong culture of xenophobia here, albeit under the surface. When I asked for examples, she explained how the Lebanese kept coming in and dirtying up the streets, not to mention all those Asians stealing, preying on each other and on Australians with their criminal rackets, and trying to live by the same rules they did back home, rather than by Australian law. I thought of voicing an opinion, realized I had to meet my friends in the next few minutes, and feeling more than slightly ashamed of myself, politely excused myself to wander the gift shop.

Mel and Evgueni had just gotten through a visit to the nearby Powerhouse Museum, featuring a dancing robot, and displays on the space program. After we met outside the aquarium, Evgueni and I decided to press on ahead to check out the Sydney harbour area during daylight. The Harbour Bridge is a vast single arch construction that towers over the harbour. You can see it in postcards hovering behind the Opera House. For about a hundred dollars, you can actually climb along its scaffolding to the very top of the arch, a dizzying hundred metre or so above the water. We didn't have that kind of money. We tried some stairs to access the pedestrian walkway. They were closed. We gave up.

We spent the next few hours walking, exploring the Opera House, and sitting on Mrs. MacQuarie's chair, a chair carved out of stone for a 19<sup>th</sup> century politician's wife that provides an excellent view of the harbour area. After that came a free didgeridoo demonstration at the aboriginal tourist center, a store that sells handcrafted aboriginal goods and group tours. Basically, this was just a scheme to sell didgeridoos. Nonetheless, it was a good one. Evgueni, the other tourists, and I were shuffled into a dark room with a stage. A single performer got up, introduced himself, and proceeded to play the didgeridoo for half an hour while telling stories of the dreamtime, the time in which all aboriginal legends occur, giving lessons in how to play didgeridoo, and explaining the meanings of different sounds. Seeing as I've owned a didgeridoo for four years and am still hopeless at playing it, I asked him for advice on circular breathing after the show. "Fill your mouth with water, and push the water out while breathing in," he replied. It seems that when it's either circular breath, or choke, the process comes more easily.

Evgueni left that night on an overnight bus for Melbourne. Melanie and I were to meet him the next day. We joined Frederique that night for an IMAX double bill at the Sydney IMAX cinema, the world's largest. I wasn't all that impressed by its size, which was comparable to any other IMAX that I've seen, but the movies were fun. Both were in 3-D, a technology that I've since decided the folks in Sydney must be very keen on. The first one was about the life of astronauts living aboard the International Space Station. Half of it was actually filmed in space. This was an absolutely incredible movie to view on an IMAX, though the 3-D effects actually hindered the experience much of the time. The second movie, Haunted House, was mostly computer generated, designed to show off the effects of a 3-D IMAX experience, and had for its theme that Christian Rock aside, Rock and Roll is in fact the tool of the devil. Notable quotes included, "Originally we were going to call it twist and burn but naaaa... Too obvious." After the movies, the three of us went out for a couple drinks at a nearby pub before turning in for the night.

Sunday was fairly uneventful. Melanie and I checked out of the hostel and walked to the coach terminal to lock up our stuff until our bus for Melbourne departed in the evening. I had placed my umbrella, my water bottle, and several plastic bottles that I was hoping to recycle in a plastic bag. I was carrying just this and my backpack. While crossing the street to the terminal, I felt a hand reach overtop of mine and try to grab the bag. I turned around and saw the man who had just tried to rob me very obviously trying to stroll away casually. When I turned around about thirty seconds later, he flipped me the finger with both of his hands held over his head. I did likewise with one hand, and then flicked under my chin at him Italian-style just for the hell of it. I wasn't exactly being the bigger person about the whole thing but I can only imagine how pissed off he would have been if he'd been successful: "Yes, I got the bag! Now I can make some cash off of these... empty plastic bottles...?"

Mel and I split up soon after that. She spent the rest of that day studying. I wandered around the lesser known tourist sites: a beautifully designed Chinese style garden, Sydney Market Square, where for over two hours I mistook the shopping mall above the square for the square itself and missed out on most of the interesting deals, and the Sydney Monorail. Yes, for all you Simpsons fans out there, I can now say that I've visited a place as impressive as Springfield, Ogdenville, and North Haverbrook. The view of downtown from the monorail was nothing special. I rode the full monorail loop two and a half times, alternating between exhausted dozing, thinking of the Monorail song from the Simpsons with a half-smile on my face, and fighting new bouts of dozing.

After that, came a long walk up the whole length of the Harbour Bridge, for some decent views from the top, another long walk back to the Opera House, passing a Canadian mission along the way, and one last long walk to Mrs. MacQuarie's chair for a final view of the Harbour. When my time for the day was up, Melanie and I met back at the Coach Terminal for our overnight bus to Melbourne. My would-be robber was nowhere in sight.

That's it for the fun stuff in Sydney. In the next installment, to be written, work permitting, next week, we visit Melbourne for a day, meet up with Faiza, who most of you will no longer remember from our trip to Surfer's Paradise during the first bulk e-mail, rent a car and go traveling throughout the southern state of Victoria. Hope you're all well back home,

Adam

## Around Melbourne:

Hi again everyone,

As usual, the explanation of how bulk e-mailing works:

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- 3) If you know of anyone that I neglected to add to the list, write me and let me know.
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Now the fun stuff:

The last e-mail ended with Melanie and I on the overnight bus from Sydney to Melbourne. Ordinarily a 1000km bus journey would be a fairly boring affair. This was no exception. I spent most of it asleep. I do, however, want to share with you one story from the ride that may give those men out there that have ever wondered how women's intuition works a little hope.

On the bus one of our fellow passengers was an Israeli backpacker fresh out of her army service named Roni. She was sitting near to Melanie and myself. We exchanged some small talk soon after boarding the bus. At one point, at the start of our journey, as Roni's nose was in her book and I was gradually letting mine slip into my own book, Mel leaned over and surreptitiously rubbed one forefinger overtop the other at me, the international symbol for cooties.

I shook my head, not understanding. She did it again. I said, "I have no idea what that means." She responded, "Oh, never mind then." I felt the need to go into more detail: "No, I know WHAT that means. I just don't see what's causing you to use the gesture in question."

"Maybe not from your end," was Melanie's somewhat loaded reply. About twenty minutes later, Melanie was starting to doze. I asked Roni if I could see what she was reading. She handed me a book with a title something like, "Can Long-Term Same-Sex Relationships Work? Here's How."

Just to confirm, I asked if she was gay. She was.

We met Evgueni the next morning at his hostel and went to check out the Melbourne Zoo, home of giraffes, monkeys, platypi, pygmy hippos, tree kangaroos, and butterflies. I was really looking forward to seeing the pygmy hippos. Evgueni was overjoyed at the whole visit. His second choice of field after engineering had been zoology. In a not so subtle ironic twist, the sole pygmy hippo was too small, not to mention too far from the edge of its enclosure, to be seen as more than a vague lump. Disappointed though I was, I took the zoo as yet more Australian evidence that god has a sense of humour. If you'd ever seen an enclosure where kangaroos climb and hop their way to sleep in tree branches, while echidnas, small creatures with goose bills, webbed feet, and porcupine quills, waddle about underneath them, you'd be forced to agree.

That evening we were to meet with our friend Fayza, an exchange student from UBC, before picking up our rental car and driving halfway to our next stop, Phillip Island. Evgueni and I picked up the car while Melanie and Fayza waited for us at the Melbourne Central Station. Upon our return we drove to the trendy neighbourhood of St. Kilda for dinner, where second-hand bookstores congregate with wine bars, while looking nervously over their shoulders at dance clubs. Before the food arrived, Mel excused herself for a moment. We found her feeling very ill outside about twenty minutes later.

None of us had eaten since breakfast that morning. Mel, driven by hunger as she waited with Fayza at the train station, had picked up a somewhat sketchy sandwich from a vendor. None of us realised this at the time though. The car ride to the hospital was understandably tense. With her food poisoning successfully diagnosed and medicated, Mel stayed there overnight with Fayza by her side. At about ten o'clock,

Evgueni drove off to find somewhere to sleep. I elected to spend the night across the street from the hospital in a large open park, the kind frequented by dog walkers.

I slept under the stars that night. I had been too lazy and more importantly, too self-conscious, to set up my tent in such a public place. The park was as good as many of the campsites here. My suspicions about dog-walking were confirmed when I got a perfectly timed 7am morning wake up call, delivered by a passing dog sniffing my face. The nearby toilet facilities were slightly dirty, but did provide potable running water for me to wash my face and brush my teeth. All in all, as free illegal campsites go, I decided to give it a three and a half star rating.

I arrived at the hospital that morning feeling refreshed. Mel felt likewise, as did Evgueni and Fayza. We drove to Phillip Island, something of a wildlife sanctuary about an hour outside of Melbourne, only slightly behind schedule.

We spent the morning climbing through caves along the beach by the ocean side, posing for upside down pictures while hanging from the rocks, or just trying to avoid getting soaked as high tide brought the water levels up.

At the time the Jewish holiday of Passover was still on, meaning that I was unable to eat any form of leavened bread. That morning, while grocery shopping for lunch, we'd managed to find some matzoh, unleavened bread used on Passover, at the grocery store. It's not known for being particularly tasty. For anyone who's ever had a hard time sticking to a diet or finding food while travelling, try backpacking on a budget while holding to a vegetarian diet that doesn't allow for bread. I had never been so happy to see matzoh in my life.

Later, lunch was laid out on a towel on the sand, above a small rise overlooking the beach. We all shared our grocery store purchases from earlier in the day. There's something surreal yet satisfying about dining on cheese, jam, spreads, cookies, dates, red wine, and matzoh while watching people surf in the ocean on a sunny day.

In the afternoon we took a hike along a cape at the south-east corner of the island. The views along the way were hard to beat. Phillip Island is a continuous streak of brown cliffs, green-topped, falling away towards sandy beaches and blue ocean. The effect, flowing continuously into various changing shades and hues is beautiful. At the end of the cape, the cliffs dropped away about fifty feet to a rocky beach below, and about ten metres off the coastline towers of rock jutted back out of the ocean like giants' teeth, their surfaces smooth but covered in an intricate pattern of crags and indents.

We were also lucky enough to chance upon the burrow of one of Phillip Island's more famous residents, a blue penguin. Inside were two chicks, waiting for their parents to return in the evening. Just a few moments after sundown, when all the adult penguins return to their burrows from the ocean, Phillip Island's biggest tourist attraction occurs. It's called the Penguin Parade, as hundreds of penguins pop their heads out of the ocean one by one and waddle home across the beach.

We'd purchased our tickets for it that morning. They seemed to be astonishingly overpriced, over \$10 per person. Also, photography was strictly forbidden. I don't claim to have been in any way justified in this conclusion, but those two facts led me to believe that the people running this island were trying to milk those penguins for all that they were worth, first by overcharging for admission, and then by making sure that anyone who wanted a photo had to buy it from their gift shop. As it turns out, I was very wrong.

We managed to get front row seats in a crowd of about a thousand people by sitting on the sand in front of the concrete bleachers erected for spectators. Sitting on bleachers with a thousand other tourists to view one of nature's great wonders somehow seemed like it would cheapen the experience. Determined to beat the miserly folk who ran the island, I hid my camera under a towel, set it up on a tripod with the no-flash night-time photography setting on, and got set to take some pictures.

The penguin parade did turn out to be something of a sight to see. First a dozen, and then several dozen little heads popped mysteriously out of the waves. The heads were soon followed by the rest of the penguins as they waddled across the beach. There were one or two tense standoffs with the local seagulls who occasionally barred their way. Luckily, in the end all was resolved peacefully.

Meanwhile, I was getting frustrated at being unable to take a clear shot with my tripod resting hidden on the ground nearby. Unfortunately, I had nothing else to rest it on, and couldn't take a clear photo without either using the flash or holding the camera perfectly steady. I made a stupid decision.

I decided one flash shot couldn't possibly hurt, so long as I hid the camera quickly afterward. I took the shot. One of the park workers came over right away looking very pissed off. Looked right at me and said, "Right! Where's the camera?" I tried to act innocent. "What camera?" I replied.

He was having none of it. I brought out the camera. He ordered me to give it to him. With visions of men in suits on the x-files confiscating roles of film that contained pictures they shouldn't I felt the need to ask what he was going to do with it. "What am I going to do with it?!? I should chuck it in the ocean you daft bastard!" was his answer.

Not wanting things to escalate but also not wanting to lost my camera, I pressed further and found out that it would be returned once they'd escorted me back to the parking lot. I handed it over. That's when things were finally explained: "Was it worth it?! You could have permanently blinded the lot of them with your stupidity."

With the reasoning behind the camera rule explained, I felt like a total jackass. I apologised profusely. I also did something that I'm far more ashamed of than nearly blinding a dozen wild penguins. I lied and said that I didn't realise the flash would go off during that last shot. For those of you I've never explained this to, I try never to lie. I may not always volunteer the whole truth but I do sincerely try not to lie. This time I did. I'm still not sure why, but it didn't exactly make me feel better about myself. This probably seems inconsequential to most of you. As I write this it does seem foolish, and a little narcissistic, but I think it's appropriate that I own up to it publicly.

I was apologetic enough that they let me stay behind in the back row to view the rest of the parade. I wasn't really in the mood to enjoy it. On the way out, I lost my camera case. Somehow this seemed like an appropriate thing to have happen though so I didn't question it too much. Since I know someone will later ask me, I'm still not sure how the photos turned out. The film had its development pre-paid at Loblaw's back home so it hasn't been processed yet.

That night we drove halfway to The Grampians National Park and, after discovering that every caravan park and tent site was closed for the evening, camped by the side of the road. The following day was spent hiking through the park, a series of small mountains and forests. The rock climbing there was excellent. We all took advantage on one or two occasions to try scaling whatever looked interesting. Doing as the locals sometimes do here, I spent the entire hike barefoot. I highly recommend the experience. It's a lot more comfortable on flat terrain than I expected. At one point, I went off the trail on my way to the summit of the highest point in the park. I then edged my way along and up a cliff face with a drop that probably should have convinced me not to. Having an eleven year old girl spot me and yell, "How did YOU get up THERE?" just as I climbed over the ledge at the top made it all worthwhile though.

By evening, Fayza who had decided she was going to cut her hair off during this trip was randomly cutting off locks with a pair of scissors and throwing them into the wind. Evgueni and I ate dinner at sunset by MacKenzie Falls, a thirty odd metre high waterfall in the middle of the park. Fayza and Melanie sat off to the side as Melanie gradually helped Fayza turn her nearly shoulder length hair into a mohawk. As we left that night, we noticed forest fires in the distance, visible as a large orange glow on the horizon with a massive cloud of smoke above. Driving that night brought us very close to some of them.

Alright, that's the end of this e-mail. The next one will cover the last part of the Easter Break. I'll hopefully get that one finished in the next week or so. All the best to those back home,



Adam

## Easter Break: Final Installment

Hi everyone,

Well, it's been a month since the events in this e-mail occurred now. I thought that I would have finished writing this a long time ago, but coursework has conspired to make things otherwise. I'm leaving on a further two weeks of travel at 6:30pm tomorrow evening. In an effort to keep things from really piling up on my return, I've decided to bite the bullet and finish off writing about my last set of travels in April. Lest I forget:

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One other piece of business first: I've gotten a couple of e-mails asking me to explain the punch line to my anecdote about the Israeli backpacker on the bus with cooties. I was trying to be subtle in my story telling. It turns out that I may have been being obtuse. As with most punch lines, this one's less funny once it's explained. Long story short, my friend Melanie thought that the Israeli was interested in me. As it turned out, she was gay. (The Israeli, not Melanie. I just want to make sure that things are absolutely clear this time. No room for confusion in any part of the story this time. No sir.)

When I last left off, Evgueni, Melanie, Fayza and I had stopped for the night on the southern coast of Australia about halfway between Melbourne and Adelaide. We'd camped for the night near to a petrified forest and a seal colony. The next morning, we discovered that the petrified forest, while very impressive, was not actually made of petrified wood. Real petrification involves a gradual replacement of vegetable matter with minerals so that the final product looks just like wood. In this case, the holes left by trees that had been covered by sediment and then rotted away were filled by rock, leaving round indents and occasional stumps where trees had been. I've never seen a real petrified forest. Given how impressive this semi-petrified forest was in the early morning half-rain though, I can only imagine that it would be well worth the visit one day.

