



SRI AUSSIE

THE LAST JOURNEY AS UNMARRIED, AND THE FIRST AS NOT

A Travel journal by Martin Smedendahl & Caroline Heldtander

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NEW TRIP, NEW COUNTRY, NEW CONCEPT

2019

SRI AUSSIE



2020

Gothenburg/Stockholm, Sweden



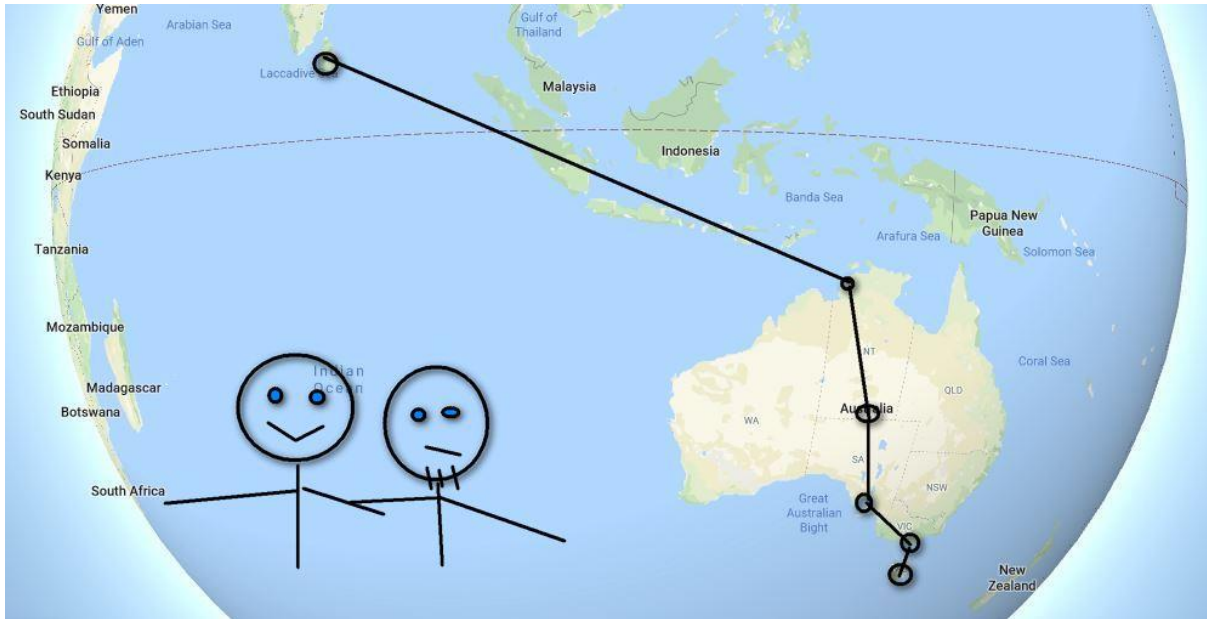
The time has come! To say fair's fair and so forth. Soon I'll embark on a new odyssey, as it seems like ages since last time.*

*Fourteen years ago, I started these irregularly returning trips to far-off places, and I started with **Australia**. I have since visited all inhabited continents, AND all uninhabited, and done so over the course of ten trips.*

So this is my eleventh event, and with it, it's time to usher in a new era: Not only is it about time to revisit some places, but more importantly, I now have someone to share them with. My partner-in-crime-, -life-and-travel, Caroline, will be co-travelling with me all the way, which is a new concept.

***Australia**, as noted earlier, is not new for me, but as a rule, I always visit at least one new country on my trips. In this case, it's **Sri Lanka** that'll be a new experience.*

So, this will be a new trip, a new country and a new concept.



Since we hadn't actually left yet, no actual photos existed of us on this journey. Thus, the portraits embedded in this symbolic map of our planned route is an artist's depiction

The route, as far as we know

We'll fly out from Stockholm to **Sri Lanka**. After a day or two with beaching and diving in Negombo, we'll join a tour group for their 10 day hike, bike and kayak tour to Sigiriya, Kandy, Ratnapura, along Kala Ganga River, Mt Lavinia and finally Colombo.

My partner-in-crime-, -life-and-travel, Caroline, will be co-travelling with me all the way, which is a new concept– Martin

After the hot and humid explorations in what is sometimes called The Teardrop of India **, it's time for the main part of the trip: **Australia**, and in particular its Outback. Starting in Darwin (where we'll dive with the crocs at [The Cage of Death](#)) and its surroundings, we'll head off to the Red Centre with another tour operator.

Alice Springs, Uluru, Barossa Valley and Adelaide will provide adventure, scenery, culture and wine-tasting (not necessarily in that order), with the additional possibility of financial independence by finding a large enough opal at Coober Pedy.

After a stop at Oz's third largest island, Kangaroo Island, the tour continues along the Great Ocean Road, where we'll pass the Twelve Apostles before reaching Melbourne just in time for Festivus***. And Xmas, I suppose.

Waving adieu to our co-travellers for the last three weeks, we'll fly off to Oz's first largest island, Tasmania.

Starting in Hobart, we'll be joining yet another tour group and explore the highlights of Van Diemen's Land, including, but not limited to, Strahan, Cradle Mountain, Launceston and Freycinet NP, with New Year's celebrations on the road. We'll round up with a few days around Hobart, such as Port Arthur and a visit to a get-away run by a former tour leader of mine, before heading back to the mainland.

Finishing with a couple of more days in Melbourne, we'll fly home in early January 2020, with empty pocket books and to the brim filled memory banks.

Caroline's corner

To embark on a journey is not always the literal action of hopping on a bus, a train, a boat or an airplane. It is sometimes the planning, the dreaming, the longing, the vagabond itch. For me, this journey started perhaps 2,5 years ago when this travel-duo looked at each other with different eyes and actually saw one another.

Or perhaps the journey might have started some 25 odd years ago when we first got to know each other during the dark (slightly dimmed lights) and seedy (oh how innocent we were back then) uni party/frat life.

So this might be a natural continuation of what was already begun years earlier. But leaving philosophy or nitpicking aside, this specific journey started about a year ago when we loosely began the pre planning stage of vagabond dreaming.

And now, some 12 or 13 months later we will, in just a few days, take off and fly away to the first part of our winter/summer adventure. Leaving the Scandinavian winter for seven weeks of Southern Hemisphere summer. And all this in the company of my partner in crime, my person, my best bud and my favourite pain in the patoot: my Martin.

This journey is on like Donkey Kong!

-C

*) Or, rather, **we'll**

**) Or, you know, Serendib, Resplendent Isle, Island of Dharma, Pearl of the Orient and so forth

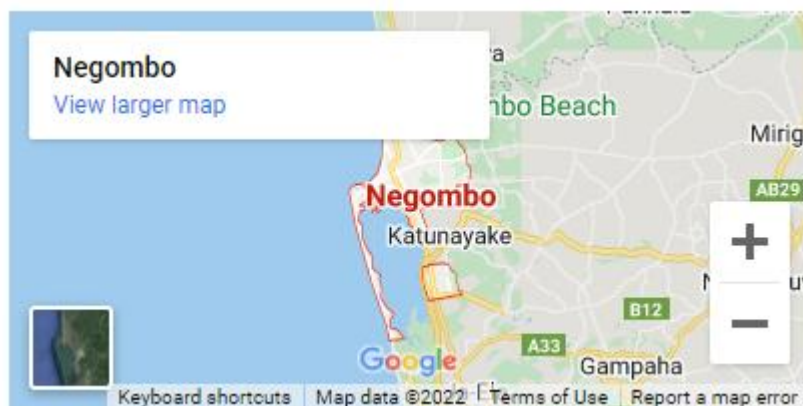
**) For the rest of us



INTO THE BLUE



Negombo, Sri Lanka



Finally, we were on our merry!