The seal colony provided more of an adventure. After a short drive, we began the thirty-minute walk to the colony. The suddenness with which it appeared was a little strange. One moment we were walking along rolling hills ending in steep seaside cliffs. The next moment we were hearing the sounds of seals honking. A moment after that, the base of the cliff was filled with seals about a hundred metres beneath, sunning themselves and frolicking in the water as only animals and little children seem able to do without feeling self-conscious.

There was a wooden outlook built at the end of the path to provide a better view of the seals. Melanie decided to hike down the grassy slope under the outlook for a closer look. A few minutes afterwards, I followed her. I began edging my way down the slope and was soon greeted by a cry of "Ahhh!!! Spiky thing!!!" Instantly, I knew the cause. "Echidna?!?!?" I shouted, without thinking. As Melanie came into view around the bend, her finger extended pointing at a small bush, I could tell that my guess had been right. The puzzled non-plussed look on her face did nothing to diminish my happiness. After I'd explained what an echidna was and insisted on getting as close to it as I could, she lost interest and continued down the path.

Breaking out my camera, I crouched down nearby to observe it. Understandably frightened, the echidna was keeping its head tucked into its chest and looked much like a porcupine does when on the defensive, its quills in the air. Realising that it wasn't going to move until it was sure the coast was clear, I sat down and

tried to be as still as possible. It started to bring its head up. I brought out my camera. The noise was enough to send its head right back down. A few minutes later, my patience was once again rewarded. It's head came up, beak, dark eyes, quills and all. I managed to snap a picture. The echidna was more non-plussed than Melanie. By now it had decided that I wasn't so much a threat as an annoyance and waddled off into the bushes. It needs to be said, however, that you'll never truly appreciate what a sense of humour the universe's creator must have until you see a small ball of spikes with a beak waddling away from you into a bush in the kind of lack-a-daiseyckle fashion that just seems to scream, "I know I look ridiculous. I just don't care."

The afternoon that day was spent at a nature preserve where Fayza, Evgueni, and I played a game of spot the wildlife. Evgueni with his keen eye for koalas was quickly well in the lead. We soon realized though that the game was pointless. The place was so jam-packed with popular Australian animals that it would have been hard to throw a rock without hitting an emu. Luckily, while the thought did occur, we were all responsible enough not to test this particular observation.

The stretch of Australia we were then in is famous for its rock formations by the ocean side. The most famous of these, The Twelve Apostles, a series of giant irregular columns climbing out of the ocean just offshore, features on many postcards. We watched the sunset over several towering columns of rock at a place morbidly named for no readily apparent reason, The Bay of Martyrs. Just after sunset while there was still light to see by we took in a similar view at the more pleasantly named, Bay of Islands.

En route to our final stop that evening, we spotted a sign along the highway that said, "The Grotto." It wasn't particularly famous but Melanie had seen a place in Ontario called, "The Grotto," that had been really worthwhile and so we decided to stop. It was a good thing that we did. The sun was setting as we arrived. "The Grotto," turned out to be a rocky outlook into a very narrow cove along the ocean side. Waves coming in from the ocean would first roll up the cliffs all around the cove and then recede again. This is nothing exceptional in and of itself. The fact that each wave would rush upwards and fill nearly half the twenty metre high cliff side like a backyard pool before instantly receding again, however, was. The effect was somehow tranquil, mesmerizing, and frightening all at once. We sat and stared until cold and dark eventually drove us out.

We woke up around 5:00am the next morning so as to see sunrise at The Apostles, just a few miles down the highway. Ordinarily, I'd be grumpy about such a wakeup. Unfortunately, the weather recently had started to turn colder. As it turned out, none of us had been asleep when our alarms went off. The cold had already woken us up.

Sunrise at the apostles, while no doubt spectacular during the summer when the rocks are set to glow with a dull red light, was not terribly impressive that morning. The rock formations themselves, left behind when all of the cliff around them had eroded away, climbing fifty metres out of the water and lined up in a very long row, were worth the trip but the sunrise did little to make them more so. We ate breakfast back at the Grotto afterwards. Not to speak ill of the Apostles, but I enjoyed the view at the Grotto much more than I had there.

The rest of the day was spent visiting other similar sites, one of which, called London Bridge, had been made up of two arches still attached to the mainland until roughly ten years ago when two tourists who had walked across it were left stranded as the first arch of the bridge collapsed. We spent a few hours by a beach where Evgueni and Melanie found a sponge and I sat on a rock in the middle of a cove as the waves splashed around me.

On the way to our next stop, the town of Apollo Bay, we stopped at a short walk through the rainforest called Mait's Rest. Later that night, after having given up on camping out and booking four beds in town, we returned. Though you can't tell during the day, Mait's Rest is home to thousands of tiny glowworms. These little creatures are about a centimeter long. In the dark, they emit a bright white pinpoint of light from one end.

Walking through the path in the dark, Fayza and I managed to bump into each other repeatedly as we waited for our night vision to begin working. Melanie and Evgueni went on ahead with a flashlight. With virtually no light able to penetrate the canopy, the effect of walking amongst glow worms in a rainforest at night is like walking among the stars. There's nothing in front of you but blackness, nothing behind you but blackness. As you move, the darkness occasionally gives way to small colonies of little lights that seem to float by you. Instinctively I started trying to make up constellations as I walked.

The next day was spent driving along the Great Ocean Road itself. Built as a make-work project for returning soldiers after one of the two World Wars, it was meant to be a tribute to the fallen, the most beautiful highway on the planet. The drive lasted for about three hours of winding countryside, shimmering beaches, and rolling green coasts, with several stops along the way to walk along the shore or admire the view. I don't know if it's the most beautiful highway on Earth, but it was certainly worth the trip.

Fayza returned to Brisbane that evening. The remaining three of us stayed at a hostel in the Melbourne suburb of St. Kilda. Melanie and Evgueni spent much of that evening and the following day studying. I took advantage of the location to check out the eclectic collection of cafes, restaurants, and second-hand bookshops for which St. Kilda is famous. I wasn't disappointed. The place was trendy but still subdued, a little bit like Queen Street in Toronto used to be. I managed to find the complete scripts to the entire BBC run of Monty Python's Flying Circus in one shop for the equivalent of about \$7 Canadian. Nearby, Goethe's Faust was tucked in with Milton's Paradise Lost. I bought the Python scripts. I did manage to restrain myself from buying an autobiography of Simon Wiesenthal as well as a 1001 Nationalist Jokes book.

The Nationalist Jokes book turned out to be several quotes insulting various nations. I looked up Canada. Most of the quotes related to how boring Canadians are. I did find one quote that I thought some of you might appreciate though: "In Pierre Trudeau Canada has finally produced a political leader worthy of assassination." Unfortunately, I didn't recognise and can no longer recall the name of the speaker.

I spent the afternoon of that final day of my travels visiting the old Melbourne Gaol, where Australia's most popular folk hero, Ned Kelly, was jailed and executed. The popularity of the Ned Kelly story here and the virtual complete lack of recognition for it everywhere else on Earth make it interesting enough to be worth retelling. Essentially, the story goes something like this:

Poor Irish farmboy, Ned Kelly, driven to desperation by a corrupt English police force attacks a constable who is harassing his sister. The situation escalates. Ned, his younger brother, and two friends are driven from petty horse-thievery to bank robbery and go to live in the wilderness. When a force of about a hundred police officers is sent to bring them in, they get involved in an OK Corral style gun battle last stand at a hotel in a small town. Wearing suits of armour made from stolen ploughs, the four continue shooting for nearly twenty-four hours while the rest of the hotel patrons are massacred by stray police fire. Three of the gang die by various degrees of smoke inhalation, burns, and gunshot wounds. Ned is nursed back to health by the authorities and then hanged. His last words, famous throughout Australia are, "Such is life."

I'm not kidding about the suits of armour. I saw them on display after my visit to the Gaol, about a block away at the Victoria State Library. Australians have made multiple movies out of this story. They've made comedic parodies. They've made books, rock songs, poetry, and ballads. There's a whole Ned Kelly industry here. During my visit to the Gaol there was even a live action retelling of the Ned Kelly story performed by two actors.

Ned Kelly aside, the Gaol still had the original manacles, leg weights, hanging ropes, and even death masks of its prisoners, making for an educational if morbid visit. Near the cross-beam on which criminals were hanged was a small glass display of a stick figure doll on a gallows. When I first saw this display, a little boy was giggling and motioning for his sister to join him as he pressed a button on the display repeatedly. Each time he did, the stick figure would once again take its final plunge. As I said, very morbid.

Later on that day Melanie and I flew back to Brisbane, while Evgueni went back to Sydney via bus for a few days. Since then, it's been non-stop work. For those of you that waited on an e-mail reply from me for the past several weeks without response, I can only say again that I'm sorry. Our project course here was to build a simple calculator from electrical parts. It's a lot more difficult to do than the description would lead one to believe. Between completing that and other assignments, I've had no time for anything else during the past several weeks.

The next trip, starting tomorrow, will take us to the south coast again. This time we're making a round trip from Adelaide to Uluru in the desert at the center of Australia. I'll let you all know how it goes when we return in two weeks. Hope all is well back home,

Adam

## Red Desert Outback:

Hi all,

Welcome to my final e-mail from Brisbane. This one's longer than usual. You've been warned. ;-) I finished my last exam this afternoon. Tomorrow when Evgueni and Melanie finish theirs we'll be throwing a going away party for ourselves. Any of you who can make it to Brisbane are of course more than welcome to attend. I'm also doing some final souvenir shopping over the next few days. So, for those of you with requests, please let me know, even if you've told me before, as I'm notoriously poor at remembering these things. Anyway, as usual, the four points that make bulk e-mailing work:

- 1) I will respond to individual mails, it just takes longer.
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Lectures here at the University of Queensland ended on June 6. Evgueni and I decided to give this minor detail a miss and so flew to Adelaide on the south coast of central Australia on the evening of June 4. We met with our friend Marc, who had been studying at the Sydney University of Technology, and his friend Frederique, a French Canadian who had been lounging about Sydney ever since he'd completed his own engineering studies back home. Melanie flew in the next day.

Adelaide is a city of small thrills and medium paced entertainment. It's a beautiful place, filled with parks, occasional pieces of sculpture, a clean pedestrian mall, and a sizeable but equally clean market. It's also not particularly exciting. We were stopped over there for about three days as we waited for the train to Alice Springs.

The time passed pleasantly. We made regular use of the hostel's oversized video library. Marc and Fred lead us in songs on Marc's guitar in the evenings. One day we visited a local aboriginal art gallery, learning how to interpret the symbols used in traditional aboriginal painting. We also visited the malls, the market, and a very friendly chocolate shop where we were fed free samples as we huddled in the entrance, avoiding the rain and waiting for our cab back to the hostel to arrive. For all these reasons and more, we were perhaps a little too leisurely when it came time to catch the train. A train, which I should probably stress, was not cheap and ran only once per week.

As we were leaving the chocolate factory on the day of our departure, the second cab in which Fred and I were going to ride back to the hostel never arrived. We walked back in the company of two other backpackers, arriving about ninety minutes before the train was due to depart. Still feeling relaxed from our time in Adelaide, I sat back to a warm mug of complimentary hostel tea. Fred went to buy groceries. Marc took a shower.

About twenty-five minutes before the train was due to depart, Marc, Fred, Evgueni, Melanie, and I all got together and began a hasty and only slightly stressful last minute walk to the train station, exactly twenty minutes away by foot. I joked with Evgueni about a conversation we'd had a few days previously. We'd been discussing how, for a variety of reasons, we always seemed to find ourselves nearly missing trains while traveling. Finding ourselves across the street from the station and facing a red light, Evgueni jay-walked ahead, looking down his nose at passing cars and pretending not to notice them, a strategy which generally keeps him from being honked at as the cars assume from his confident air that, all traffic signal evidence to the contrary, he's right and they're wrong.

We followed when the light changed, being greeted inside the station by a very matter-of-fact Evgueni, stating in his most matter-of-fact, I-may-be-panicking-but-that-is-no-reason-to-lose-my-cool voice, "Wrong station." We had seven minutes left until the train departed. Having all recently seen *The Matrix Reloaded*, and each being unwilling to be out-cooled, we suavely, confidently, and above all quickly, strode out of the train station hailing two passing cabs, Evgueni and Melanie in the first and Marc, Frederique, and I in the second. "Follow that cab," I heard one of the other two say as we slammed the doors behind us and I flashed back to episodes of *The Amazing Race*.

In the cab, Marc made desperate attempts to phone ahead and halt the train's departure while directory assistance searched fruitlessly for the phone number with which to connect him. Fred and I passed the time by laughing at Marc, offering suggestions for him to give to directory assistance, and egging on the driver. When we did reach the station, Evgueni and I ran out of our still moving cabs just in time to halt the train. The folks at check-in and baggage were a little nonplussed at our late arrival.

The train was possibly the most exciting part of our time in Adelaide. I had brought plenty of work and study material to occupy me during the nineteen hour, two thousand odd kilometer ride. Instead, I passed the time in the lounge car with Marc, Fred, Evgueni, a group of junior high school students, a middle-aged drunk woman who took pictures for us, and later, a young Greek girl named Kate. We swapped snack foods, sang along to Marc's guitar, and traded stories. By the time I was ready to go back to my seat for sleep, it was four in the morning and the crowd had dwindled to just Marc, Kate, and myself.

Our group of travelers became far more eccentric the next day. In Alice Springs we met with a group of Marc's friends and flatmates from Sydney. The group was made up of two Italians, a Macedonian, a Hungarian, and a Malaysian. Pietro, one of the two Italians, was a hilarious walking talking stereotype. For those of you who have watched recent episodes of *The Sopranos*, picture Furio, the Italian gangster. Now, make him about twenty years old. Give him a very dirty sense of humour. Make him loud. Have him swear constantly in Italian at the slightest provocation. Now make him louder. This should give you an idea of the type of person with which we were dealing. I have not laughed so hard nor so often at another person's mannerisms in a long time.

Alice Springs is remarkable, simply for the fact that it exists. In the middle of one of the largest tracts of inhospitable land on Earth, surrounded for hundreds of kilometers by nothing but scrubland mixed with desert, all resting on seemingly endless bright red sands, one finds a completely typical small town, population approximately one hundred thousand. It is the only thing approaching a major city throughout most of Australia's Northern Territory, a landmass that could easily contain several small European nations.

Marc, Fred, Evgueni, Melanie and I parted company with Pietro and his group that afternoon as we left in our rental car. Our two groups traveled together and parted company regularly throughout the trip. We traveled to King's Canyon, a nearby attraction, arriving the next morning.

The canyon, formed by thousands of years of erosion, rose about ninety meters high, encircling a small oasis, with walls so smooth in places that we joked God himself had carved out the canyon with a giant butter knife. The views were beautiful. The hike provided plenty of opportunities to go off the track and climb around a little bit, something I've really come to appreciate. The oasis at the base of the canyon, nicknamed the Garden of Eden, gave just that impression, a sudden burst of green with a cool shaded pool in which to dip your feet. That night we played complimentary tennis at a court provided by our campground, met up briefly with the other group, and ate roasted potatoes with toasted sandwiches by firelight.

The next day was the big one. This was the day in which we were going to see Uluru, better known as Ayer's Rock, the world's largest single stone. When we first spotted the rock in the distance from the road, I was a little disappointed. We pulled the car over and began taking pictures. It was flat topped, and looked like as if a distant giant had misplaced his hat. I tried to feel enthusiastic but was actually pretty letdown by the sight after all the hype surrounding it. This was hardly surprising though when you

consider that what we were looking at was actually Mt. Connor, a less impressive sight that tourists often mistake for Uluru.

When we spotted the real Uluru, I wasn't disappointed at all. There's not much that can be said about it. It's red. It's huge. It's a rock. It's also quite very cool to see, a giant, blunt, towering monolith, surrounded by empty desert.