A mid-day flight meant no stressful morning (we even had time for a café breakfast) and plenty of time to do the oh-so-important liquorice shopping at the airport. Yes, one can get the good stuff in Finland as well, but we'd rather be sure. Salty liquorice is, for reasons unknown, frowned upon outside of the Nordic Countries.*

Flee or flight?

The connecting flight in Helsinki was easy as, but worries began to arise regarding the next one: Not only did we only have 35 minutes layover originally (between landing and boarding starting, that is, so in reality some 60-70 minutes), but our flight from Helsinki was delayed some half hour, most of which we didn't manage to catch up.



Proof that Martin can smile in photos. He just chooses not to.

Dashing through the aisles, speeding along the tracks, with constant bursts of “Sorry!”, “Connecting flight!”, “Scuse me!” “Thanks” and so forth, we managed to be at our connecting gate around 20 minutes after our previous plane touched ground. That must be some kind of a record, at least for economy class

passengers?

So, eventually we made it to our first destination: Negombo, a beach town more or less grown together with the northern parts of Sri Lanka’s capital of Colombo.

Tired from being on the road for some 20 hours, we nevertheless took a stroll in the neighbourhood, mostly in order to find the dive centre we had booked for the day after, but also to find, in no particular order, SIM-cards, flip-flops, beer and sunscreen.

Eventually, the waiter poured us some, though, revealing the fizzy hoppy goodness inside.

We found most, and purchased some. However, this was election day, which, in Sri Lanka, means that beer cannot be served.

Before our meal the waiter brought a tea pot and two cups. Thinking that it was just a Lankese custom, big with the tea as they are, we let the pot rest for a go, awaiting our meal. Eventually, the waiter poured us some, though, revealing the fizzy hoppy goodness inside. Clever concealment, barkeep!**



Silver tea, of sorts

Diving Miss Daisy



Allriteallriteallrite

The first dive site was some 50 minutes boat ride from the shore, and with joint effort we pushed the boat into the waves and set off. It was Caroline's first dive in quite some time, so the presence of a dive master was a soothing and welcome one. Despite the heavy rain during the evening and the night before, visibility was real good, and the reef was full of marine life; lots of starfish, corals, lobster antennae, and apparently a turtle. We missed the last one though, because we had to ascend a bit earlier than the rest of the group. That was no loss, though, as a school of big yellow and grey fish was curious about the three humansized creatures floating in mid-water, so they circled us for five minutes straight. Awesome safety stop!

The second dive was shallower and one reef closer to the shore, making it much more susceptible to the outswamp of silt. Visibility was low, and the reef considerably less teeming. However, I brought my brand new camera, supposedly waterproof to 20 metres. This was only a 13 metre dive, though, so I took the risk, and the camera made it back, fully armed and operational. Morays and octopi*** hid in the caverns, and was caught, rather unconvincingly, on the sensor.

After a yummy lunch of grilled mullet, fresh from the sea, we set off to finish what we had started regarding buying the essentials****, before meeting our surprisingly small and eutophone tour group and going for group dinner at a place that presumably hadn't heard about the tea trick.



Cheer up, Moray!



Wave about to hit

Caroline's Corner

What a day! Or should I say two days? Or three.

Just after noon time Friday we took a plane that would take us to Helsinki. We had had our preflight drinks. And we had bought some liquorice (Never leave home without the black salty gold) which meant that we were properly prepared for anything that might occur.

In Helsinki we would catch the second plane and then we would arrive at the last transit airport Bangkok. I was slightly concerned that we had not enough time to be able to make that last transfer... But so far so good, we thought in Stockholm. Little did we know that Finnair had decided to delay the flight with some 20 minutes. It was rather sweet of them to make sure that some transfer passenger would be able to board the plane. But for us it was a disaster. We basically had 15 minutes to leave the plane, run through safety controls and board the next and last plane....

Not cool.

But the movies were plentiful and Martin is a delightful company so the long and uncomfortable journey didn't feel as long as it should. Although the gentleman in front of me reclining his seat from takeoff to landing did not do his part to ensure a happy trip.

But we arrived at our destination safe, sound and very happy. Time to do some sightseeing and some dive prepping. (Also we checked in at a very quaint two room hotel in downtown Negombo which we would discover is situated right between a mosque and a church. No sleeping in).

At the dive centre we found this lovely restaurant. Of course we had to check the local quisine. I had Kotthi rotti, a Sri Lankesian streetfood which is shredded pancakes, refried with sliced veg. Add some pulled protein and we have a home run.

As it was the presidential Election Day, nobody were allowed to serve alcohol. So we had Sri Lankesian pure silver tea. Beer served in a ginormous tea kettle. Love the way rules are bent in this country.

Sunday we had two dives. One magical with plenty of fish, sea slugs and other interesting submarine fauna. Second dive though, wasn't as magical. We were closer to land and with that the silt were denser and we had crap visibility. Also we lost our group.



I got stripes, stripes around my shoulders

But my dive buddy extraordinaire and I didn't lose each other so we proceeded according to safety regulations of searching for the others for one minute and when unsuccessful, do a controlled ascent with a safety stop. Our fearless divemaster found us in the mid of our safety stop and kept us close by for the rest of the dive. Especially me. I did not need to use a single muscle because he swam for the both of us. Martin he trusted to be able to swim by himself.



Just keep swimmin'

Then we had the best grilled fresh fish imaginable for lunch. Which very much made up for the old (probably Sri Lanka's oldest, leanest and meanest) mutton curry I had for our meet and greet dinner. Yes, we have met up with our tour members and tomorrow we start our journey for real.

*) Salty of course. Sweet liquorice can be found worldwide, and we did bring some ammonium chloride powder to spice up what we buy en-route, but Nothing Compares....

**) It was beer, for clarification. Beer served in a tea pot.

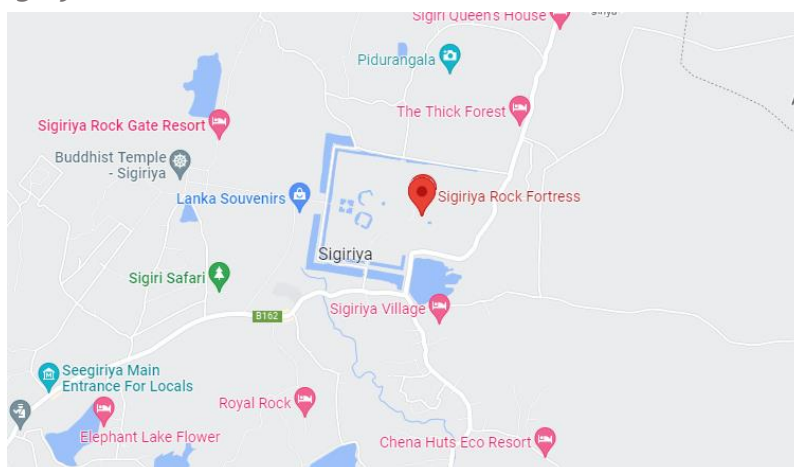
***) It was actually just one octopus, but I like its plural form. Octopi.

****) Including, we had come to realise, an adapter. None of the so called universal adapters and chargers seem to recognise the Lankian weird three-pronged outlet as part of the universe.

GREETING THE DAWN AND THE TUSK



Sigiriya, Sri Lanka



Our active Hike, Bike and Kayak tour started easily enough. There were seven passengers in our group, which just pushed us over the limit from minivan to mini bus. So, we had plenty of space and could really stretch out on the ride to the Central Highlands, for some elephant spotting and mountain hiking.