The official name for the rock was returned to its aboriginal title, Uluru, about fifteen years ago when it was returned to aboriginal possession. The return was conditional on the aborigines leasing it back to the government as a conservation park for ninety-nine years. A joint council, composed of government officials and aboriginal representatives, administers the rock and the park. There is a path to the top of the rock along a very tempting looking hike marked only by a support chain. Though they are unable to prevent anyone from climbing it, the aboriginals make massive efforts to discourage tourists from doing so. They raise a number of safety concerns to discourage tourists. The risks of heart attack or high winds, however, are far from convincing reasons to avoid the climb for a group of twenty-something backpackers.

To me, the important point was that the rock is sacred to them. The path to the top lies along the same route used by their young men in initiation rituals. Both groups had rejoined to climb to the top. Having done some serious thinking about it, I opted out and used the next couple of hours to follow the nine-kilometer circuit around the base instead. Along the way, I picked up a rock, to add to my collection of stones from places to which I've traveled, and an interesting looking flower that I pressed inside my travel guidebook. Taking two full hours to walk around the rock gives plenty of time to admire its size. This was something that I had still more time to reflect on the next day as I walked halfway around the rock again to return the plant and the small stone that I had collected. I hadn't realized it at the time, but the aboriginals also don't want anyone removing bits and pieces from the area around Uluru. In the past few years, superstitions have sprung up amongst tourists that rocks collected from the area carry bad luck with them. I don't believe the superstition but I'm certain that it's helped the locals out immensely, which I can only assume is for the good.

We spent that night at the same camping/hostel complex as Pietro's group. Dinner that night came with a free show. As we stepped into Pietro's room, he was opening his cooler to check on the steaks that he had purchased for dinner that evening. Unfortunately, no one had warned him that even ice stored in a cooler melts in the desert after a couple of days. He also apparently had been blissfully unaware that plastic wrapped steaks are not waterproof. His drinks were covered in watered down blood and his steaks were soggy. Pietro started cursing in rapid mixed Italian and English.

"Porco Dio!! Whata the #\*%^?!?" was followed by, "Put a di Madon! Fanculo!" and finally, gesturing to the Hungarian in the group and handing him the now moistened beef, "Here take these outside." Once the mess in the cooler had been cleaned up a little, Pietro looked up again. "Okay, go get the steaks," he said.

"What do you mean go get the steaks?" a Hungarian accented voice replied.

"Whata do you mean whata do I mean?! Go get thee #\*%^ing steaks!"

"But you said put them outside..."

"So goa outside and get them, no?"

"Well, when you said put them outside, I put them outside... in the trash."

"You deed what?!?! Porco dio!! Stupid puta! Puta di Madon! Busta fanculo di stugatzi..." At this point, I lost track of the rapid Italian swearing. The dialogue continued in much this way throughout dinner, with me occasionally cocking an ear to listen for a laugh track, or pausing to look over my shoulder trying to find the live studio audience. Like I said before, Pietro was one big Italian stereotype.

We watched the sunrise over Uluru the next morning before traveling to Kata Tjuta, a native phrase that I think means place of giant heads. Kata Tjuta, originally called the Olgas by white settlers for a reason that



now escapes me, is made up of a series of giant dome-shaped rocks a short distance from Uluru. The hiking along the path at Kata Tjuta led through deep shaded valleys between the giant domes along a nearby rise that provided a view of many of them. Though I can't easily describe it, the effect of these giant domes is very impressive.

When we returned to Uluru that afternoon, I returned the rock and the flower before viewing sunset over the rock. We then parted ways with Pietro and company as they returned to Sydney for their final exams and assignments. The next morning, Evgueni and I dropped off Marc, Melanie, and Frederique at the airport in Alice Springs before heading north on our own towards our next stop, the Devil's Marbles.

There is little to see in central Australia. The little that there is to see, is connected by a mind-bogglingly long thin two-lane highway. There are service stops about every one hundred kilometers, which function as small towns. The highway is so long and straight for most of its length that mirages form on it, causing the horizon to seem to blur into a flickering pool of water where it meets the road, forever receding as you travel forward.

The devil's marbles are a series of granite boulders, ranging in height from about fifty centimeters to six meters, many of them perfectly round, scattered seemingly for no apparent reason in the middle of nowhere. The scientific explanation is that nearly one billion, note that this is billion, not million, years of wind erosion acting on the granite bedrock is responsible. Luckily for me, there are no requests from the local aboriginals about not climbing these landmarks. Evgueni and I spent the afternoon climbing, jumping, and straining our way over a variety of boulders, marveling at the views, and occasionally side stepping one of the many nearby termite mounds.

Melanie's not comfortable with my driving in this country and essentially refuses to let me take the wheel when we travel together. She was now back in Brisbane though so I managed to kick Evgueni out of the driver's seat as we left the Devil's Marbles. By the next morning I had gotten the car up to about one hundred and ninety kilometers per hour on the speed limitless two-lane highway before it gave up accelerating further. Evgueni got mad at me at that point for guzzling gas unnecessarily and driving unsafely. Given my driving reputation here and the prohibitive cost of gas in the desert, about one dollar and ten cents in Canadian currency per liter, I didn't argue. Instead, I settled back to a leisurely one hundred and sixty kilometers per hour.

Not wanting to drive the four hundred kilometers back to Alice Springs that day, we had instead decided to press on ahead to the town of Tenant Creek to spend the night. We watched the sunset from a lookout point and with some very impressive maneuvering by Evgueni, managed to visit the Pebbles, a site accessible only over unpaved roads used almost exclusively by four wheel drive vehicles. The Pebbles are a site similar to the Devil's Marbles, on about one fifth the scale. They're also eerily pretty by starlight, resembling something out of a fantasy poster.

We left Tennant Creek early the next morning so as to arrive at Alice Springs in time to return our rental car, traveling the five hundred kilometer distance in just over three hours. That afternoon we wandered around some of the shops in the downtown area. I lucked out and was offered a free didgeridoo lesson by a local shop owner. The didgeridoo is an Australian aboriginal instrument that makes a slightly otherworldly buzzing sound. I got one as a birthday gift from my sister years ago, but have never been able to play it properly. After about fifteen minutes with this guy, I'd nearly mastered many of the basics. He didn't want money for the lesson but I did manage to buy him a chocolate cake from a nearby grocery store to thank him.

At this point, the final leg of our travels begins. Evgueni and I joined an organized three-day tour group that would show us bits of the outback on our way back to Adelaide. We stopped that night in the small town of Coober Pedy, one of the highlights of the tour. Coober Pedy is an aboriginal phrase meaning white man's burrows. The town got this name because most of it is underground. It's in a completely inhospitable part of an already inhospitable country. The attraction of the place is its massive quantities of high quality opal gemstones. People there began by mining for opal and gradually built homes out of used mines after all of the opal had been extracted. Living underground protected them from the extremes of

temperature in the desert. It's also incredibly convenient when you consider that tunneling out an entire room from the surrounding rock costs only about one thousand dollars, far less than building a room above ground would.

Years ago, because explosions in one's home tend to disturb the neighbors, the city council passed a resolution banning all opal mining within city limits. Building permits are still handed out relatively easily though. This has led to an interesting practice in which many of the locals put in requests to add on indoor swimming pools, tennis courts, etc. to their homes as an excuse to keep looking for more Opal. One can often make enough money to pay for the extension several times over just from the opal extracted. As we were touring one old mine in the town, explosions from the neighbors could be heard.

Essentially, this was a town of explosive-happy miners living in underground mansions with year round temperature control and indoor swimming pools in the middle of the desert outback. We spent the evening there at a couple of the pubs in which the locals drank. The townspeople were as eccentric as one would expect. That night I met the local radio guy, Dingo Dave, the local token teenage girl-rebel with a crew cut and an attitude problem, and a whole cast of interesting characters. What struck me most, however, was that Coober Pedy was the first and only place in Australia in which I've seen whites and aboriginals hanging out together. Groups of aboriginals are hard to come by in the larger cities along the eastern and southern coasts. In places like Alice Springs, the two groups don't seem to mix much. Here, however, they sat together drinking, chatting, and laughing. I'm not sure what made the difference but it was nice to see it.

The next day the tour stopped to view a couple of the salt lakes with which this part of the country is sprinkled. We also passed by the formerly top-secret military-personnel-only town of Woomera from which missile tests were run for decades. Experiments involving nuclear detonations had been conducted and coordinated in the outback under the auspices of the military in this town until comparatively recently. Pausing at a train crossing to snap photos of the Flinders Ranges, a chain of mountains, we spotted three horses behind a ragged barbed wire fence.

This is the part of the story where I do something stupid. For whatever reason, someone offered five dollars to anyone willing to ride the horses. I offered to do it for ten. The group agreed. After climbing through the fence, I tried to make friends with the nearest horse. No problems yet. I petted her a few times. Still no problems. I pushed down on her back to test if she would be frightened. She was. She immediately trotted away. I tried this with all three of the horses in succession, including one rather angry looking stallion, with similar results. Finally, I decided to stop testing first and just hop onto one of the horses. I picked a medium sized one, the one that I had first tried.

She was understandably a little skittish at this point. I let her sniff at my hand. I then petted her face, ears, and neck. Finally, I put two hands firmly down on her spine and hoisted myself up... halfway. She trotted with me dangling on her side for about two meters before I jumped off and scrambled away. The tour group had all had a good laugh watching me. The guide decided that the effort was worth a free beer, which I received that evening with dinner.

We spent the morning of the final day of the tour hiking through some nearby parkland. It was a pleasant and relaxing, if unremarkable, hike. In the afternoon we visited a winery where a few of us sampled about twelve different varieties. By the end of the afternoon, Evgueni and I were dropped off at the airport in Adelaide with a couple of the other folks from our tour. After that, it was back to Brisbane for exams.

Ignoring the exams, that brings us to the present moment. Once I've packed all of my stuff here, I'll be resting in Brisbane at a hostel for a couple of days before heading up north along the coast, safariing, sailing, and learning to scuba dive as I go. Then, it's off to New Zealand, then hopefully Thailand and Cambodia, depending on the circumstances over there in August. Hope everyone back home is doing well. All the best,

Adam

## Croc Hunters and Scuba:

Hello everyone,

This one's being written from the road as I travel. As usual, an explanation of how bulk e-mailing works:

- 1) I will respond to individual mails, it just takes longer.
- 2) I don't expect you to read all of it. (These e-mails tend to be very long, as they're really just a personal travel diary for my own benefit, and a way of letting the rest of the world know that I'm not dead by demonstrating that I occasionally send e-mails). My advice is to skim for what seem like the good parts.
- 3) If you know of anyone that I neglected to add to the list, write me and let me know.
- 4) If you want to be removed from the list, write me and let me know.

I left Brisbane about a week ago and have been on the road since then. Jay and I wrote our last exam on June 27. Evgueni and Melanie finished the following day. Jay left soon after to go traveling with his parents across Australia. Evgueni left on July 1 so as to fit in as much of the North Eastern coast as possible into his travels before he, Melanie, and I are scheduled to meet again in Auckland New Zealand on July 26.

After some pretty intense packing, in which I was forced to fit almost all of my belongings into one forty-kilogram duffel bag, send just under 11 kilograms of books home, and draft Josefin's boyfriend, newly-arrived from Sweden, to help me carry my things to their new house for storage, I decided to go to Australia Zoo. As an aside, those of you who know how horrible I am about bringing far too many books with me wherever I go will be pleased to hear that the cost of shipping most of my books home, combined with the unholy weight the remaining ones are now making in my duffel bag, may finally have broken me of this addiction.

The Australia Zoo is the none-too-descriptive name of a zoo about an hour drive outside of Brisbane run by Steve Irwin, TV's Crocodile Hunter. It's entirely owned and operated by Steve and Terri Irwin. Steve appears there semi-regularly when he's not out filming or working with wildlife. I had been meaning to go all term but had been unable to find the time. I was joined on the trip by a friend named Josh. Most of you won't remember hearing about him but he was with Melanie, Evgueni, and myself when we traveled to Lamington park at the very beginning of the term.

The ride to the zoo required two changes of train and took two hours. Zoo admission was nineteen dollars after student discount. The contents more than made up for the cost. We started off with the snake exhibit at the entrance to which was a cage with a small eight and a half by eleven sheet displaying the words, "World's most poisonous snake." The third most venomous and several more of the top ten followed. We saw one of the world's oldest living creatures, a one hundred and sixty-nine year old giant tortoise. Unfortunately, being 169 years old must be hard work. The tortoise just sat under its shell, resolutely unwilling to move throughout our visit. Despite the lack of motion, I've been assured that it is still alive... just lazy.

We watched a live croc-feeding demo in which the crocs were baited out of the water with long strips of raw meat. Somehow baiting crocodiles didn't seem as dangerous in person as it had on TV though, despite the crocodile's giant mouths and excessive teeth. At one point we took pictures of ourselves driving one of the Crocodile Hunter's old run-down 4x4 utility vehicles. At another, I got to see a kangaroo with a bird resting in its pouch. On second glance, however, the bird's beak turned out to be an upside-down nearly fully-grown baby kangaroo's foot sticking out into the air. The baby would poke its head out for a few seconds every so often, making for great photo opportunities before plunging back in with one foot out to check the air quality.

On the way back to Brisbane, we ran into several other Canadians waiting for the train. I'd forgotten that it was Canada day, but was comforted by the knowledge that visiting the Crocodile Hunter's zoo is apparently a very Canadian way to spend the day.

Over the next couple of days I worked my way up the coast towards Fraser Island, the largest sand island on Earth. If such a job exists, this place would be a sports utility vehicle commercial writer's dream. All of the inland roads are dirty, bumpy, incredibly scenic, and completely inaccessible without four-wheel drive. The island is over one hundred kilometers long so the beaches function as highways during low tide. While touring the island, we shot down the beach, an endless ocean on one side, and forested sandy cliffs on the other so often that I almost became tired of it. Almost.

The company providing the tour organized travelers into groups of ten, furnishing each group with a 4x4 vehicle, tents, camping supplies, permits, ferry tickets, and a suggested itinerary. The people in my group were just eccentric enough to make things interesting. Five of them were a group of friends from Mexico City traveling together, Carlos, Patty, Santiago, Jerardo, and Alberto. Carlos and Patty were dating. Santiago, affectionately known to his friends as San Briago, which translated means The Holy Drunk, was celebrating his birthday on the second day of our trip. Alberto, celebrated the birthday in style, drinking far more wine than was healthy and deciding that he was a koala. He subsequently tried to climb a few trees before passing out on our first night. The Mexicans nicknamed me MacGyver because I always seemed to have whatever camping supplies were needed and knew how to use all of the equipment.

Another three of us were also traveling together, a group of Norwegian siblings: Martin, Silje, and Krissy who had just finished a term studying in Melbourne. The last member of the group was the one absolutely essential member of any international traveling troupe in Australia, a crazy Italian.

This particular crazy Italian was named Marco. He was a twenty-six year old vegetarian who believed that one of the most unnecessarily evil activities on Earth was medical experimentation on animals. He was unimpressed and a bit sanctimonious when Silje said that she was a vegetarian but she still ate fish. He was also firmly convinced that the shark was the, "Emosta perfect aneemal on tee earth." The irony seemed lost on him.

The car had not been designed to accommodate ten people with supplies for three days, especially not given the amount of wine the Mexicans were bringing to celebrate San Briago's birthday. The camping equipment was of poor quality, with poles that did not match the tents with which we were supposed to use them. Frazer Island and the people on the trip more than compensated for

this.

On the first day we stopped by Lake MacKenzie, a lake with long sandy beaches, beautiful forest paths, and water more blue than any I had seen before. We swam from one shore to the other, hiking our way back to where we'd left our towels on the opposite far shore.

That night, after having decided that he was a koala, Alberto passed out so thoroughly that no amount of shining a flashlight in his face or yelling at him could wake him. I started joking that he was dead. I went to take his pulse as part of the joke and couldn't find one. I started to become worried. He woke up.

Ironically, on the second night after I had gone to bed, Alberto smoked something he shouldn't have, became paranoid, and decided that he was dying. I was woken up at around two in the morning to the sounds of catholic catechism being recited in Spanish. "Salvame Jesus. Por favor salvame. No quiero morir. No quiero morir," was being interspersed with repeated Our-Fathers, and Holy-Mary-Mother-of-Gods, all in rapid Spanish for well over half an hour. I assumed that it was a dream and went back to sleep.

Another fun aspect of the evenings were the frequent visitations by dingoes, which while normally shy in around humans, are so over-exposed on Fraser Island as to be completely unafraid. Several of them wandered within a metre or so of our campfire looking for food before being chased away.

On the second day we waded our way through Eli creek, a freshwater creek that flows down to the ocean. Later we spotted whales off the coast at an area called the Champagne Pools. That evening, Marco and I hiked up some sand dunes near our campsite and went rolling down them a couple of times for fun. There was no swimming in the ocean. Ignoring the problem of cars that use the beach as a highway, Fraser Island is a breeding ground for sharks and not exactly a safe place for a swim.

After the sand dunes, all of us climbed a nearby lookout that was supposed to have plentiful views of sharks. Unfortunately, visibility in the water below was poor at best. Poor Marco was forced to leave the island without once seeing one of his "Emosta perfect aneemals," on Earth.

Our third day was spent driving through sandy, bumpy, forest roads before ending our trip at Lake Wabby, a big blue freshwater lake, at the base of a giant sand dune. Beautiful.

After Fraser Island, I traveled North to Bundaberg, where Australia's backpackers look to earn some quick money as fruit pickers. The money is okay from what I understand, but the work is terrible. Never have I heard such horrible things said about zucchinis in my life. Apparently the amount of stooping over involved in picking them makes them the most hated type of produce to potential fruit pickers. Luckily, I had come for the chance to learn to Scuba Dive rather than the chance to pick fruit.

The certification course offered in Bundaberg is one of the cheapest in Australia. It's four days long. The first two were spent alternating between a few hours in the classroom followed by several hours in a tightly confined training pool. Class time was typical of similar swimming courses that I have taken, boring but necessary. Sitting in a training pool for over five hours

during a cold afternoon with only two short breaks in between to warm up was not. By the end of our time in the pool, hypothermia wasn't so much a concern as something to be ignored until it could be dealt with properly. Returning home the night before the course and the first night of the course, required readings varied from one hundred to one hundred and sixty pages.

On the third day, we were allowed to swim in open water. This meant that we were taken to a very rocky beach and waded in for a six metre deep dive. Unfortunately, conditions were poor, visibility was limited, and the waves made going out from and coming into shore a dangerous mission at best. Still, the experience of being underwater for half an hour at a time, while still able to breathe is an amazing one. The only true problems were caused by my slight congestion problem from a recent cold, making it more difficult to dive without pressure problems in my ears. Also, the nausea caused by constantly flowing currents and waves pushing us all about throughout the dive detracted from my fun a little.

The fourth day more than made up for all the previous ones. This time we came prepared with anti-nausea medication. My congestion had almost cleared up completely. After our miserable experience of nearly being crushed on the beach, our instructor had offered to take us to an artificial reef just outside of town. The reef was built by a group of people who had been saving old boats and small planes from being sold as scrap for over sixteen years. Instead of melting these old derelicts down, they had decided to alternately blow them up or sink them beneath the waves by drilling holes in them.

A fantastic displays of aquatic life uses the wrecks for a home. My final skills testing took place on the deck of a sunken ship surrounded by hundreds of curious fish seventeen metres below the water's surface. While the fish were initially scared of our arrival, they soon grew accustomed to us. Five minutes after our first descent, the school of fish had reformed, creating a solid wall that begin to circle about us. We were surrounded by a tornado of fish. We were even visited at one point by two passing dolphins.

Unfortunately, I never got to see those two dolphins myself. All communication beneath the waves has to be done by a series of hand signals. My instructor became so excited by the rare sight of the two dolphins hunting fish that he pointed both his index fingers at them to get our attention. Unfortunately, the standard signal for look over there is to point one's index and middle fingers at one's eyes followed by pointing in the direction of interest. The instructor had instead just given us the instruction, "You lead, I'll follow." As we were in the middle of skills testing, I didn't know what was going on nor where to lead him. By the time the confusion was over, the dolphins were long gone. Dolphin losses aside though, I can hardly complain about my first real diving experience. Being underwater was one of the most unique experiences I have ever had. I also had recently purchased a reusable underwater camera for only about forty dollars Canadian, so I promise many photos when I return.

Anyway, that's all for now. In my next e-mail I'll be sailing on a thirty foot yacht, diving the Great Barrier Reef, and visiting some of Australia's most untouched rainforest.. at least as far as tourists are concerned. Hope everyone's well back home,

Adam

## Sailing, Diving, and Crocodiles:

Hi all,

First off, sorry about the recent flood of e-mails from me/my mom to this list. I've been having trouble with getting these bulk e-mails properly working again lately. It's for this reason that you're now getting two different bulk e-mails back to back.

I've just recently popped back into Brisbane though before flying out to New Zealand, so I've been able to get them all back off my laptop. Anyway, I'd suggest a breather between these two. As usual, Kaufman's four points:

- 1) I will respond to individual mails, it just takes longer.
- 2) I don't expect you to read all of it. (These e-mails tend to be very long, as they're really just a personal travel diary for my own benefit, and a way of letting the rest of the world know that I'm not dead by demonstrating that I occasionally send e-mails). My advice is to skim for what seem like the good parts.
- 3) If you know of anyone that I neglected to add to the list, write me and let me know.
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After learning to Scuba Dive, I travelled up the coast to a small town called Airlie Beach. Airlie is a pure tourist trip. Its existence is almost entirely dedicated to two industries: Scuba certification courses, and sailing trips throughout the Whitsunday Islands.

These islands are famous for a number of different things: isolated white sandy beaches, abundant wildlife, vast underwater fields of coral, and huge numbers of tourists on sail boats. For my three day / two night trip sailing trip I had spent far more money than I could afford, buying myself a spot on board one of the snazziest boats available for hire. This was in direct opposition to my usual habit of finding the most reasonably priced deal available after several days spent shopping online, by brochure, and by phone in Brisbane.

The Condor, a Maxi class yacht, has been retired for about a decade and carrying tourists for about five years now. In its nearly thirty year career, it won every major race in its class twice. This was a world class boat. I love to sail and have never been on anything bigger than about fifteen feet. It didn't take too much effort for me to convince myself to spend the extra money. I'm glad now that I did.

What struck me most about the boat was that it was in many respects identical to all of the smaller boats on which I've sailed before. The fundamental difference was that every part appeared built for giants. There were a few new toys on board to compensate for this. Parts that would have been controlled by a simple small rope and pulley system on a smaller boat were now controlled by hydraulic pumps and complex systems of gears controlled by teams of two men at a time. I made sure to make friends with the crew as soon as I got on board so as to pump them for as much information as I could about how the boat was run. This was made easier by the fact that all four of them were a reasonably friendly bunch, especially a forty-year old deck hand named Johnno with an encyclopedic knowledge of rock music. They were happy to explain things and

even let me play around a little to get a feel for how the different parts worked. As an aside, Johno really impressed me by the fact that he'd seen The Tragically Hip, a band that I thought at the time was hardly recognised outside of Canada, perform live in small venues in Australia on five separate occasions.

On the first day we sailed for only about an hour before stopping at a nearby coral reef for some snorkeling and scuba diving. The charge for scuba diving, seventy-five dollars for one dive, was far too high to be worthwhile, especially considering that nearby depths were no greater than five metres throughout most of the reef. For comparison purposes, a single dive for a certified diver on the great barrier reef will generally cost no more than forty dollars, with subsequent dives becoming less and less costly.

Part of my dive training in Bundaberg had involved snorkling and I was happy to do just that. The five or so other certified divers onboard opted to do the same. Snorkling was spectacular. I was met underwater by a spectacular variety of fish and coral. Smaller fish, a vivid orange with black, yellow, and white stripes on their tail fins swam with larger purple fish having green lips and fins. The coral came in every collar of the rainbow. Some were shaped like underwater leafless trees. Others were hemispherical, green, with blue patterns that looked like mazes from a children's puzzle book all over their surface. All of this stretched for as far as one could reasonably hope to swim and I was fascinated by all of it. I followed the scuba divers around underwater to see what they were doing. I scared some of the other snorklers by cackling underwater because I was having too much fun not to laugh. Better still, the water was delightfully warm. I was one of the first snorklers in the water and the last one to exit. Others were shivering as we left. I was comfortably warm, hypothermia in Bundaberg having toughened me up apparently.

With the exception of one dinner in which the main course for vegetarians was poorly-spiced fried tofy, the food on the boat was spectacular. It was also all-you-can eat. Leftovers from each meal were unceremoniously thrown out, giving me extra incentive to make a pig of myself. By the end of the trip I experienced something that rarely happens to me. I'd lost my appetite.

On the second day we lounged for several hours on a beach so beautiful I couldn't believe it wasn't a painting. As the tide shifted, so did the shape of the beach. Capes and peninsulas formed and were again covered by the sea. Sting rays swam nearby enough to be seen and far enough away not to cause any worry. The sand was almost perfectly white; the water almost perfectly blue.

The ship was anchored on the opposite shore of the island on which we were resting. Unfortunately, by the time we tried to leave, the tide had sunk so low that not even the small inflatable motorboat with which passengers had been ferried to and from the ship was able to cross the coral between it and the shore. It took nearly ninety minutes and manage frustration for the crew before everyone was back on board and lunch was served.

On the third day we again snorkled in yet another field of coral. This was made less enjoyable by the fact that the weather had been gradually becoming colder and wetter throughout the trip. By this point it was raining for brief periods every hour or so. The views were still spectacular. I still remained in the water until the very end of available time. The enjoyment was less though.



The sailing trip back to Airlie Beach that day took about two hours. On the way, the winds blew steadily at about twenty-six knots. Where the water wasn't sheltered by large islands or coral reefs, this led to two metre high waves. The largest waves were nearly three metres high. The main sail was reefed (sailing jargon for not being pulled up entirely) to keep the boat from tilting so much that its twenty-five odd passengers became frightened.

It was on the last leg of this trip that I managed to get an opportunity to drive the boat. Two of the other passengers had already done so, one on the previous day, and one immediately before me who had started during a lull in which the waves were generally less than a metre high.

As we swapped positions, the waves had just again returned to their two metre height. Our forty-foot yacht's course seemed to vary by about twenty degrees with each wave. The skipper kept having to grab the wheel to correct me as I both learned what I was doing and posed for a couple of photos that I had asked someone to take for me. With the moment safely preserved for posterity on film, I gradually learned what I was doing, until after about five minutes I was competently steering a forty-foot, multi-million dollar yacht through two and a half metre swells on a windy day.

As I departed town early the next day, there was one small downside to the trip. I had lost my Tilley Hat somewhere in Airlie Beach the day before I had left on the Condor. Despite some frantic searching, I was unable to find it again before I left. I managed to get one local store-owner to actually tell me, "Move on mate. It's just a hat," after I'd asked him for the second time if he'd found the hat lying around his store somewhere.

After the Whitsundays I travelled further north to Cairns, the last large town on the north-east coast of Australia. Cairns is not too interesting in and of itself. It's filled with souvenir shops and restaurants. It also acts as a staging ground for those planning on diving along the outer Great Barrier Reef or visiting the rainforests further North, both of which I was hoping to do.

I arrived at 7:30pm. After some frantic last-minute shopping around I was able to secure myself a diving trip with two separate dives on the outer great barrier reef, departing early the next morning. Despite the hundreds of kilometres over which I had traveled to arrive in Cairns from Airlie Beach, the weather had not improved noticeably. The day of my dive trip was cloudy. The winds were still at about twenty-six knots. The waves were still over two metres high. This was a lot less fun in the motor-powered boat in which I was then traveling than it had been on board the Condor. This boat was designed for calmer seas, as the nearly half of our thirty passengers who felt the need to share their breakfasts with the rest of the boat could attest.

Most of those on board were families who had come simply to snorkel. There were only four certified divers on board the ship. Diving was again a lot of fun. I confess, however, that I was a little disappointed. The depth, number, and variety of fish on both dives were less than they had been at the artificial reef in Bundaberg. The quality of the coral was not as great as it had been in the Whitsunday Islands. That being said, we still managed to see a reef shark on our first dive, feed leftover chunks of chicken from lunch to the fish, and follow a sea turtle about on our second dive. The coral was still breathtaking, extending on as far as the eye could see. Unfortunately due to the poor water and weather conditions, this was only fifteen metres.

That evening, I again found myself hunting at the last minute from travel agent to travel agent. This time I was searching for a tour North of Cairns to Cape Tribulation, that most northerly point easily accessible to most tourists. Cape Tribulation consists of about four backpackers hostels, a small general store, several different local tour companies, and a number of hiking trails. All of these are huddled together over a ten kilometre stretch where the tropical rainforest meets the beach, crocodiles abound, and human habitation can almost pass unnoticed if one isn't looking for it.

I arrived there in the early afternoon. After wasting nearly three hours in an attempt to find and purchase some groceries, I finally began hiking around three in the afternoon. Here, finally, was a rainforest that gave the impression it was still untamed, despite a number of hiking paths running through it. Wild palm trees and mangroves, a type of tree capable of growing directly out of salt water beaches and estuaries, lined the edges of the forest, sometimes extending all the way into the surf and winding along the beach. Warning signs to beware of hiking off the path into nearby estuaries and the jaws of the plentiful crocodile population lined the beaches on all sides.

I hiked contentedly searching out a number of hikes that had been suggested by the hostel. Around five o'clock, I had finally given up on ever finding the final hike that the hostel had suggested and decided to turn around. Walking along the beach, I soon noticed a piece of litter. Being a conscientious tourist, and not wanting to let yet another candy wrapper harm the local ecosystem, I stooped down to pick it up. As I stood back up, I spotted the trail leading to the missing hike leading off the beach directly to me left. By now the sun was setting. Still, I would have no time the following day to complete the hike before I had to leave Cape Tribulation. Not wanting to miss it entirely, I decided to attempt the hike.

By now the sun was beginning to set. As I was halfway through the one and a half kilometre hike, the signs along the path became increasingly difficult to read. By the time I was two thirds of the way done, they had become impossible to read no matter how hard I squinted. In an effort to lighten my load, I had emptied much of the contents of my backpack onto my bed in the cabin in which I was staying. I began searching for my flashlight, soon realising to my dismay that it was now lying on top of my bed about four kilometres away.

Not worrying too much, I continued on the trail. By the time I had walked another three hundred metres, I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. Despite a full moon that night, heavy cloud cover and a rainforest overhead, kept almost all light from reaching my eyes. When they say that light doesn't penetrate the canopy in a rainforest, they're not kidding. I somehow managed to stumble my way along the remainder of the path, listening for the difference in sound as my sandals scuffed gravel path, or leafy forest floor. This was often unnecessary though, as a tree leaf in the face will quickly indicate which way the path is not going.

I was still reasonably relaxed as I reached the beach. The experience reminded me a little bit of sneaking out of my cabin at night back when I used to go to Camp Arowhon in Algonquin Park over the summers. The Point road there had been equally black on many nights. I walked south along the beach, looking for the next section of forest through which I would have to cross. I could now see my hand in front of my face and had a clear outline of where the forest ended and the ocean began. It was about this point that I spotted a crocodile on the

road in front of me.

I was understandably a little jolted. This continued even after I realised that the croc was actually a large fallen log. I continued walking, looking for the sign that would point towards the next path through the forest through which I would have to cross. Five minutes later, I found it. This, at least, is what I thought I had found, until upon very close inspection in the near-total darkness, I discovered that this was in fact a sign in no less than four separate languages warning me to beware of crocodiles. Still rattled, but reasonably calm, I kept walking along the beach, right into a small estuary. I had had to cross this small salt water washout during daylight and so wasn't very shocked by it. Nevertheless, I kept my eyes open and crossed quickly, finally reaching the next woodland track.