Look, Mr. Frodo....

In Sri Lanka, quite opposite of the case in mainland Asia, most elephants are wild, rather than domestic. Their number has declined, of course, but that's mainly due to decreased habitats. The British, when they colonised the land, turned the elephants' natural habitat in the middle highlands into tea plantations, forcing the trunked trumpeters downslope, settling in the flatlands. This caused some friction with the farmers, but the elephants prevailed, and the introduction of National Parks has seen the population stabilised.



In ancient times, elephants were used in farming in many aspects, one of which was irrigation

Of course, the fact that with the Sri Lankan subspecies of the Asian elephant, no females and only a select few of the males have tusks, has certainly helped their survival rate.

We took seat in a jeep with roofbeams designed for slightly smaller passengers and set out for a bumpy ride through the forest and out to the open fields and lo, and indeed behold: elephants!

A small group of the pachyderms was quietly grazing, and not far away there were others.



Baby elephant wrestling

The afternoon continued with sightings of more wildlife, such as various birds, water buffaloes and peacocks. And plenty of more elephants, including a huge herd, up to a hundred animals, by a lake. Among them was one of the few grown-up tuskers, although quite a few youngsters seemed to have picked up the dental decoration as well.



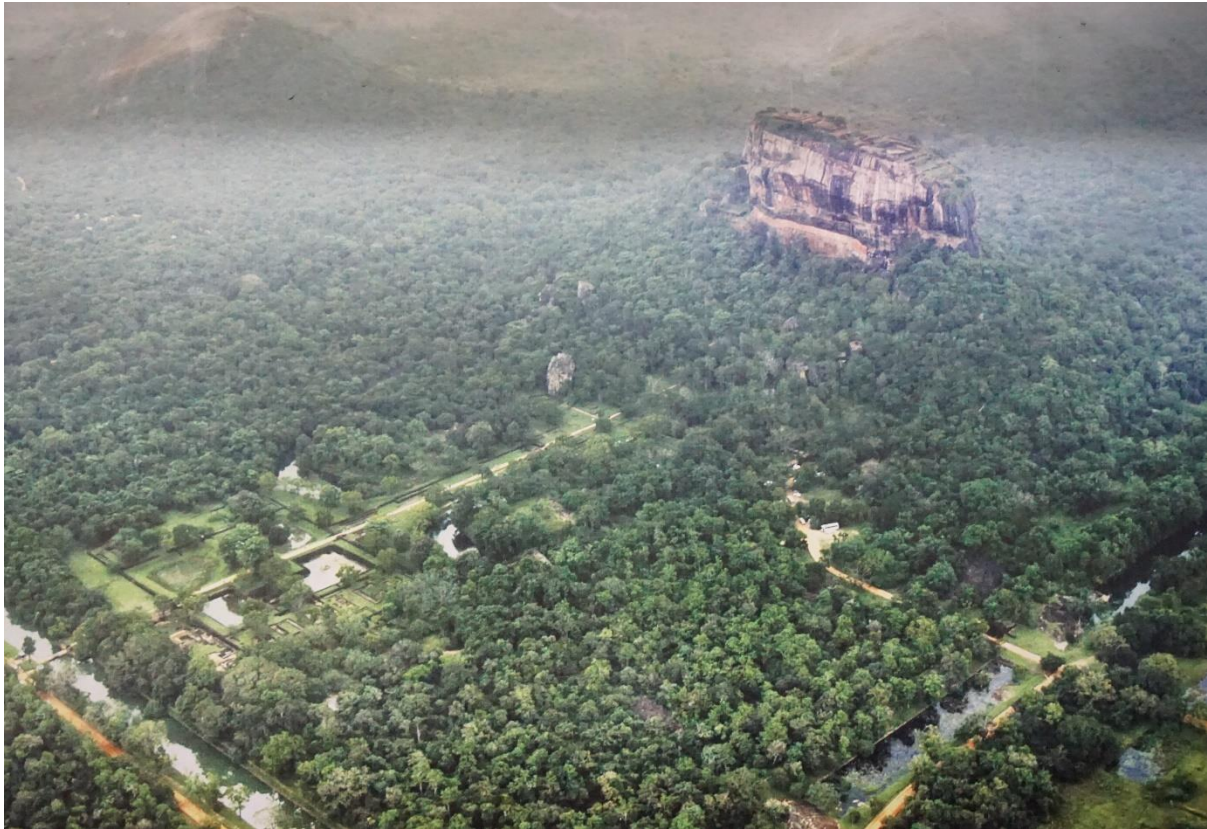
*Peacock, or possibly Onbird**

With full memory cards we returned to the park HQ to return to the hotel. On our way back, after the sun had set, the bus came to a rather sudden stop in the middle of the road. Now what? my mind enquired. Stuck in the mud? Corrupt traffic police? Road work? No, nothing of the sort. In fact, it was a roadside shack, providing a surprise dinner consisting of Sinhalese specialities, such as coconut bread, wade (a lentil based patty, baked), egg poppers and more. Delish!

King of the who?

Sri Lanka's probably most recognisable landmark is Sigirya, or Lion Rock.

Built by order of king Kassapa in the 5th century, the impressive engineering extravaganza consists of a palace, a town (now depopulated, of course), and a garden on the plains below, and a palace (or fortress, depending on your point of view) atop a massive monolith, rising some 200 metres above the surrounding forest.



Aerial view of Sigiriya. I won't show a Comic Saens view.

To beat the crowd, wheels were rolling at 6:00 which, while ridiculous early, nevertheless was worth it. There were few tourists around when we started the ascent just before seven o'clock, and considerably more heading up as we came down.

To beat the crowd, wheels were rolling at 6:00 which, while ridiculous early, nevertheless was worth it

Passing through the garden, with its no longer used waterways-and-fountain system, we passed the lower wall and took the first of 1201 steps towards the top.



Sunrise hits rock bottom

In the past, an area about halfway up the steep cliff, was covered in thousands of colourful paintings. Rain and wind has torn away most of them, but under an outcrop, protected from the elements, a few has remained, though their colour has faded.

Continuing climbing, we finally reached the top of the cliff, with stunning views as a reward. The reasonably low number of tourists made the early start worth it, and as we had a late breakfast back at the hotel, we had already had pretty much a day's worth of adventuring ticked. With more to come.....

Caroline's corner

OK, my partner in crime has very eloquently described our first part of the Sri Lankan experience. I only have a few things that I'd like to add.

I HAVE SEEN WILD ELEPHANTS!!!! AND MONKEYS!!! Squeeeee! My inner child is dancing with joy! To see that many elephants in the (almost) wild was superb.



The last *three* steps are the most important

And the climb up the Sigirya was no fun. The rickety staircase was steep and slightly wobbly. And the part that was made out of rock lacked railings. Not my fav part of visiting the beautiful lion rock (in olden days it even had a lion face on it. nowadays you can only see a slight resemblance. But it is there, the majestic and the mighty lion) . The view was worth the scary climb though. Fantastic. Amazing. Splendid. Add any adjective and it still won't be enough to describe the lush beauty of this land.

*) Which only makes sense if you're bilingual.



Knuckles, Sri Lanka



The Sri Lankan highlands beckoned, and we heeded. Hiking gear at the ready, we spent 2.5 days in the mountain range known as The Knuckles hiking and glamping.*

Lankan leeches, grand glamping

After the literal ups-and-downs of Sigiriya, we boarded the bus to take us to the central highlands. We got dropped off and got ready for what should have been a reasonably easy stroll in the woods: 9.5 kilometres, mostly downhill, on dirt roads and paths, and not very undulating. But we don't live in Shouldland, do we?