Near total darkness was quickly replaced by absolute pitch black. I was completely unable to see more than a hint of light overhead along the path. Small drainage ditches over the path frequently convinced me that I had fallen off of it. Steps that had carefully been built into it to ease hiking began causing me to stumble if I walked too quickly. At one point, the path turned ninety degrees and I walked directly into a sign that would have informed me of this during the day. Instead, it kept me from walking into the woods until I could feel my way along its rightmost edge to make out which way the arrow on it was pointing. It was lucky for me that the messages on the signs there were both painted and carved into the wood. I finally exited the path about ten minutes later after crab walking my way down a final steep series of steps.

I had only one large section of beach left to cross now. Unfortunately, this was a beach dotted with small estuaries and large bunches of mangrove, both of which saltwater crocodiles seem really to enjoy using for lurking purposes. A road soon ran parallel to the path on which I was walking. I walked into another sign post. This time, however, as I groped for directions, I spotted a car's headlights travelling along the path towards me. I made my way towards it, holding my hand out to ask the driver to stop.

After I'd asked for directions back to the beach, the car continued on its way. I began walking in the direction I had been given. I knew from daylight hours that the distance to the beach was about three hundred metres from where I'd left the stairs. After twenty minutes, and several cars passing me, I was beginning to think that the directions I had been given weren't entirely reliable. I was on an open road about four metres wide, and still having difficulty making out not only my hand in front of my face, but the road as well. I was also more than a bit concerned about crocs at this point, all rational arguments to the contrary. I decided to turn around and work my way back to the stairs so as to find the beach and get back to the hostel.

I turned around. I walked for five minutes. I soon felt like turning around again. I decided against it though. "Turning around once was a calculated decision," I reasoned, "Turning around twice would be panicking." At this point, a 4x4 drove up the road towards me. I motioned for him to stop so as to ask for directions again and confirm my location. He pulled over.

"I'm looking for the beach, do you know which way it is?"

"Which beach, mate?"

"Cape Tribulation Beach. I was crossing over from Mally Beach, trying to get

back to the Beach House Hostel and I got lost on the crossing."

"Hop in."

Normally, I wouldn't take a ride from a stranger. Under the circumstances, a nice well-lit car seemed preferable to a dubious journey through potentially croc-filled beaches. I quickly accepted, hopped in, and began relating my story including several angry references to my own stupidity at leaving the flashlight behind when it would have been most useful. "Where were you heading?" I asked.

"Same as you. The Beach House hostel," was the reply.

"Really, what would you be heading there for at 7:30?"

"I'm the guy who guides the night hike."

I then realised it was possible to feel still more embarrassed about my situation. The guide driving the car was very understanding though and the ride passed pleasantly as I realised that if I hadn't turned around in the first place, I'd have reached my hostel in about five minutes via the main road on which I'd been walking.

I got back to the hostel that night and began relating my story to other backpackers as I cooked my dinner and tried to unwind a little. Exiting the kitchen, I ran into my friend Fayza from university in Brisbane. I was soon telling her my story as well. Before leaving the hostel the next morning, total strangers were referring to me as, "That guy who got lost in the rainforest."

As an aside, as I was checking out the next morning, I finally had that moment where you run into someone who knows you halfway around the world. Unfortunately, I didn't know her. She recognised me from both Dunlace and York Mills. Does anyone on the list remember a girl one year behind my class named Naomi Silver? I recognised her name, but not much else about her. It was vaguely reminiscent of running into Lisa Sunshine from Dunlace, who I also didn't remember while camping with my university friend two years ago.

The next day I went to inspect where I'd gotten lost. The sign into which I'd bumped was an Authorised Persons Only sign leading into the woods. The path continued onwards to the beach after only about one hundred metres. I'd rejoined the main road by accident as I walked towards the first cars headlights. No sign of crocodiles anywhere.

I did see a number of crocodiles, however. On the way back to Cairns the next day, my tour bus stopped for a one hour cruise along the nearby Daintree river where I got to see not one, not two, but three crocodiles, the local dominant male, a two year old infant, and a female with only her head above the surface.

I leave for Auckland New Zealand in a few hours. I'm writing this from the university library where e-mail is about to be shut down. Sorry if the quality of this one is a little poor. I've had no time to reread it. Hope all is well back home,

Adam

## **New Zealand:**

Hi Everyone,

As I begin writing this, I'm once again at the university library in Brisbane, taking advantage of the free Internet service here. I returned from two weeks in New Zealand earlier this morning and thanks to a combination of jet lag and spending the previous night in Auckland International Airport, I've effectively been awake since 3:30am. Tonight I'll be spending one last evening with some friends in Brisbane. I suspect that I'll be forced to finish this bulk e-mail on my laptop during my plane flight to Hong Kong tomorrow. As usual, don't forget:

- 1) I will respond to individual mails, it just takes longer.
- 2) I don't expect you to read all of it. (These e-mails tend to be very long, as they're really just a personal travel diary for my own benefit, and a way of letting the rest of the world know that I'm not dead by demonstrating that I occasionally send e-mails). My advice is to skim for what seem like the good parts.
- 3) If you know of anyone that I neglected to add to the list, write me and let me know.
- 4) If you want to be removed from the list, write me and let me know.

Given current time constraints, after two weeks in New Zealand, I doubt that I'll be able to supply my usual quota of anecdotes and funny stories. This means that this e-mail will be something that I usually try to avoid writing, a junior high school shopping-list style essay about, "What I Did During My Summer Vacation." Sorry in advance for that but it's about all that I'm capable of just now.

As Evgueni pointed out to me on my last day in New Zealand, different people react to the countryside there in different ways but nearly everyone is awed by it. For him, New Zealand was, "The Land From Which All Screen Savers Come." For someone else with whom I chatted, it was the Lord of the Rings come to life. To be honest, I could see both points. Being there, it's not difficult to see why every fantasy production from Lord of the Rings to Xena Warrior Princess has been using it as a backdrop. For me, New Zealand seemed like a never-ending series of television beer commercials, letting me know that here was someone who used only the purest of mountain spring water over and over and over again.

Firstly and most importantly, New Zealand is, in my opinion, without a doubt the most beautiful country that I have ever visited. These two islands resonate to a greater or lesser extent with the natural wonders of most every other famous locale on Earth. During my two weeks in New Zealand, I began by viewing thousand year-old trees, many as immense as those found in western North America. I later visited sulphurous springs, hiked on glaciers, and sledged down sand dunes. Nearly every location that I visited was like a surreal artist's rendition of itself. Landscape after landscape appeared too beautiful to be able to exist in the real world. The further south I traveled, the more beautiful it was, and the more incredulous I became.

I arrived in Auckland on July 22 after a sudden unexpected red-tape crisis

involving my Australian visa and my conditions of entry into New Zealand. The problem wouldn't be fully solved until several long distance calls to travel agents from a variety of phone booths and about a week had passed but luckily after some last minute juggling of entry and exit requirements for both countries, I did manage to board the flight. I won't bore you with the finer details here.

Evgueni and Melanie were scheduled to join me in Auckland in four days time on the 26th of July. Rather than waiting for them there, I had instead booked a tour bus trip throughout the north of New Zealand, seeing most of the interesting points along the way. There were two highlights to this bus trip: Waipoua, and Cape Reinga. Waipoua is a national forest park, housing some of the few remaining Kauri trees in the whole of New Zealand. Kauri trees can live up to five thousand years, reaching maturity only around the age of five hundred. They grow nearly as tall as the Sequoias in the west of Canada and the United States. While they used to be populous all over the north of New Zealand, their numbers have been greatly reduced since the arrival of European loggers. All surviving Kauri are currently protected under New Zealand law, making it illegal to cut them down for any reason. New Zealanders take their conservation very seriously. There is still, however, a thriving trade in Kauri wood. The trees are so large and decay so slowly, that dead wood can be obtained in well-preserved condition by mining in old swamps.

The highlight of Waipoua is Tane Mahuta, a Maori word meaning Lord of the Forest. (The Maori are the aboriginal people of New Zealand. They are a Polynesian people with some cultural points similar to other Polynesians as far away as Hawaii.) With a three-metre diameter, and a height far too great to fit into a single photo, Tane Mahuta is the oldest surviving Kauri tree. Its been dated at anywhere from thirteen-hundred to two-thousand years old. To put this in greater perspective, while it isn't definite that the birth of this tree coincided with that of Jesus, it was certainly around by the time Mohammed was founding Islam. Add to this the fact that human beings only arrived in New Zealand one thousand years ago and one begins to realize just how old this tree really is.

Cape Reinga, the other highlight, is the most northerly point in New Zealand. Maori believe that the spirits of the departed congregate together to form groups under a tree at the tip of the cape before diving through the waves towards their ancestral homeland of Hawaiki. The route to the cave passes across a stretch of coast known as Ninety-Mile Beach. It was a cloudy day when we drove across it and I'd experienced enough more impressive coastlines by that point to be somewhat nonplussed. This was balanced, however, by the excitement of a short side trip to some nearby sand dunes where we tourists were provided with small foam sand sleds for tobogganing. A British passenger and I competed in a race down the dune with our bus driver. I took a running start on my board, over jumped, and flipped head over heels into the sand. The Brit performed only slightly better. Needless to say, the driver won.

Arriving at Cape Reinga itself, the view stretching out towards the ocean was only slightly spoiled by the relatively historically recent addition of a small lighthouse off to the side. Somehow, a lighthouse being placed right next to such an important religious area for the Maori just didn't fit into my worldview.

As an aside that I think some of you on the list will appreciate, on the first night of my bus trip I managed to place myself in the finals of a karaoke

contest held in a bar in the town of Paihia. Of about thirty to forty singers that night, I was in the top five. "How does this happen to a man as tone deaf as Adam?" one might ask. The answer is simple:

A French Canadian with whom I was traveling offered me a beer to go on stage and sing Billy Ray Cyrus' "masterpiece", Achy Breaky Heart. Being me means being ever ready to make a fool of oneself for personal gain. I accepted. At the last minute, the man providing the beer insisted on changing the selection to Baby Got Back by Sir Mix-A-Lot. Some of you may remember me performing this little ditty at Camp Arowhon about a decade ago for the amusement of the staff in exchange for exemption from table clearing duties after meals. Others will remember the far more recent performance at the Engineering Society A talent show back in Waterloo last fall, (Clegg, Schubie, thought that you two might really appreciate this story... ;-)). The point of the above information being that I had no problem earning my free beer. Not being very talented, I was forced to fall back on Afroman for my follow up performance in the finals. Needless to say, I didn't win. I did, however, get a free beer and a very unimpressive two-for-one coupon at one of the local tourist trap activities for a consolation prize.

I spent the next day waiting for Evgueni and Melanie to arrive by completing an activity that has taken up much of my spare time while traveling. I wandered into the largest bookstore that I could find, picked out the comfiest looking seat, and read the new Harry Potter book. I really lack the budget to pay for the thing but I can't resist it. The only non-guidebook that I've been carrying with me throughout my whole trip has been the bible. Needless to say, this is not light reading. Still, I've now completed reading roughly 90% of the Tanach (Hebrew for Old Testament), word for word.

On the twenty-seventh, after meeting Evgueni and Melanie in Auckland, the three of us traveled first southeast to the Coromandel peninsula in search of a place known as Hot Beach outside the town of Whitianga. Hot Beach is so known because parts of it are located directly above thermal springs. At low tide it's possible to dig a hold in the sand and create your own personal thermal bath. Unfortunately, we arrived at high tide and had to content ourselves with some small nearby hikes instead, never knowing the wonders of naturally heated spring water.

Our traveling strategy throughout the trip was simple. Do something fun during the day, drive to our next destination that evening, book all tours as quickly as possible first thing in the morning or late in the evening. This allowed us to make the most of our traveling time in New Zealand. It also worked surprisingly well. During the New Zealand winter most everything except skiing has room available no matter how last-minute one makes the booking.

That night, we drove to Waitomo, famous for its underground caving trips. The next morning I woke up just after seven and began shopping around for the best possible caving deal. By 9:30am we were on our way. Entrance to the cave was by a thirty-metre rappel descent along a sheer cliff face. We were outfitted before with lamps and wetsuits to keep us warm and keep the caves well lit. At the cave entrance we also received an added bonus. Large rubber inner tubes with which to float lazily down the river that formed the major cave entrance.

Our visit to the cave alternated between short hikes upstream with our lamps lit and long lazy drifting down the stream with our lamps out. The caves are inhabited, some would say infested, with thousands upon thousands of

glowworms. Up close these resemble a roughly one inch strand of dangling worm, suspended from the cave roof, surrounded by several tens of shorter transparent strands. These smaller strands are used to catch prey attracted to the light of the worm. When the lamps go out, the worms create the impression of a bright starry sky hidden under the Earth. It's quite remarkable to say the least, even more so as one quietly drifts past them. Before exiting the cave and climbing back over the cliff from which we'd descended, we explored for a couple of hours, finding a sleeping eel near the entrance, wriggling through some tight spaces, learning about stalactites, and at one point, jumping backwards off of a small cliff to land in the darkness on our inner tubes in the stream. Unfortunately, I have no pictures from inside the cave. After making a special effort to bring my waterproof camera along for the trip, our guide left it at the top of the cliff.

Our next stop after that was the town of Rotorua. Here Evgueni and I spent our first evening attending a traditional Maori welcome dinner called a Hangi. Unfortunately arriving just as most bookings were closing for the day meant that we were forced to take the slightly more posh, less authentic, Hangi dinner hosted in a modern building next to the Novotel Hotel. Generally, the preferable option is to go to a traditional Maori village for a slightly more authentic experience.

The word Hangi comes from the means of cooking used. A traditional Maori Hangi involves placing food in an oven-like space over warm rocks. The food is subsequently buried under a mound of dirt in order to keep the heat from escaping. As our cooking was occurring next door to the Novotel, our food was effectively cooked in an iron box with rocks underneath it.

Most tourist Hangi dinners are designed to imitate a traditional meeting between two Maori tribes. As the visitors approach, their chief is met by a warrior from the Maori village. This warrior will threaten and try to intimidate the newcomers as they may be aggressive. He will then presents a piece offering. Should the incoming chief accept the offering, a large dinner and dance ensues. Should he not, a large battle is substituted. In this case, as both Evgueni and I were the first guests to arrive, we were offered the chance to be made chief of the tourists' tribe for the greeting. Evgueni was kind enough to let me have the honour.

The warrior who came to greet us was good at what he does. We later learned that he's done some TV work in the past. As he approached, the mistress of ceremonies warned me, "Make no move until he's laid the offering on the ground and backed away. If you do, it's a grave insult. Don't break eye contact as you pick it up. That's also an insult. After you have taken the offering, shake his hand and touch your noses together twice. Make sure it's a firm handshake, or you'll appear weak." To the sound of recorded conch shell trumpets, the warrior then entered the room, screaming, swinging a large club, kicking the air, looking like he'd had an unhappy childhood, woken up that morning to find a bee stinging his butt, and thought I was the one to blame. I'm only partially ashamed to admit that I was a little frightened. Wanting to get out offstage quickly, I nearly stepped forward to take the offering too soon and had to be held back by the mistress of ceremonies. It was a good thing too. I'd hate to have seen the man's reaction to such a grave insult.

Unfortunately, Evgueni couldn't quite get a clear picture of my greeting with the warrior. Luckily, the Maori cultural group did. Unfortunately, they charged me twenty New Zealand dollars for it, equivalent to about sixteen



Canadian dollars. I paid it. I don't regret it but I'd never do it again.

The dinner itself was tasty but contained huge amounts of meats and seafoods. I very nearly allowed myself a couple of baby shrimp and a mussel before thinking better of it and giving the seafood to Evgueni. Dessert was a schormgasborg of sweet puddings, fruits, cakes, and ice cream. Both were accompanied by a Maori playing the works of traditional local composers such as Joni Mitchell and Eric Clapton, on an acoustic guitar. This was followed by genuine traditional songs and dances. For the last several of these, the audience was invited to participate and learn a little.

With all the talk of excellent food, I may have neglected to mention the unpleasant side of Rotorua. It stinks. It's located around a massive number of sulphur springs. For those of you unfamiliar with the smell of sulphur, you're currently sitting on the closest approximation you'll likely find for it. The whole town is permeated by that smell. After a while one almost begins to find it familiar and comforting.

We spent the next morning with a Slovakian girl whom we had met the previous evening, Suzanna, viewing the eruption of a big geyser and touring amongst the springs. These came in a wide variety of sizes, colours, and levels of bubbling, ranging from small and yellow at a simmer to big and red at a boil. Most had names that seemed to imply that Satan owned a fair bit of property in the area: Devil's Home, Devil's Inkpots, Devil's Chamber Pot, etc.

In the afternoon we escaped pungent Rotorua traveling up a nearby mountain to play on concrete-track luges. These are something like a cross between a toboggan and a gocart on a concrete track. Those of you familiar with the old credits at the beginning of Sesame Street may have seen them before. They're as fun as they looked on TV when I was five, asking my Mom if she knew where we could find some. They even came with their own ski lift to return for the next ride.

By the next day we had traveled as far South as Tongariro National Park, famous as the home of the best single day hike on Earth, the Tongariro Crossing, which passes up one mountain, along a series of small bubbling craters, and down the other side. Unfortunately, every local with whom we talked assured us that it was too dangerous to cross in winter unless one had large amounts of previous alpine experience. Evgueni, Melanie, and Suzanna went skiing instead. I climbed a nearby hiking trail that resembled yet another surreally beautiful beer commercial. In the afternoon, Suzanna left for Auckland, Melanie stayed behind, and Evgueni and I decided to attempt the first part of the crossing and turn back if we encountered any danger. The weather had been ridiculously good for a while at this point, and New Zealand has been having one of its most mild winters ever. We made it about a third of the way through one of the most enjoyable hikes I have ever done before time constraints rather than danger forced us to turn back.

By the next day we were at the very bottom tip of the North Island, in the nation's capital, Wellington. We stayed long enough to view the New Zealand Museum, an interesting place that seems to be one third Ontario Science Centre, one third Royal Ontario Museum, and one third Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, with such fun distracting rides as virtual bungee jump, virtual sheep shearing, and virtual time warping. Its collection of info on the history of interaction between whites and Maori was reasonably well balanced for a patriotic government funded venture. Better still, one of its gift shops was filled to

bursting with Lord of the Rings paraphernalia.

Running into Jay, who had recently been following a very similar route to our own using a guided tour bus, we crossed the Tasman Sea between the North and South Islands on a ferry, before continuing onwards in a mad dash towards our first major stop on the South Island. We landed at roughly 5:00pm. The next stop was about an eight-hour drive away. We had to make bookings there and somehow arrive before 9:00am the next morning. This involved very long rush to a hostel in a small town where we slept for only about six hours, followed by another mad rush to our destination, the Fox Glacier.

The Fox Glacier is a rarity. It exists in a temperate climate, completely exposed to its surroundings. Trees continue to grow right up to its very edges. Its large enough that Evgueni and I spent our whole day hiking across it with a local guide company. They warned us to dress extremely warmly and supplied us with a whole slew of supplies. Temperatures could reach minus twenty, or so I was told. In actuality, the temperature that day didn't drop below zero anywhere on the glacier. I was mostly overheating that day.

This was fine though. The scenery was so spectacular that I hardly noticed. From a distance, the glacier looks like a flash flood bursting from a canyon. This impression only changes as one comes much closer. The base of the ice is covered in rock chips as the cliff sides around it erode. Hiking along the base, one comes across small pools of crystal clear water resting on the ice, dips, and cracks in the ice as tall as most people.

Further up the glacier, the ice turns a remarkable shade of deep blue. The pools of water disappear. The cracks become bigger, becoming full-fledged crevasses. One is able to climb over under and through holes and breaks in the ice in places. Further up the glacier, where hiking becomes too unsafe to continue, is the ice fall. Essentially, this is a waterfall frozen in time. The ice does flow downhill. It just does it slowly. At a sheer drop of nearly a hundred metres, however, large blocks of ice, up to six stories high, form, break away, and fall towards the lower levels as the glacier moves. Though the movement is slow by human standards, temperate glaciers move quickly for a giant block of ice. At one point during the hike, we could feel and hear the ice shift underneath us.

Our final stop in New Zealand was a small settlement called Milford Sound in Fiordland National Park. This place was, for me, the most naturally beautiful place that I have ever seen. Tall mountains, clothed in trees, capped by snow, fall through nearly vertical cliff faces into the waiting sea. Waterfalls over one hundred metres high can be seen foaming from over nine kilometers away across the water. On our first night there, Evgueni and I walked through the small settlement to view a one hundred and sixty metre high waterfall by moonlight.

During our visit, the moon was always a perfect crescent, strengthening the impression that the scenery had to be a giant painted canvas rather than a real place. The stars there were plentiful as was the wildlife. During our first morning, Evgueni and I went on an organized two-man Kayak tour of the nearby fiord. Along the way we came within a metre of the local seals so often I almost grew tired of it, saw a rare yellow-crested penguin, and generally sat back absorbing as much of the scenery as possible until the other person in the kayak got tired of paddling on their own and began throwing dirty looks.

That evening the three of us hiked up a nearly vertical trail to the base of a beautiful waterfall, nearly losing Melanie along the way due to some garbled directions as the sun was setting. Later, Evgueni and I passed our last night in Fiordland drinking kiwifruit wine by starlight.

The next morning we hiked along a ninety-minute trail to a semi-frozen lake, surrounded by forest, and clear as glass. The sights in this part of the country were too beautiful for me to be able to do them justice. No photo seemed quite big enough to capture it either. Evgueni reached the lake at the end of the trail before me. By the time I arrived, I had no idea how long he had been sitting gazing at the scene in front of him, tall snow capped peaks, tree covered cliffs, and a mirror-like lake half-covered in ice. I sat down about fifty metres away and did likewise. Melanie was still far behind us on the trail, taking a more leisurely pace as she usually does while hiking. Evgueni and I didn't speak for the first fifteen minutes or so after we arrived. Somehow it just didn't seem necessary or appropriate in that setting.

By that afternoon I was on a plane leaving from the nearest major city, Queenstown, back to Auckland. By that evening I was lying down for the night in the Auckland airport. The next morning, I arrived in Brisbane. As expected, while writing this, I am currently on the plane, about an hour from Hong Kong. If all goes as planned, I'll be in Bangkok tomorrow evening. I expect that I'll send this from there. By the time I write my next bulk e-mail, with any luck, I should be flying somewhere over Anchorage on my way back to Toronto. I'll be seeing many of you very soon. All the best,

Adam

PS Just as an extra side note, you're all receiving this about five days behind schedule as I temporarily lost the disk on which it was stored in Hong Kong, and haven't had time to access the Internet since recovering the disk. I'm currently in Siem Reap Cambodia near Angkor. The final bulk e-mail about my travels through Asia should be on its way in a little over one week. Bye for now again. :)

## Hong Kong Mixups:

Hi all,

Hong Kong and I seem to have a love-hate relationship at the moment. It loves me and never wants to let me go. I hate that it's so clingy. First the usual four points, then an explanation:

- 1) I will respond to individual mails, it just takes longer.
- 2) I don't expect you to read all of it. (These e-mails tend to be very long, as they're really just a personal travel diary for my own benefit, and a way of letting the rest of the world know that I'm not dead by demonstrating that I occasionally send e-mails). My advice is to skim for what seem like the good parts.
- 3) If you know of anyone that I neglected to add to the list, write me and let me know.
- 4) If you want to be removed from the list, write me and let me know.

It requires some serious ego and conceit, not to mention chutzpah (Yiddish for audacity, though it loses something in the translation), to believe that a whole city is pulling out all the stops to keep you near. So how does a man as humble as I arrive at the conclusion that an entire city is hopelessly trying to hold onto me forever?

Staying in Brisbane for one day before arriving in Hong Kong, things were friendly. I didn't feel trapped. The general population was nice but not overly so. On my way from the airport I bought a bottle of wine for my travel agent to thank him for all of his help over the term and dropped it off at the his branch. He wasn't around but by this time I was such a regular there that all of the other agents knew me as well. They thanked me and commented how disappointed Martin, my agent, would be that he'd missed me. One even said, "Hey you're local aren't you?" "I was. I'm going to Asia and then back home tomorrow," I replied. "Oh... Well I was going to ask if you wanted to come out for a birthday party this Friday, but I guess not." "I'd love to but..." was my reply. With that, we all shook hands and I was off to the university for some e-mails.

That evening I met with another friend for a few last drinks in a pub near where I used to live. We had a few laughs, talked for a few hours, and then went home. During the night, I chatted with both Josefin, my ex-housemate, and her boyfriend for an hour or so before they went to sleep, stayed up late doing laundry and repacking my things, and then I too went to bed. The next morning, Josefin helped me out the door and up the steps with my bag. We said goodbye, hugged, and parted smiling. Carrying my baggage across buses and trains to the airport was challenging, but many friendly bystanders helped me along the way. At the airport, I was waved through customs without a second glance. In retrospect I've noticed a pattern here: friendly but not clingy.

Not so Hong Kong. Arriving off the plane for my one night stopover before going to Bangkok, I took my baggage and checked most of it with the airport baggage service. I then caught an express train followed by a shuttle bus into downtown Kowloon, the human winepress that functions as the Yonge Street of Hong Kong.

Arriving in the city I was at first unable to find a cheap place to spend the night. This situation changed quickly. An army of immigrant Indian touts soon greeted me. "Tout", for those who, like myself until recently don't know, is the term for those people in the street who will stop at nothing to try and sell you something. They are generally poor, paid only on commission, desperate for a sale, and have no problem being falsely friendly, helpful, and informative at you until you can take no more. If they're not poor immigrants, they're likely one of the worst kinds of tout: a con artist and/or a thief.

In this case, I was lucky. The touts were having a bad night and needed to get rid of a single room at their guesthouse. I was charged a mere \$100HKD (about \$18CDN) for a double bed room with private bathroom. In Hong Kong, this is a great rate, about \$20HKD lower than the lower end price for a single room in most cheap guesthouses. Better still, the Hostel, though very sketchy in appearance, offered a baggage check service for a mere \$10HKD per bag per day. This was far cheaper than the \$80HKD per bag per day that I was currently paying at the airport. It seemed that Hong Kong was trying to entice me to stay longer with its surprisingly cheap but seedy accommodations.

I was unswayed. I spent the night weighing the risks of leaving my bags, one of which contained my laptop, in what appeared to be one of the shiftiest hostels in Hong Kong. Given that the net savings in baggage storage fees was about \$200CDN, or about one third of the current market value for the laptop, I decided to risk it. I resolved to bring my bags from the airport to the guesthouse for storage before my 6:10pm flight to Bangkok the next day.

I checked out of the guesthouse in the morning, returning to the airport via the same shuttle bus-train combination that I had used the previous day. I was in a relaxed mood. I had arrived at the airport just under seven hours before my scheduled departure time. I was hoping to check my large backpack early so that I wouldn't have to carry it all the way back to the hostel with me along with all of my checked luggage.

My flight was with Sri Lankan Airlines. They have very few flights in Hong Kong so no check in service was yet available. Their customer service counter was shared with about six other airlines and appeared very busy. I stopped at a nearby counter to fill out one of the mandatory SARS health forms required for those departing Hong Kong. A roughly seven foot tall Asian man strolled past, followed by a large crowd made up of reporters, camera crews, and numerous hangers-on. Thinking that this might be a famous basketball player of whom I'd recently heard, I took out my camera for some pictures. With that out of the way, I strolled down to the service counter. As I waited in line, I reached into my small daypack for the clipboard in which I kept my tickets, photocopies of important documents, and other essential information. It was gone.

The last time that I could remember seeing the clipboard had been that same morning in my room at the guesthouse. Now see if you can discover where I went wrong: Having realized the clipboard was missing, I was at first inclined to search for it. Trying to remain calm, I thought of where I was and decided instead to ask the lady at the service counter to try and re-issue my ticket first. She began the process but told me that she would need to receive a fax from the Sri Lankan Airlines head office in Colombo authorizing her to re-issue the tickets, or she could do nothing. I told her that I would go look for the clipboard and come back in half an hour.

Still trying very hard, and with some reasonable success, to remain calm, I retraced my steps through the airport. I checked with the express train service. They could find no sign of my clipboard. I asked them to check with the shuttle bus service. After twenty minutes, they found no sign of my clipboard. I tried the bookstore in which I had browsed for a few minutes before going to the service counter. Still no news. I tried the information booth at which I had stopped briefly. No sign of the clipboard. I returned to the airline service counter. It was now about 12:30pm.

"I'm sorry sir but I have not yet received the authorization. Can you come back at three o'clock?"

"Is four o'clock alright?" I replied, hoping to have enough time to transfer my checked luggage and prowl throughout downtown Kowloon in search of the missing clipboard. Four o'clock was fine. I grabbed my luggage from the luggage check and, still forcing myself to remain calm, made my way back to the guesthouse, where I was again greeted by the same army of touts, one of whom insisted on helping me to carry my bags up to the hostel. I tried to refuse out of kindness, realizing that he would receive no payment since I had no need of a room and was thus wasting his time. He didn't seem to understand or believe this. "Okay," I said after continued pestering, "Thanks for the help. You can have the commission. No problem." He spoke limited English but evidently understood the word commission. "No commission!" he enthusiastically stated. This is always a sure sign that there is definitely a commission involved. A surer sign was given when he left me at the reception and gave his name followed by the remark, "You write down when register him, okay?!"

I stored my bag. The race was now on to find my clipboard before four o'clock, thereby avoiding the \$400HKD (about \$75CDN) service fee for re-issuing the tickets. Already nervous about where I was going to store my bags over the next ten days, I convinced reception to let me scour my old room. No luck there. I checked the entrance to the four star hotel where I had met the shuttle bus that morning. Despite a very helpful doorman, still no luck. I checked at the baggage storage counter at the train station where I had earlier checked prices on my way to the airport. I was given a printout with their lost and found number on it for future reference but still no clipboard. Running out of time to check more spots in downtown Kowloon, I dashed back to the airport, arriving at exactly four o'clock. I was greeted by an apologetic looking service counter woman telling me, "Still no response from Columbo. Come back in an hour."

By now, I had accepted that the clipboard was lost. I wasn't yet prepared to lose my spots on multiple flights as well though. I used the hour to get my ticket to Toronto on August 17 with Cathay Pacific re-issued. Again, the cost was \$400HKD. I paid by credit. I felt a little depressed. I returned to the Sri Lankan Airlines service counter. The service counter woman, the travel agent she had called on my behalf, and I waited out the minutes until it was far too late for me to board the flight. Instead, I was placed on the next available flight to Bangkok, four days later on August 11. As I had to return from Bangkok on August 16 to catch my flight home, this didn't leave enough time to explore the ruins of Angkor in Cambodia as I had hoped.

Angkor had been the theoretical final cherry in my traveling sundae to which I had been looking forward for six months. It was a great disappointment to know that I would miss it. It was made into a greater disappointment by the

following: I had very little travel money left at this point. Hong Kong is very expensive. I was staying in a dirty overly-commercial part of town that can generously be compared to Pacific Mall in Toronto crossed with the portion of Yonge Street near the Eaton Centre. I would not know for certain until the following day to see if I could have the ticket re-issued at all. If the ticket was not re-issued, no earlier flights to Toronto were available to me, essentially trapping me in Hong Kong for a very unpleasant nine-day stopover.

I returned to the guesthouse feeling depressed. The great deal I had obtained the previous evening was a once-only affair. I was stuck in a much less impressive dorm room for about \$60HKD per night. By that evening I had decided that I hated Hong Kong and everything in it. I would have resolved to go home to Toronto as soon as possible but unfortunately, this option was also unavailable to me. Accepting this, I decided that instead of returning to Toronto, I would pass the time by wallowing in my own self-pity and writing irate e-mails to friends and family. The touts passed the time by finding other potential guests and offering to sell me hashish.

The next day, the travel agent informed me that not only did she not yet have the fax from Columbo but also that I would need to obtain a police report detailing the loss of my tickets in order to receive my potential new ones. By now I was making a continuous effort not to let myself get too depressed. I began contemplating buying an electric adaptor for Hong Kong outlets so that I could at least spend my days in Hong Kong performing useful work on my laptop. The prospect of working instead of traveling offered me limited comfort.