The pines stood tall (another bilingual joke...)

We were each issued so called leech socks. Yes, in Sri Lanka, tiny leeches inhabit the wet grass and bushes, eager to latch on to the feet and calves of unsuspecting hikers, walking around like Happy Meals with legs. The thick canvas and tarp socks are stern enough to withstand the tiny bites from reaching the skin, but the slimy buggers have no problem sticking to the socks and starting their ascent to the exposed skin by the knee, or the descent to the hope of likewise by the foot.**

Not long after setting foot, the first of the bloodsuckers appeared. We all had to have intermittent stops getting rid of them, using little balls of salt, wrapped in damp cloth. Surprisingly effective, though the ones that had crawled into the shoes were tricky to swipe left and had to be killed by salt before releasing.



Deleeching

The leeches took away a bit of the focus of the immensely beautiful landscape. It was overcast, but no rain, and the high altitude and lower humidity inland made for a reasonably cool walk, temperature-wise. All in all, without the leeches, this would have been an amazing afternoon hike. With them, it was simply great. And in fairness, leeches aren't all that bad. You don't feel them when they crawl, and as soon as they bite they inject a small dose of anaesthesia, so you don't feel the bite. They add antibiotics, so the wound won't get infected as long as they're around, and once they're full, they simply drop off. As long as you can get the blood to clot again (which you can, if you have a prepared nurse travelling with you), it's really no big deal. It's just, you know.... icky.



I'm no botanist but.... A flower?

An hour or so before sunset we reached our base camp. The tents were raised on little elevated platforms, there were water closets and a common area under a sail roof, where an eskie waited with soft drinks and beer.

All the facilities of a hotel (including kitchen staff; the locals cooked us mouth-watering Sinhalese meals each day), except for a shower. Or was there? Located by a creek, it was but a short walk from camp to a couple of natural pools, complete with waterfalls and whirlpools, making for a rejuvenating natural shower after a long day of walking.



In the natural pool

The next day was more challenging, hike-wise. Roughly 15 km, with an elevation gain of some 800 metres, in rough terrain and at places extremely steep. But on the plus-side, almost completely leechless.

The hike took us across the rice paddies in the valley, through the lush forest of the slopes, and to the bushy grasslands of the top plateaus. Our climbing efforts were rewarded by stunning views of the valley below and the mountain range across. Eventually we reached Tusker's head, the very highest point of the trek, and started our descent.



Plowing the fields ye olden ways

Going down is as strenuous as going up, when the slope is steep and the stone is slippery, so the following 5 km were not a walk in the park either, but we eventually made it down to somewhat flatter ground, and the small village below. One of the houses belonged to our local hike guide Gamine, and we were kindly invited for tea and biscuits. His 6-year old son, whose favourite school subject is dance, performed his monkey dance, and his 80-ish frail father joined us for tea. In these parts, tradition has it that the youngest son takes over the house, as they are most likely to care for their parents the longest.

The valley smelled like a spice rack. Cardemum had historically been grown here, and there was a nice scent of cinnamon and cloves in the air. No word on whether there was arrak as well, but our fearless leader provided a bottle of the sweet liquor after dinner. Along with the Austrian schnapps and the local beer, we had quite the little party going. The crew sang a local song, and as arrak liquor is basically punsch, Caroline and I sang a traditional punschvisa (drinking song, for when drinking arrak).

Next morning we said goodbye to our glamp site and set off through the rice fields and the villages towards Pitawala Pathana National Park, for a stunning view from what is known as Mini World's End. One would think that the world would have but two ends, both equal in size, but I guess not.

Picking up the litter left by previous tourists, we left The Knuckles and headed towards Sri Lanka's second largest town, Kandy.

Caroline's corner

Leeches, oh the leeches. After a, comparatively, not so early morning we got on the bus to the Knuckles mountain range. We were met, high up on a mountain range, by Gamine and his crew. Lunch in the lush green. And boy oh boy did they feed us: Daal, curries, fried little fishes, papadums and veg. So good and so tasty.

I really feel that my vulva should remain a leech free zone.

When they had finished stuffing us full with delish food, they started to gear us up for our first hike. A 9,5 k into the wilds. Well not so wild, one would describe it more accurately as a venture into the land of the leeches. We got to carry little wet salt bundles and special knee high booties which would give us some protection.

Innocently we started our hike into the Sri Lankan high lands. Not aware of the incredible amount of leeches, we thought it would be an easy stroll into the woods but soon we realised that the leeches outnumbered us humans by 9 – a quadrillion. We had to stop every one hundred metres or so to brush 'em off and to press the salt bags over the leeches that had found their way in under our clothing.

At first it was awful and I screamed on the inside, but after the first 5 or 6 removals I stopped caring and focused on the nature. Our fearless guide Matesh told us that if we had to go, we had to find a nice bush. Alas, my new truce with the dangly, bloodsucking, two mouthed little suckers, did not mean that I would like to offer up my private parts to them. I had to draw the line somewhere and I really feel that my vulva should remain a leech free zone.

The hike was worth the suck though. And our campsite was more of the glamping kind of campsite. An absolute delight.



Teeny weeny lizard

The ladies were squealing from joy when we saw the water closet. Yes. In the middle of the campsite, in the middle of farmland, in the middle of nowhere, they had build flushing wc's. Oh joy. The truest of true joys.

The same kind of squealing could be heard from the males when they discovered the ice chest filled with cool beer.

After a fantastic brekkie we went for a nice 15k hike. Only a few leeches latched on to our bodies. And they only hung on for the first couple of k's. Phew.

We climbed up and up and up and up, until we reached a plateau. Just like the one sir Arthur Conan Doyle described in his book "the lost world". Well, minus the lost civilisation and the people. But with the breathtaking views.



Lankan landscape

Our fantastic guide Gamine had a surprise for us at the end of the trek. A tea pause at his house. We got to meet his elderly father and his children. In Sri Lanka the youngest son stays at home as the caretaker of his parents. So we quickly deduced that our fine guide were the youngest son. Gamine proudly showed us the 200 year old house and his rice fields. We were served very tasty Sri Lankan filled pancakes, coconut cake and an awesome cup of tea. In the good china. The very finest and delicate china. There we sat, a muddy, sweaty, slightly bloody (the leech experience) and rather raggedy looking bunch of hobos, being looked after like long lost relatives. Claspings the delicate cups with sunscreeny, sweaty hands. The generosity made me really humble.

As we camped close to a river we got to wash our bodies and gear in crystal clear water. I had my first fish pedicure. Yes. In the nature. And the fishies did it voluntarily. Both evenings we got to swim in cool, flowing clean water. Very lovely. Very refreshing. A great hike despite the two mouthed little bloodsuckers.



After hike shower

*) A portmanteau of glamorous camping

***) In vain, though: the feet were also covered in the stern stockings

****) Not even literally, as this was no National Park, just regular ol' wilderness

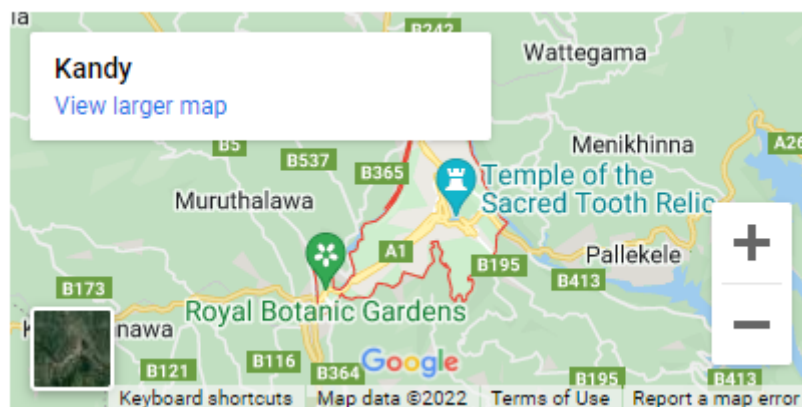
*****) So, basically, glögg

*****) FestU:s punschvisa, natch

OH, PEACE OF KANDY!