The morning passed with me in a police station obtaining the report. In the afternoon, I visited the travel agent. On arrival at her office, it became apparent that she was an employee of Sri Lankan Airlines and not a travel agent. It also transpired that she was able to find me an unexpected vacant seat on a flight to Bangkok the following day. As we waited for my tickets to print she kept telling me, "I can't understand what happened. Ordinarily when we send an urgent fax to Columbo about such things, we have a response within five minutes. Yours took twenty-four hours."

Things were now going better. I hardly noticed the loss when I paid her the \$400HKD required for my new tickets. That afternoon I went to visit the large Wong Tai Tsin Taoist temple to celebrate. In the evening I even treated myself to a sit down meal at a restaurant where the only two people who spoke English were the manager and the sign out front saying, "Chinese Vegetarian Restaurant."

By the following day, things became still better. I decided to call the baggage service counter at the train station one last time to check if my clipboard had reappeared. I soon realized the stupid mistake that I had made while searching for my clipboard two days previously. Looking at the printout with the phone number for the train station's lost and found, I noticed printed several lines above it the words, "Airport L&F." A phone number followed. "Oh!" thought I, "I didn't think there was a lost and found at the airport! How silly of me." I called the number. They had my clipboard. I felt foolish. The above is, predictably, a sanitized version of the actual internal dialogue that occurred. This is for the benefit of the more sensitive members of the list.

When I came to pick up the clipboard that afternoon, I asked if they had any record of where it had been found. I was told that it had been found in Aisle

J by one of the baggage trolley collectors between noon and one o'clock. This was the aisle in which the Sri Lankan Airlines service counter was located.

I had noticed that it was missing around 12:20pm. I thought hard on this and finally realized that I had taken it out of my daypack while filling out the SARS form, so as to put the completed SARS form inside it. Distracted by the giant Asian and his camera-carrying band of onlookers, I had forgotten about this. If, after noticing the loss, I had only calmly retraced my steps by about fifty metres, I would have found the clipboard. I now felt more foolish than before.

Interestingly enough, the baggage trolley guy, having acquired the clipboard on August 7, didn't hand it in to the lost and found until August 8. I still felt stupid for not having checked with the lost and found but at least I was vindicated by the fact that it wouldn't have done me any good anyway. I had the clipboard back. I was flying to Bangkok. Hong Kong had let me go this time, knowing full well that I would return in precisely one week's time.

As for Bangkok and Angkor Wat, I had some interesting experiences in both. I'll be relating those in my next and final e-mail.

I arrived back in Hong Kong safe and sound from Bangkok on August 16. I was very nervous to find out if my luggage would still be there. I had made sure to obtain a receipt for it from reception before departing but a hastily scribbled note about two pieces of luggage signed only, "Lily," didn't seem likely to be of much legal use if anything was missing. This was especially true given that I would have to leave Hong Kong one way or another within less than twenty-four hours of my arrival... or so I thought at the time.

The touts were once again waiting at the guesthouse to greet me. Luckily, so was my luggage. My laptop was still inside, where I had placed it between a pillow and a thick blanket. It was undamaged. Better still, I again managed to haggle a single room from the guesthouse receptionist for only \$100HKD. Given the dorm room was \$60HKD and the cost of storing my bags with reception for the night would have been an additional \$20HKD, the extra \$20HKD expense was fine by me.

I had a slight cold at the time. Ironically, after a week in non air-conditioned rooms in Thailand and Cambodia, I woke up in the middle of the night very concerned because I wasn't drenched in sweat. I thought that I might have a fever. With current SARS restrictions in Hong Kong, this would have been disastrous. I would have been quarantined for ten days when I tried to pass through customs. The time was 2:00am. I tried to remain calm. This didn't help. I tried to tell myself that I was overreacting. This didn't help. I decided a little scientific experiment was in order.

Jumping out of bed, I strapped on my backpack and began to run around outside away from my air-conditioned room so as to work up a sweat. It was cool and raining. Nothing happened. I returned to my room and turned off the air conditioning. I set my alarm for 3:30am. If I still wasn't sweating by then, I resolved to take some of my emergency antibiotics, prescribed in case of diarrhea from Cambodian sanitary conditions. This was inappropriate use, I admit, but the drugs did have directions for treating respiratory ailments. When I woke up at 2:40am, drenched in sweat, I was happy as a pig in \$#!&.

Leaving the hostel the next morning the only money that I had left was the key



deposit that I had left with reception. I checked out, received my money, and resolved to buy some food and water at the airport. My baggage, both carry-on and checked, weighed a cumulative total of about 69kg. I had brought far too much with me to Brisbane.

By the time I arrived at the airport it was past one o'clock. By the time boarding had begun it was past two o'clock. By the time I reached the front of the very long check-in line, it was nearly 3:00pm. I was hungry and moody. My flight was overbooked. Would I mind volunteering to stay an extra night in Hong Kong?

This place truly did not want me to leave! With an emphatic "No," I asked if there were any alternative. I was given a voucher for some free food and told to come back in forty minutes. Thanks to my previous experiences, I knew the routine. I bought my food, ate it, and tried to remain calm. Returning to the counter I asked what the situation was. After a five minute delay that seemed to last forever, I was told that I had no choice. Being in the lowest class of economy fare ticket meant that I was also the designated sacrificial lamb in this case. I spent the next thirty minutes playing the role of pleasant, polite, and very sad lost-little-tourist-who-just-wants-to-get-home. I watched the woman behind the check-in counter bravely and repeatedly punch in YYZ, the code for the Toronto international terminal, searching for an alternate connection.

I was not the only one to have been overbooked it seems. Throughout my time speaking with the check-in counter woman, a family of eight locals yelled angrily at her and her colleagues in rapid Cantonese. I suspect that they were encountering the same problem as I. In fact, I'm fairly certain that all those in my ticket class were not allowed on the flight. When all alternatives were exhausted and insufficient time remained to clear customs before the flight, I agreed to take the compensation they were offering. As it turns out, this wasn't so bad.

As I write this, I'm sitting in a private room in a four star hotel within a two hundred metre walk from the airport. The airline has already checked my two rather large pieces of baggage. They've provided me with an all-you-can-eat very high-quality buffet dinner, an electronic adaptor for my laptop, and access to their swimming pool and Internet facilities. I've also received a \$2500HKD (just under \$450CDN) compensation from Cathay Pacific. Still to come are an upgrade to business class and use of their airport lounge tomorrow.

So, while Hong Kong may be clingy and unwilling to let me go. At the least it's now trying to treat me nicely. I view it something like an abusive boyfriend: "Hey girl! Don't you walk away from me!" Slam goes the door. "Alright fine then just go! ... Wait! Wait! Baby! I didn't mean it! Please, baby I can change! Really! Here, have some flowers! And a four star hotel with free dinner and breakfast buffet." With any luck, I'll manage to get out tomorrow... One more e-mail to go,

Adam

PS This is for no one's benefit but my own records. As an aside, I forgot to write in my New Zealand e-mail about one incident. For those of you who remember the crazy initial dash from the ferry at the top of the south island to the Fox Glacier, I neglected to mention that with only a couple of hours left to reach our destination, miraculously still on schedule, we began to hear

a loud howling noise. "What's that?" said Evgueni. "I think it's the wind... or maybe the horrible roads here," said I. We drove another couple of kilometers. Suddenly with a small bang, one of the rear tires popped. We pulled over. The tire was completely shredded.

Amazingly, despite a very fully loaded trunk and a complete lack of tire changing experience on all of our parts, Evgueni, Melanie, and I managed to unload the trunk, replace the tire, and repack the trunk in a mere fifteen minutes. We did receive some moral support from a cute but mangy dog who I suspect came from the small rural hostel across the road. Still, given the length and difficulty of the drive, fixing that tire and still arriving half an hour early to our destination was quite the accomplishment.

PPS I'm adding this on the plane about twenty minutes from the descent into Toronto. Just thought it might provide an extra smile to know that when I came to receive my business class upgrade the following day, the lady at the service counter began to say to me in as friendly a way as possible, "Oh you're going to Toronto! Actually, we are looking for volunteers to..." "Thanks," I interrupted, "But I was already forcibly volunteered yesterday. That's how I got the free upgrade. Good luck today though." Hong Kong just really can't let go.

## Thailand and Cambodia:

Welcome to the final installment,

These probably aren't necessary anymore but for the sake of tradition:

- 1) I will respond to individual mails, it just takes longer.
- 2) I don't expect you to read all of it. (These e-mails tend to be very long, as they're really just a personal travel diary for my own benefit, and a way of letting the rest of the world know that I'm not dead by demonstrating that I occasionally send e-mails). My advice is to skim for what seem like the good parts.
- 3) If you know of anyone that I neglected to add to the list, write me and let me know.
- 4) If you want to be removed from the list, write me and let me know.

I lost some time this morning taking a swim and another all-you-can-eat buffet meal at the airport hotel so half of this will probably be written on the plane. Life is rough isn't it?

After my first extended stopover in Hong Kong I arrived in Bangkok feeling a little nervous. I'd behaved stupidly enough in Hong Kong with respect to losing my tickets that I still didn't fully trust myself not to make a similar mistake in Bangkok, (e.g. being conned, losing my passport, my wallet, etc). Luckily, on the bus from the airport I met a useful fellow Canadian, a University of Calgary engineering student named Sandy. She had been traveling throughout south-east Asia for the past several months. Her flight home was scheduled for the following day.

She showed me around Kho San Road, the tourist ghetto of Bangkok, splitting the cost of a room with me that evening, showing me where to buy mango sticky rice from the street vendors, and even helping me to book a bus bound for Cambodia the following day. Considering we arrived after 10:00pm, I was pretty impressed that all of this was still available.

The cost for the bus was a mere one hundred baht. Twenty-seven Thai baht are roughly equivalent to one Canadian dollar. This meant that I was effectively paying about \$3.50 for a four hundred kilometer journey across international boundaries. I had heard that prices in Thailand and Cambodia were low but still this seemed ridiculous.

As it turns out, it was ridiculous, even by Thai standards. Things began to seem suspicious around noon the next day. The morning passed quietly enough. Several other tourists and I boarded a van around 7:00am. After an unnecessary delay of about forty minutes, we were on our way. This delay was the first of many.

A retired French Insurance salesman named Dominic, an Italian couple, a middle-aged seasoned and cynical German freelance travel author, his young twenty-something year old Thai wife, and his visiting son, aged sixteen and wanting to work as a camp counselor in Canada or the US during his next summer vacation, joined me in the van. I don't think that the wife could have been more than a few years older than her stepson. The Germans were both named Frank, making

name recollection somewhat easier for me.

I was once again lucky for the second time in twenty-four hours. Arriving in a totally unfamiliar environment, I had found first Sandy, who was willing to provide some guidance, and now Frank Senior, who seemed to relish playing the role of knowledgeable guide. He regaled us before, during, and after our trip into Seam Reap Cambodia with tales of politics, murder, drug trafficking, and prostitution in Cambodia, with some nasty remarks about France occasionally thrown in for good measure. Luckily, Frank spoke no French and Dominic spoke virtually no English, so I was able to befriend both.

Around eleven o'clock we stopped at a small roadside restaurant for lunch. There we were asked to fill in some forms, pay \$30US, and wait for our drivers to process our Cambodian visas for us at the border. The official fee for a Cambodian visa is \$20US or 1000baht (about \$25US). The Germans had already been granted their visas from the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok. The rest of us refused to hand over the extra \$10US, an extortionate rate by Thai standards. We tried to haggle, meeting our drivers halfway at \$25US. They refused. We then insisted that we would obtain our visas ourselves when we arrived at the border. Our van was soon joined by several other vanloads of tourists all of whom save one, a Romansch Swiss named Romeo, happily handed over the necessary funds.

About an hour later, Frank Senior, who spoke enough Thai to understand the conversations around us, cheerfully informed our group that in order to make the cheapskates change their minds about visa prices, the bus drivers had decided to make certain that those who had not paid for their visas would be left at the rest stop for at least another hour in scorching tropical noonday heat to reconsider. He and his family would rent a tuk-tuk, a small three-wheeled taxi, to the market near the border to pass the time before meeting us on the other side.

He was also kind enough to offer us directions on how to reach the border, (a sort of no man's land infested with touts, pickpockets, amputee and orphan beggars, and casinos), how much to pay for our own tuk-tuk, how to process our own visas once we arrived there, and what type of bribes or added purchased tout services might be necessary to receive speedy service from the Cambodian officials. The process could take anywhere from half an hour to three hours from the time we arrived at the border.

Thankfully, as our Thai drivers became aware that we were going to leave on our own, they quickly made a change in plan, offering to process our Visas for \$25US as we'd originally requested on the condition that we not tell the twenty odd passengers who had just paid them \$30US. We agreed.

The scene at the border crossing was like something out of a television documentary. A small compound marked the Thai side of no man's land. The sun was scorching hot. The street was so crowded that no car dared approach. Instead area was filled with the cries and vehicles of countless tuk-tuk drivers. Beggars, orphans, and amputees shuffled about, their hands shifting from a prayer clasping motion to a pleading grasping reach for money. The elderly passed by, wearing traditional conical straw hats and carrying baskets of food balanced on either side of a wooden shoulder bar. The ground was covered in litter. The place smelled only like less developed parts of Asia can smell in my experience, a mixture of pungently spiced food, refuse, and humanity. As we passed through Thai customs and past the casinos of no man's

land, the situation grew worse. Luckily the touts left us alone, acknowledging that, as Frank so eloquently stated, we were, "Somebody else's prey."

Cambodia's SARS protection scheme, as with most of its government policies, would have been laughable had it not been so tragic. We were asked to fill out a yellow form, which on close inspection amounted to two questions:

- 1) What is your name?
- 2) Do you have SARS?

All forms were rubber-stamped without so much as a glance. I'm almost fully convinced that even had I checked the, "I have SARS!!!!" box on the form, they would not have bothered to notice. After making our way through several more rows of beggars, orphans, street-vendors, and pickpockets, we arrived at our van on the Cambodian side, a run-down vehicle, which Frank later pointed out was likely stolen from Thailand. It lacked a license plate and had its driver's seat on the right-hand side of the vehicle. This is common in countries where driving occurs on the left side of the road. Cambodians drive on the right. Along with our luggage, we were packed in like clowns in a circus-sized mini car.

The road leading from the Cambodian border town of Poipet to our destination in Siem Reap is one of the most developed in Cambodia. It is nevertheless famous, or rather infamous, as a mud-bogged, pothole-strewn nightmare. We alternated over the next four hours between violently swerving to avoid large potholes, being violently jolted by a pothole around which we had not swerved, and slogging through long tracts of mud. As we began the journey, Romeo, the Swiss who had now joined us from one of the other vans, pointed me to a highlighted passage in his Lonely Planet Cambodia guidebook:

"Beware the Poipet Mafia!" it began. It then went on to detail how a group of unscrupulous hostel owners in Cambodia had begun creating a bus service from Bangkok to Siem Reap at ridiculously low prices. The prices were so low in fact, that at an average cost of two hundred baht, twice what I had paid, they didn't even cover the cost of gasoline. The Poipet Mafia made up their money in another way. Firstly, they overcharged for Visa services. Secondly, they created long delays at roadside stops where they received commissions on all food, goods, and services sold to their passengers. Lastly, they made sure to arrive at their destination so late in the evening, that no other choice in hostel was available. Generally these hostels were not particularly pleasant. Passengers who refused to stay in the hostel were often subjected to anything from lying, pleading, and clinging to outright hostility. Two parts had already occurred at this point. The last remained.

We joked about the accuracy of this warning as we swerved along the road while Frank enlightened us about some of the more interesting aspects of Cambodian tourism. "Personally, I'd never come by this route. It's too much of a pain in the ass dealing with all of this scheming and having to constantly force one's way through it. My wife and I normally just take our motorbikes from our place in Thailand and travel on our own but this time I got a request to do a piece on these so-called cheap bus trips across the border and I wanted something easy for my son's visit."