Kandy, Sri Lanka



Once the capital of the island, now the second largest city in Sri Lanka, Kandy is the country's cultural, buddhist and tea-y capital.

Without milk or sugar. Or tea.

The day started with a visit to a nearby tea factory. In Sri Lanka, as opposed to, for example, India, they still harvest the tea by hand. Whether that makes it better or not, I leave to the more avid tea-drinkers to decide, but it certainly makes it more expensive. The pluckers are paid a living wage, but sometimes the factory use workers who not only don't get paid a fair amount, or at all, but in fact even pays for permission to come to work: tourists.



At the tea tee

We did our own little five-minute harvesting, filled a third to a half of the little baskets, and went back to the factory for some presentation of the process. Basically, the leaves are fermented (to make black tea), not fermented (for green tea), then dried, crushed and separated. The grading is what gives the tea different taste. Of course, if you really want to differentiate the taste, one could always add other flavours and herbs to the mix. Ginger, lime, coconut, arrak, berries, bergamott, and so on, and so forth, in that manner.



From expensive to fertiliser; the different uses of the same bunch of tea

After the factory tour we got to sample the tea. Not a variety of versions, mind you. Not even a few. Nope. One cup of one flavour was what we got. And it was the, probably, most vanilla* of tea ever: English Breakfast. So, yeah. No. Meh.

Lake it or not

The tour had so far been pretty jam-packed with activities from dawn to dusk, but after the morning tea business, we had time to explore Kandy on our own. Leaving the town's most famous attraction, we set out for a stroll among the second most: Kandy Lake, aka Kiri Muhuda.



As Kandy Lake is artificial, so is this island

An artificial lake, created by Sri Wickrama Rajasinha in the 1800's, it offers a relaxing break from the otherwise rather bustling street traffic of Kandy. The lake is populated by fish (eagerly fed popcorn by the locals and tourists alike), pelicans, ducks, monitor lizards, turtles and cormorants.



Setting off to find a restaurant recommended by a former co-traveller, we soon realised that the turnover in the food and drink industry in Kandy must be rather high; we found the place, but it was closed, seemingly for good. Moreover, none of the bars and pubs listed on map apps seemed to be in business. Eventually, we found ourselves back at the hotel, ready for the evening activities.

But who monitors the monitors?



Urban pelican

It's fun to stay at the....

The first of which was a cultural show performed at the local Y. MCA? Nah, MBA**, of course. Skillful drummers and dancers performed traditional and ceremonial dance and acrobatic numbers, dressed in elaborate clothing, demonic masks, or peacock dresses. For the finale, we went outside for a fire show.



Cultural show

Tooth fairy

Kandy's main tourist, and indeed pilgrimage, attraction is the Temple of the Tooth. Some buddhists believe that when Siddharta Buddha's body was cremated in India, somehow one of the teeth survived scot-free. That tooth was retrieved by devout monks and given to the king. According to the story, it later swapped hands a few times, eventually made it to the Portuguese, who obviously burnt it, smashed it to powder and spread it into the ocean. Yet somehow the tooth magically reappeared in buddhist hands, and since the hindus forbade veneration and worship of human remains, the tooth was smuggled from predominantly hindu India to predominantly buddhist Sri Lanka.



Drummers done drummin'

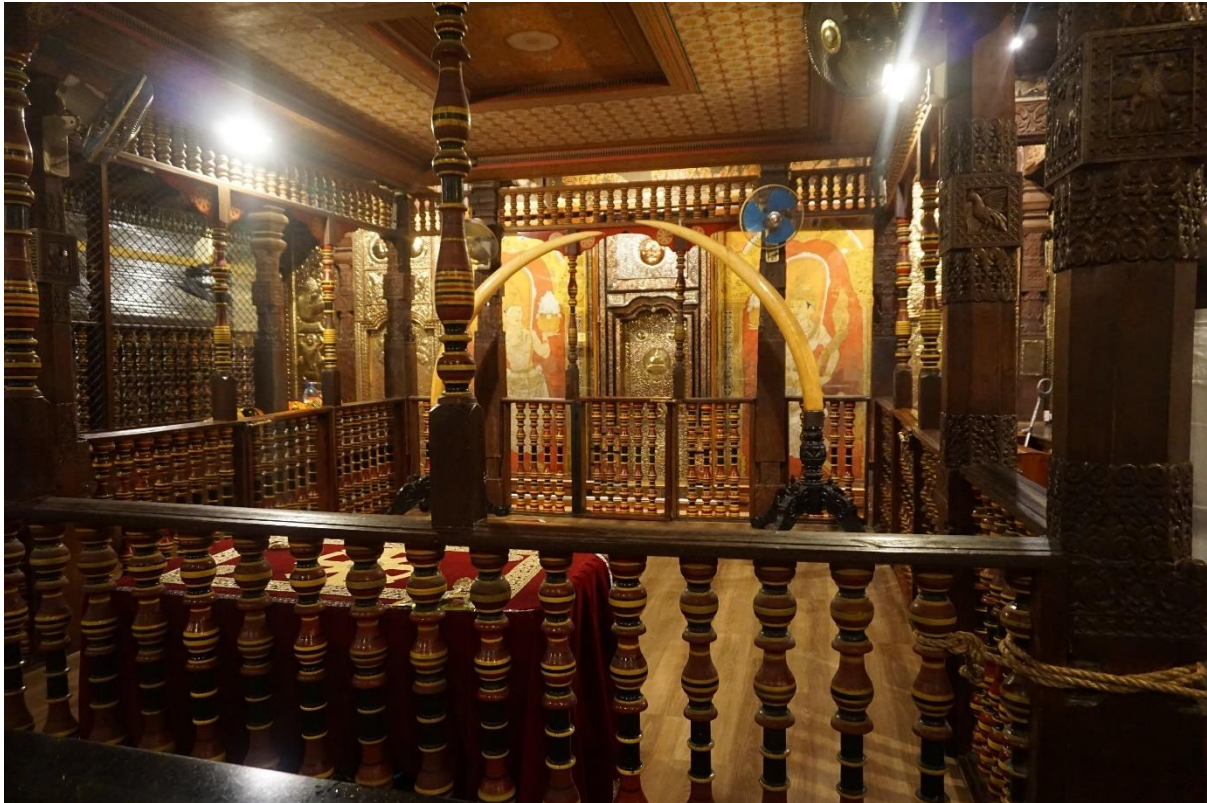
Different kings placed the dental deity in different capitals, until it reached Kandy, around which a temple was built and the tooth was displayed for all to see.

In a temple that is definitely not a temple, but nevertheless an interesting, and indeed more or less mandatory, site to behold when in Kandy.

Except no. First of all, it's not a temple, as it lacks two of the three things needed to be considered such: no stupa and no bohdi tree. And second of all, the tooth is kept in a chest, which in turn is kept in another chest, and so forth, like a Russian doll.

The few non-buddhists to have seen the alleged magical resurrected denture all agree that it's way too big for a human tooth, and more probably comes from a cow. It doesn't stop hundreds of people to every day stand in line to see a chest that may or may not contain a few more chests that may or may not contain a

tooth, which may or may not have belonged to a human, who may or may not have been an Indian prince, who may or may not have reached enlightenment, by his own statement.



The chamber of the chest of the chests of the tooth of the Buddha

In a temple that is definitely not a temple, but nevertheless an interesting, and indeed more or less mandatory, site to behold when in Kandy.

Caroline's corner

The Brits introduced the tea plant to Sri Lanka, thus causing the man-elephant conflict as they took the lands populated by the elephants and repurposed it to tea plantations. The elephants were pushed out of their natural habitat. The organisation we travel with, Intrepid travels also has a foundation: The Intrepid foundation. They try to give back to the communities which we visit. One of these projects is the Orange project. Apparently elephants don't like oranges, lime etc. The plants/trees are too filled with thorns, and the smell and taste of the oranges is not for the elephant palate. By planting the edges of the farm/tealands one lessens the crop destroyed by hungry elephants thus decreasing the elephcide. I do believe that the Orange foundation plants more elephant suitable crop in places where these beautiful giants can live in peace. A pretty neat setup. Also they try to minimize the plastic waste. We collect our plastic waste in a bottle that will be used as a brick in a house. Another cool thing with Intrepid is that they really try to use local suppliers. For example, we got small canvas bags for shopping sewn by a single mother with handicapped kiddies. Yeah, that sounds like a fib but it is really true. And nice.

More than 21 million individuals live on this island. The lankese, the hindus and the tamils.

They have an amazing history. In fact, the longest recorded written unbroken history record is Sri Lankan. When my ancestors played with bronze and chased the sun god, the Sri Lankan old ones had a books, brick buildings and a very technologically advanced society. A lot of that knowledge was destroyed intentionally by the colonial rule. The Brits, the Dutch

and the Portuguese intentionally targeted the scholars and the skilled craftsmen and therefore wiped out all that skill.

During our stay we have seen and met many dogs. Sri Lanka have approx 3,5 million dogs. Not wild but more like communal dogs. People feed them, some have collars (and those have less fleas) some are clearly filled with bugs and other nasty little surprises. It is somehow interesting to see how dogs look like without human interference. No small, pug-nosed ones, no big, long-legged tired-looking ones. They all are approx knee-high length, long noses, perky ears and lean tight bodies. Rather like short-haired foxes. But it is hard to see them and not adopting them all. Even harder not to cuddle them but some do have rabies so no cuddling it is.

Kandy was an interesting experience. Our fine and fearless leader Mr Matesh fills our bellies with good and tasty Sri Lankan Street food. Yum, yum and yum. Since my partner-in-crime does not like the sugary pastries I got all of them.



Sweet and sugary

The main business in Kandy is surprisingly marriage. Or rather the party surrounding the nuptials. 2 shops out of 3 were basically either a wedding party rental shop, a wedding beauty salon or a lawyers office....

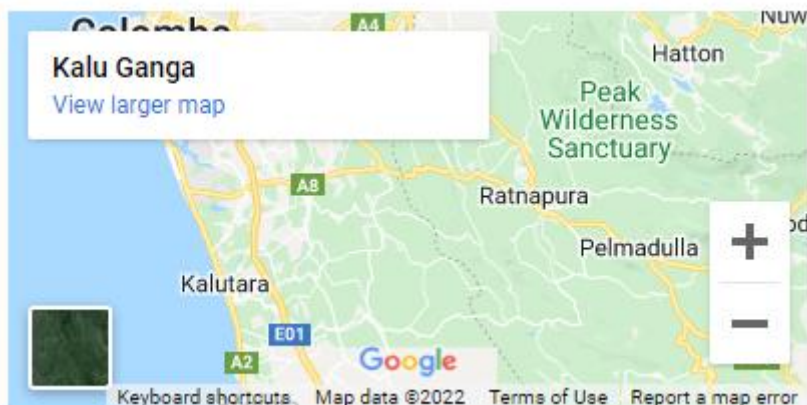
*) Other than, of course, actual vanilla

***) Young Men's Buddhist Association

UNDULATING AND MEANDERING



Kalu Ganga, Sri Lanka



This vacation is no vacation. Though we left Kandy by scenic train, we would be spending the next couple of days motoring our own arses, by means of pedal and paddle.

I choo-choo-choose Sri Lanka

Amongst the most famous things to see and do in Sri Lanka is taking the scenic train ride through the lush landscape, the tea plantations and the green hills. We boarded the 7:40 from Kandy to Hatton and got to experience the land in one of the most satisfying ways possible. Although parts of me would have preferred either the classic crowded cart with people on the roof and/or clinging to the sides, or the luxurious victorian *Passage to India* style steam train, one has to accept that technology marches on, and trains and beautiful views are always a good combo.



Modern train on classic tracks

Rolling, rolling, rolling....

As we got off the train in Hatton, the next mode of transport awaited. As we had already declared our height, all the bikes were the right sizes, with just minor adjustments of saddles to be done. Although the lowlands of Sri Lanka is perfect for road biking, the mountains really aren't. It's very hilly, and the roads are either busy with traffic, in rugged conditions, or both. So, the best type would be a mountain bike with city tyres, lots of gears, and disc brakes. And that's what we got, and in great condition to boot, or at least mine was.

The next few days were filled with biking through stunning landscapes, past rice paddies and tea plantations, through picturesque villages and gum tree forests, on undulating roads. Every so often we would stop for a photo opportunity, some tea and/or biscuits. There were fruit bats in the trees and monkeys on the electrical wires. People were picking tea and everyone, especially the children, waved and shouted "Bye!".

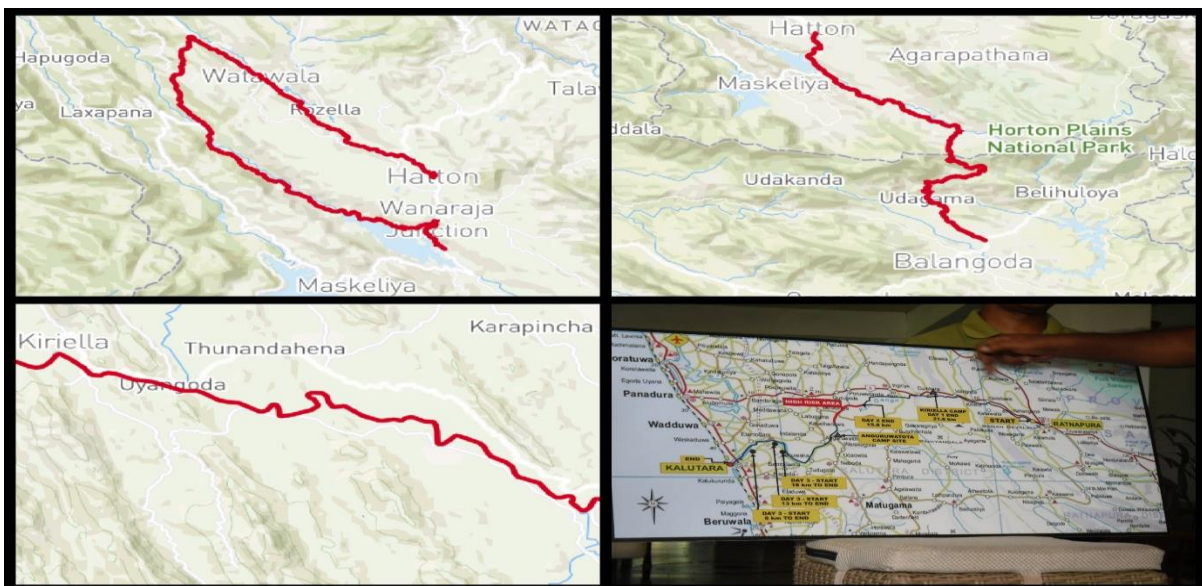
The first day's route was 48 km down-and-up, with almost 1000 m elevation gain. The second was a bit longer, roughly 56 km, with less climb, but more importantly, ended with a 20 km joyful descent.