"Oh," mouthed Romeo, "What would have been hard then?"

"Wait until you've been in Cambodia for a while. In this country a carton of

hand grenades is cheaper than a carton of coke cans. Travel a little off the main track and you can fire RPGs [Rocket Propelled Grenades] for anywhere from thirty to a hundred US dollars depending on how much of a tourist you seem to be. The favourite pizza topping in most of the big cities is 'special' happy oregano. A full meal costs about five dollars US. A short go with a reasonably good hooker would be about the same." I'm sorry to report that while he was exaggerating a bit, presenting things in such a way to impress the new tourists, he was mostly right. These things are a little harder and more expensive to find as a new white arrival but they are readily available.

Arriving at the guesthouse, we were already determined to make our own way. I had no desire to help fund a group called the Poipet Mafia. Dominic, Romeo, and I agreed to join together as a group and look for another hostel. We asked Frank if he knew of a good place. He told us to follow him. A few minutes later however, Frank's wife returned with a favorable report of the hotel. They would offer both groups a three-person room at only \$5US per room per night. Surprisingly, the hostel was clean and reasonably secure. The price was low even by Cambodian standards. We changed our minds and stayed.

The following is my brief, poorly researched, and mostly opinionated view of Cambodia and its history. Cambodia is among the world poorest countries. Measuring by GDP alone, it ranks somewhere around thirtieth from the bottom. Bearing in mind that the majority of the population lives at barely subsistence level, earning an average of roughly \$10US per person per month, while a significant but smaller group, much richer and living in the cities, may earn up to several dollars per day, it becomes apparent that most Cambodians are living in incredible poverty. For comparison purposes, the international extreme poverty line is placed at about \$1US per person per day.

I was staying in Siem Reap, the modern base for visits to the ruins at nearby Angkor, until comparatively recently lost in the jungle for about six hundred years. Because tourism is currently a very sizeable slice of Cambodia's economic pie, those in power are anxious for it to continue. For this reason, Siem Reap is one of the few places in Cambodia in which guns and violence are rarely overtly seen, at least not by tourists; however, I have heard plenty of stories to suggest that this is not the case in other large Cambodian cities such as the capital, Phnom Penh. The roads are paved for the most part, and the people tend to have some form of employment. In other words, Siem Reap is the Ritz Carlton penthouse suite and Las Vegas of Cambodia all rolled into one. The workers there are generally quite successful by Cambodian standards, some owning their own small tuk-tuks in which they sleep, and an extra change of clothes. Others, like those working at my guesthouse, earn about \$1US per day, and are allowed to sleep in the open-air garage where the tuk-tuks and generators are stored. They work roughly twelve-hour workdays for this privilege.

Orphans lack any form of social safety net. Many of them start working as young as four, selling drinks, postcards, and assorted useless junk to tourists. Mobs of more than twenty of these children will generally begin surrounding a tourist at Angkor as soon as he or she shows the slightest inclination to buy something. They will overcharge if they can, guilt trip if they need to do so, play cute if it helps, and insult if none of the above works. One day, while waiting for me beside our tuk-tuk and trying to avoid buying anything, Romeo told all of the nearby children that I would buy water from them when I returned. As a diversionary tactic, it was a masterstroke.

Arriving back at the tuk-tuk, I had already purchased a bottle of water. "Hey! Mister! Your friend say that you buy water from me! Why you not buy?!" "Hey Adam! I know your name! You have to buy postcard from me! Ten for one dollar!" "You don't want postcard. Buy from me bracelet! I give you special price!" I was greeted not by one child, but by a crowd of about twenty. As we drove away it seemed that every child within a fifty metre radius knew my name. After refusing to buy from them, many became upset. "You bad man!" one said. Another shouted as we left, "You a liar! You say you buy water but you no buy!" "Hey," said Romeo trying to be funny and putting on a fake sad voice, "They need to eat too, you know?" I half-smiled to be polite but was fairly nonplussed.

Some who cannot find work selling items try to earn money as de-facto tour guides, offering information and directions to tourists before requesting money. The more successful ones can afford to pay the local police the necessary protection money to continue to operate. Others simply evaporate at the first hint of police presence. A telling incident happened after I had paid two small children from a group of about five, 500riel each (about 12.5US cents) for their guidance. Ordinarily I would avoid paying for unsolicited services. In this case, I made an exception because they hadn't asked me for anything. Once they saw money, however, they began insisting that I give them more. One of those who hadn't received anything followed me insisting that I give him 1000riel. I told him that I had no more riel. This was true. I had only US dollars and Thai baht at the time. "You a liar! You have two million riel but you give nothing!! You a bad man!" he shouted at me. For me, the truly telling part of the story is this: two million Cambodian riel is equivalent to about \$500US. Having \$500US constituted enough to be considered extraordinarily and obscenely rich by this boy.

Even the Buddhist monks are not immune to Cambodian disillusionment. Two young monks at one of the ruined temples not to pray but to practice their English, told me about how they often eat meat. They did not know why I found this exceptional. Until this point, I had been under the impression that one of the vows required of a Buddhist monk is to harm no living creature for their food. Encountering another, I asked with hand gestures if I could photograph him. He nodded, smiling. I took the picture and began to walk away. I heard him say something to me as I left that may have been the word, "Money." Still, given that this man was a monk, I didn't want to jump to conclusions. "Pardon?" I answered, raising my hand to my ear. "Money," he mumbled far more distinctly this time, as Romeo began taking a similar picture. Feeling very disillusioned by this man, I handed him twenty Thai baht. He tried to insist as I left that Romeo pay as well, using the only English word that he knew, "Money. Money." I made gestures to indicate that my contribution was for us both. The monk wasn't having it and continued to sit beside and/or follow Romeo for the next fifteen minutes.

The cops, for their part, will sell their badges to you as a souvenir for about 400baht. I suspect they could be obtained for less. This is just the standard opening offer from most police when they spot a tourist. At one point, on our third day visiting Angkor, Romeo pointed towards a soldier wearing a towel around his legs, a uniform shirt on his chest, and brandishing a mean looking automatic rifle. "I wonder how much he got for selling his pants..." Romeo mused.

Though I know of no statistics on this, ethnic Chinese, and a few Westerners appeared to me to form ninety percent of the business class in Siem Reap. As

an example, our guesthouse was run by an ethnic Chinese woman who treated her workers with absolute contempt. During our stay, she fired one of her tuk-tuk drivers for not quoting us a high enough starting price. Another tuk-tuk driver begged us to please let him take us for a longer ride as he desperately did not want to go back to the guesthouse to be yelled at and mistreated again. Still, he seemed generally happy. After all he had \$1US per day, a roof over his head, even if he lacked walls, and a new rain jacket.

Not so lucky were many of the people on the street. Thanks to Cambodia's history of civil war, seeing amputees on the street in Cambodia was no more uncommon than seeing a French Canadian in Toronto, neither a constant occurrence, nor a surprise. Thankfully, many of these appeared to be healthy, or at least fed. Others slept on the street and begged for a living. Those who had houses often slept in a small room hidden behind their storefront, or in a ramshackle hut similar to those one sees on Christian Children's Fund infomercials. In rural areas, the situation seemed to improve somewhat. While people were technically poorer, they often lived in family groups in larger single room shacks, built from wood or bamboo, erected on stilts to avoid the rain and mud, protected by straw roofs. Some farming families that we passed even had an extra smaller hut or two, cattle, and rice paddies to work. Those with rich relatives working in the city occasionally sported a new motorbike resting underneath their family hut.

The current leader of Cambodia is a man named Hun Sen, a former high-ranking Khmer Rouge soldier. He defected to the Vietnamese when they began to capture Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge army. His reward was to be made ruler of Cambodia itself. Despite "democratic" elections, a constant campaign of violence, intimidation, and bribery ensures that no true opposition to his rule occurs. The current leader of the opposition is the son of Cambodia's ineffectual King Sinhanouk, Prince Ranaridh. I suspect that the reason he has been kept around so long is that he is both well connected and incapable of mounting any serious resistance to Hun Sen. Others have not been so lucky. I recently read about a protest in 1997 in which a political party organized a demonstration in favour of an impartial party-independent judiciary. Four grenades were thrown into the demonstrating crowd. The attackers ran into a building operated by Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party, where they were sheltered from the remaining demonstrators by police. Many people were killed. Many more were injured. The next day, Hun Sen publicly announced that the leader of the party organizing the protest should be arrested on the grounds that he had failed to properly protect his demonstrators from spontaneous violent attacks against his unpopular views. This is Cambodian democracy at work.

Despite this, Cambodia's ethnic Khmer people are some of the friendliest on Earth. Once it has been established that you're not conducting business with them, they can be quite friendly and open, offering huge smiles to those who smile at them. Stopping at one restaurant outside the ruins of Angkor on our second day, we were caught by a sudden thunderstorm. Seeing me falling asleep at the table as we waited for the rain to stop, the family running the restaurant kindly offered to let us use the hammocks in which they slept while we waited.

One day after losing his hat at a restaurant, Romeo returned to be told by a laughing and apologetic family that their son had proudly worn it to school that morning. They offered to let us stay with them while we waited for the boy to return one hour later. Romeo happily told them to let the boy keep the



hat if he liked it and everyone smiled and laughed together despite some serious language barriers.

Stopping by the side of the road to photograph some young Khmer at work on their family farm, they smiled broadly at us. The children there appeared content and expected nothing from us but a smile in return. Feeling touched by this genuine interaction, I gave both children 100riel, roughly equivalent to only 2.5US cents. To a young rural Cambodian girl, this was a very large sum. The younger of the two looked shocked, recovered, smiled broadly at me, and did something that I had not yet seen, she bowed towards me, her hands held together in front of her in a formal Khmer greeting.

I have very mixed feelings about my time spent in Cambodia. I know that I did more harm there by my visit than good. A large petroleum company controlled in large part by Hun Sen and his colleagues administers the ruins of Angkor. One-day entry is \$20US. The three-day pass that I purchased cost \$40US. I have no doubt that a large portion of the money that I spent there has gone into Hun Sen's coffers. Visiting Angkor requires some mode of transport, a bike, a motorcycle, a tuk-tuk, or a taxi. Hagglng with the drivers in town, we found that \$8US was a cheap but fair price for a tuk-tuk for one day. Much to the chagrin of the local tuk-tuk drivers, however, Romeo, Dominic, and I hired one for the same price from our guesthouse.

On our second day, we left to see the sunrise at Angkor Wat, for what we had agreed would be another \$8US day with the same driver from our guesthouse, a smiling friendly Cambodian with a large wide-brimmed hat whom we called Roc. This was as close an approximation of his name as we could manage. He was an excellent driver and guide. I was planning on giving him a sizeable tip after our third and final day. Midway through our journey on the second day he informed us that the new price for the day had been changed to \$14US.

"What?! Why?" we asked. He explained that his boss insisted that we pay more because we had left very early for the sunrise and were taking a longer route today. The route was about thirty percent longer than that of the previous day. "So you need more money for early waking?" we asked. "No. I get one dollar every day. Boss. She say today fourteen dollar." When we returned to the guesthouse a drawn out session of hagglng and bickering with the boss woman ensued. The next day we were informed that our driver was "sick," and that today we would have a new one.

I spent the morning of our third day feeling awful that I had caused Roc to lose his job over what to me was a small amount of money. At the time, it was the deceit not the money that disturbed me. This hardly seemed worth getting our driver fired, however. Romeo cynically told me that I had been traveling too long and was dwelling on things too much. The only way to travel through South-East Asia is to refuse to allow oneself to be affected by such things. >From this point onwards, Romeo, Dominic, and I made sure not to purchase our food, drinks, or tickets away from Siem Reap from the guesthouse on principle.

Throwing money at Cambodia's problems is virtually impossible. There's no infrastructure to ensure that it's of any use. Give to one person and all will want. Give to an organization and on a good day, ten percent of the donation will reach those who need it.

Cambodia's problems aside, our time in Siem Reap was a good one. We shared our hostel with the Germans, an American pothead and his friend, and a Danish

couple, working for the UN in Laos and traveling with their young daughter on vacation. The girl, whose name was Tara, spoke fluent English and a fair bit of Laotian as well. She instantly befriended both us and the boss' seven year old daughter Li Mai. The two would play ceaselessly together, often entering our room to play with us. This would generally involve Tara grabbing a water bottle and trying to use it as a wand shouting spells that she had learned from Harry Potter duels. Li Mai in the meanwhile would alternate between joining in the fun by hitting us with her water bottle, or throwing temper tantrums because of her inability to communicate, slapping everyone in sight, throwing things, and finally storming off. Li Mai's mother would often berate her for playing with the guests, physically hurting her at times. As I said before, the boss woman wasn't exactly a model human being. Though the girls could be pretty tiresome after a long day of hiking through ruins, they were pleasant enough and we tended to appreciate their visits... much to the surprise of Tara's parents, I think.

The ruins around Angkor are spectacular. I've seen nothing to compare to them. Some are small, still overgrown by trees. Other are larger, sporting four large towers in a square at their center with a central tower housing a Buddha image underneath four faces directed to each of the cardinal points. All were at some point covered in massively detailed and intricate carvings. Some still are. The ruins span dozens of kilometers. They are massive.

Some of the more remote locations, such as Bantay Srei and The River Of One Thousand Lingas have only recently been de-mined, meaning that traveling off the path one risks more than poison ivy. A few others, namely Ta Prohm, have never been cleared of vegetation, meaning that huge rainforest trees grow from out of their hearts, wrapping their roots over and through the ruined walls and carvings like hundreds of brown tentacles.

Angkor Wat itself lords it over all the surrounding ruins. It is truly massive. I would estimate that it is at least four hundred metres in length from one end to the other. It is tall. Every inch of the wall surrounding its central compound is covered in carvings of Hindu stories from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and more. Images of a Khmer Hindu goddess who I could not recognize adorned nearly every wall of the structure. That such a structure could have been lost in the jungle for hundreds of years is still astonishing to me.

There is a romance to these places that combines a reverence for an ancient and poorly understood culture with the adventure of modern jungle violence in an almost perfect parody of an Indiana Jones film. I thoroughly enjoyed my time amongst the ruins. Sometimes this was true simply because of the respite that they offered from the constant touting of the nearby children. The pictures will hopefully speak better than I can.

The return journey to Thailand was largely uneventful despite my nervousness about it. I paid \$10US to a travel agent for a bus back to Bangkok. This was a more realistic price than that of the Poipet mafia. I thus felt secure about my ticket.

Arriving in Bangkok, I eventually found a hostel. I spent that evening and the following day sampling the local cuisine, visiting the royal palace, purchasing an hour-long Thai massage from an out-of-the-way Thai herbalists shop for a mere 100baht(about \$2.50US), and exploring the local Wat, the Thai form of Buddhist temple. The royal palace, as well as the Wat, gave an idea of what

Angkor would have resembled at its height. Every inch of the palace courtyards was covered in gold paint, or brightly coloured metals resembling gold. Intricate Hindu and Buddhist carvings abounded. The whole area reminded me of an over the top set for a production of *The King and I*. Remarkably, everything there was genuine.

The Thai massage was spectacularly relaxing though somewhat awkward. No one at the herbalist's shop spoke English. I was being treated to a very authentic Thai massage experience as all of the other customers there, as well as the employees, were local Thais, unable to speak any English.

My attempt to go to a Thai boxing match in the evening unfortunately failed due to my inability to find the arena. I spent the time shopping for discounted clothes, CDs, DVDs, and souvenirs. This seemed a nice way to finish my time as a tourist.

The next day I woke up, went to the airport, and returned to Hong Kong. That was two days ago. My flight to Toronto leaves in thirty-five minutes. I'm currently writing this on my laptop in the business class lounge after my forced overnight stay in Hong Kong last night. The kind of treatment I've been receiving in the past twenty-four hours has begun to make me understand the benefits of being rich. I may yet sell out to the man after all... With any luck, I'll be home in just under twenty-four hours. Hope to see many of you soon,

Adam

PS Having finished writing this e-mail earlier, I now find myself sending it from my father's office in Toronto. For those who were wondering, I'm now back. I depart for Waterloo on Saturday morning.