At 1500 masl, the mist was more cloud than fog

Even though the average speed was a fair bit lower than I'm used to, the exceptional climb, the challenging roads, and the heat made for quite a few calories being burnt. And the weather was pretty much the best one could hope for: overcast, but no rain.

Seeing Sri Lanka from a bike saddle is truly a wondrous experience, and highly recommended.



My sportswatch was low on battery after the first day of kayaking, thus no regging

That's a-paddling

Changing wheels to keels, the next part of our journey consisted of paddling down the Kalu Ganga in open kayaks. The name means black river, and its waters are indeed of the murkier kind. Following the gentle current, we set off towards the coast. The intense sun and proximity to water called for covering as much as possible to avoid sunburn, but at the same time the actual river water inescapably filling the bottom of the vessel craved the use of swimwear. Swimming trunks and a microfiber towel for covering the lower parts of the legs became the compromise.



Kayaking the Kalu Ganga

The calmness, the relaxing floating downstream, with active paddling now and then, is a great way of taking in the landscape and the surroundings. Every now and then we would pass a boatman or two. Some were fishing for fish, but most were fishing for something else entirely: gems.

The sandy-silty river bottom contains, amongst others, sapphire, aquamarine, emerald and onyx, and is therefore the most important resource of the region, and the town where we started our watery journey is Ratnapura, a Sanskrit meaning translating to 'City of Gems' and as such it is the traditional centre for the Sri Lankan gem trade.



Riverboat man

But paddling is more about nature, and after a day of tackling the streams, we put up camp by the river banks* and brought out the UNO deck**. The rain started shortly after the landing, and came down with no forgiveness. We spent the evening playing games under the tarp over the eating area. And once more, the camping was more glamping, with water closets and even showers.

The following day contained more paddling, but after the relative ease of the first day's floating gently down the stream, this stretch had some rapids to offer. Going one kayak by one, we passed under a bridge where two of the guides were waving directions, sometimes contradicting. Maybe that's a contributing factor in our 720 rotation down the currentiest part. Solely on the xy-plane, though. We remained firmly on board.



Mountains ahead

The paddling eventually ended. The unusually heavy rain had thwarted the possibility of paddling all the way to the ocean, but two days soaked in a kayak made for slightly smaller people was plenty, and we began prepping our minds for town and beach life.

Caroline's corner

After the beautiful but slightly unromantic train ride through amazingly green and lush landscapes we arrived in Hatton. Our destination for picking up bikes and the gear and start and finish that first day of wheeling.

So biking in the Highlands. Sounds like a piece of cake? No?

Well, we had some hard uphill ascents (Some? Plenty!) and some (not enough) descents. Ondulating roads.



Team Blue-white

But the views! The views. One think I wore out the word “wow”. The staggering beauty of the hilltops, the forests, the tea plantations and the small dwellings were to die for. In our merry

gang of explorers we had the mountaineers (the Swiss, the Austrians and Martin), then we had the normal people namely the fabulous Canadian dame and me. We decided early on to do this in our own speed (really speed? I don't think you can call our velocity speed. More a pleasure view watching huffing and puffing bike ride). Our kind and very fit guide Mr Mathish kept us company as he had designated himself as the sweeper. He rode with us as well as he were calling ahead to fix all the wonderful surprises he had planned for us.

I had some problem with my gears but truthfully it was my flat tire that hindered me the most. Silly me focused to much on the birds, monkeys, Tuk-tuks and breathtaking views to realise the flat tire. So much to see- But I managed to go all 48 k to the lovely lunch waiting for us at the end.

We spent the night in Hatton. Not a very touristy town. I hardly ever feel ill at ease but there was something with that town which made me reluctant to go exploring in the evening. Another reason for my unease was that we had the only windows of our hotel room facing out to the community staircase. The window from our bathroom. One had to time one's bathroom visits to NOT coincide with the public usage of the stairs. Otherwise one would be sharing a lot of private parts.....

The second morning of the bike portion of the trip started out with some great descents. And bats. Lots and lots of bats. We saw their sleeping trees. Yup. The bats hang from special trees during their daytime sleep, looking like funny hanging fruits.



Undulating and meandering roads through plantations and villages

My tush though felt slightly raw. It was not the most pleasant sensation to put the full moonsque derrière of mine back to the saddle that day. But the views were worth it. We saw clouds roll in. Slowly and majestic like some benevolent wraiths. 1500 metres above sea level, and I did it with broken gears. When we started the descent bit of the 60k trek I got my

third wheel change and then somehow it suddenly felt so much lighter. I should have said something earlier as we had the most wonderful back up crew with us. They changed wheels, supplied us with bananas, cookies (ah those ginger cookies! Nomnomnom) and water. What a splendid crew. I have to take the fault all by myself for not pointing out the faulty gears slightly earlier. Preferably before all the ascents. But I guess my brain had overloaded due to all the impressions from all the views.

But my poor derriere had not seen the end of trials yet. As my partner in crime has already written, we spent the night before the kayak portion of our trip in the Sri Lankan gem capital. But did I receive any gems? Nooo, But I did not give away any gems so I guess we are even.

Kayaking in the Black river is a pretty wet experience. The kayaks are all suited to the slightly less statuesque bodies of the Sri Lankans. I guess two fullbodied (very fullbodied) vikings weigh a bit moreso our kayak, how should I put it, sailed low. I took the rear that first day and oh boy did My rear take it. My nether regions spent the entire day totally immersed in river water. The part that had been leech-free was now Black Rivered....

Muddy, tired, happy kayakers arrived to a great surprise (yet again). A glamping site. Our tents were under one tarp and under another tarp, a table with white tablecloth, white linen serviettes and beautiful white china were set. We, the wet river rats, were served as if we were the main cast of "Out of Africa". I should not have packed a pair of very tacky grey leopard print tights . Oh well, live and learn. Glamping in Sri Lanka is true glamping.

As the rain was heavy and very unseasonal we had the choice of either spending another night glamping in rain or cutting it short after only two days of kayaking and instead go bike riding in much drier environments. Despite all the pampering and the wonderfully sweet crew, we all felt that a third day kayaking would be rather too much since the weather forecast were of a very wet variety. So after the white water rapids washed away my sunscreen and gave rise to an interesting sunburn pattern on my shins we said good bye to wet behinds, black water, plastic garbage decorating the trees, birds, monitors, fish, Aussie Ryan and the extremely sweet kayaking crew. New adventures (drier, much drier) were around the corner.

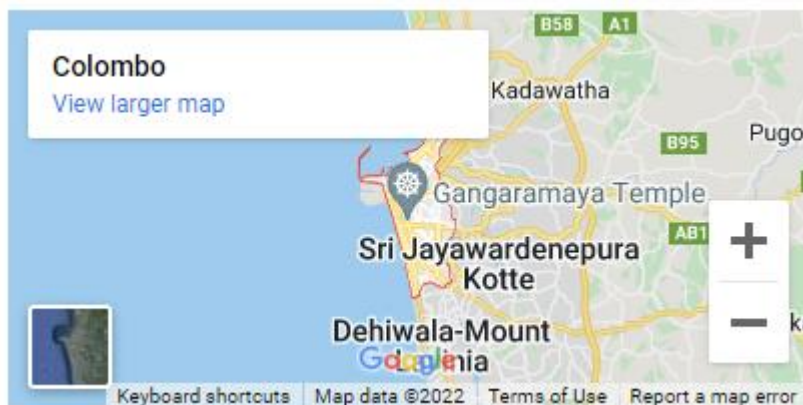
*) With we, I of course mean our crew. This is glamping, after all

***) Complete with rule debates, of course

FULL MOON, FULL CIRCLE



Colombo, Sri Lanka



Having dragged up the kayaks on land, we took to the seafront for some more relaxing days, eventually ending up in the vibrant capital of Colombo.

On a roll again

With one day less of kayaking, we found ourselves able to explore the west and southwest coastal towns, in particular Unawatuna and Galle. The former was a quaint yet touristy* town with market stalls, dive shops and seafood restaurants. Unfortunately, the season for diving on this part of the island had yet to begin, so the deep would have to wait this time. Instead, we sampled the local seafood at a beachside restaurant on a uniquely non-rainy evening.



We all float down here

An active trip still, we had another go with the two-wheelers. This time, we were presented with Merida BigSeven 300:s, fitted with regular MTB tyres, but the cruise was a fair bit more relaxed than what we had up in the mountains. Down here, almost every conceivable plant of the island can be found. Rice, coconut, papaya, wood-apple, tea, cinnamon, and so forth, and so on. And with a variety of flora comes, as so often, a variety of fauna. Monitors, bats, monkeys, squirrels, and a plethora of birds roamed the area. Taking frequent stops in the scorching heat, we had a full serving of freshly opened king coconut water in the breeze by Koggala Lake. There are 33.000 artificial lakes, but only three natural, Koggala being one of them.



Rice paddies to be

Familiar surprises

Our fearless tour leader had managed to provide a surprise almost every single day. It had been sampling of local street food, picking tea, a sip of arrak, a wood-apple floater and so on. But this day's surprise was something extra as we were driven up to a frontyard of a cosy yet elegant house. Greeting us at the entrance was a woman and two little girls, and we were invited to our tour leader's home by his wife and daughters.



A Sadly no longer working HMV gramophone



Galle Lighthouse

Restaurants hire professional chefs, and their job is to make delicious food. A home cooked meal can, with quality commodities and a nice dollop of tradition, love and care top the finest Michelin efforts. The combination of his mother's saffron-and-cashew rice and his wife's various curries was just irresistible.

The sheer Galle

Galle is an old colonial town, first utilised by the Portuguese and later expanded on by the Dutch. The core of the city is its fort, inside of which lies a stroll-friendly shopping and restaurant neighbourhood. We had a guided walk around the bastions, the old gunpowder storage, the light house and the warehouses, passing by several impromptu cricket games**, and ended up on the fortifications for a view of a stunning sunset.



Sunset, some silhouettes

After a few cold ones at the old Dutch hospital, now housing several bars and restaurants, we got in the bus for the last time and arrived in Mt Lavinia a bit too late for dinner.

Full moon

As Negombo more or less is grown together with Colombo to the North, so is Mt Lavinia to the South. Along the beach, the area draws many visitors, but is considerably more packed than its Northern counterpart. Traffic is intense, and the place is generally a bit shabby. Nevertheless, we had a day without any scheduled activities, so we took a stroll to the laundry place and onwards to the beach. Not dirty by any objective standards, it was still a pretty meh beach. The local police academy had some sort of try-out exercises, both in the water and out of it. Passing a few fooderies that failed slightly to look inviting, we eventually found a nice little place away from the beach, as well as from the bustling traffic.

In addition to laws prohibiting serving alcohol on election days*** and frowning upon doing it on Sundays, the Island of Random Booze Laws also forbids its serving on days of full moon, between 14 and 17. So, one has to wonder: does the definition of full moon nights follow the werewolf logic, in which the fullest moon night and the one before and the one after qualify? Presumably so, since we encountered the same hurdle the next day. But if so, shouldn't the ban instead be at night, when the full moon is actually out for all to see? I know that the moon is out during the day as well, but it's not clearly visible, and we're not exactly being logical here, are we****?

The Island of Random Booze Laws also forbids its serving on days of full moon



Slightly stouter than the usual lager

The owner of this particular establishment needed no significant convincing to realise the non-sequitur nature of the weird-ass law, and found it in his heart to wave it, which of course made the lunch even tastier.

Full circle

The tour was nearing its end. We had already said our goodbyes to the drivers and his all-purpose right hand man (bearing a slight resemblance to Morpheus actor Laurence Fishbourne), and now it was time for the farewell dinner. I had seen the empty cans thrown about, but I had yet to try Lion Stout. So far, the only choice had been Lion Lager, so it was a nice change of pace, and it went great with the fish and the laughs we had. Eventually we went our separate ways, and Caroline and I headed to the capital, after the final breakfast.

A highly recommended app is PickMe, an Uber-style app for ordering transport. With prices being presented right there in the app, as well as ETA and live positioning, it gives clear options. That particular day, few cars were available, but plenty of tuktuks instead, and eventually we sat in that most iconic of South Asian vehicles on our way to Colombo.

I wouldn't say that the Sri Lankan capital is of ill repute. It's just that it is huge, with insane amount of traffic, no public transport, and precious little to see and do. There are gems, for sure, but, like dredging the muddy bottom of Kalu Ganga, it's not really worth the effort, especially in comparison to how beautiful and laid-back the rest of the country is. One day was plenty. Our hotel was very nice, fresh and well maintained, and we found a real cool restaurant where they served delicious South Asian food and even deliciousier South Asian desserts. Unfortunately, they were stark proponents of the Werewolf approach to beer serving, so we had to stay dry.



Red Masjid – the polka pig coloured mosque



Nelum Kuluna – Lotus Tower

After a night of rather restless sleep (whatever construction work/demolition/nuclear tests they were doing just outside our hotel window all through the night would put old Soviet industrial complexes to shame), and a yummy brekkie at the roof terrace, we PickMe:ed ourselves to the airport, leaving Sri Lanka behind, and bringing all the memories, the sights, and the flavours. Stuti!

Caroline's corner

End of kayaking . But still wet. We got to change in the company of an unruly (but friendly) gang of chicken. The rooster kept a close eye on us as well. But the cutest of our watchers were the little puppies. Small, black and very well kept. No community dogs here. Only small, collared sweet little dogs. I melted. We ended up in a quaint little seaside town catering primarily to surfers, divers and Russian sun worshippers. We saw some abandoned houses along the way. Houses that had belonged to families wiped out by the tsunami.... It put a sombre glow to the otherwise glorious day. A lunch, a shower and a nap later we were ready to hit the town. (I guess I would have preferred to the order of shower, lunch and then nap. But the company was just as marinated in Black River water as I plus we were the only ones in the hotel restaurant so I soon forgot about my rather hobo-esque appearance. The chairs were soft and oh so soothing for my tender derrière.

We had a lovely bike ride. The heat was a bit rough but our fantastic guide had organised plenty of refreshments. I finally got to have my fresh king coconut drink. Happy life. An then we got to met the family of our fearless guide. They invited a bunch of strangers into their home. The little girls were initially very shy but after a nice get to know each other the sang

beautifully for us. Our fine guides wife and mother had spent the morning cooking a wonderful meal for us. I were touched beyond words. So sweet, so generous and so tasty. A privilege, and an honour.



Coco no Loco

The beautiful old town of Galle and more accurately Fort Galle got a proper walk through. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the Brits and of course the Lankese had all put their stamp on the small peninsula. A touristy place but at the same time a home to many. It had a nice feel of authentic mixed with the touristy notes. After a lovely sunset we left the fort to drive up north to our final destination, Mount Lavinia. A suburb to Colombo. I did not like it as much as Negombo. It was loud, dirty and well, I wanted to be back in the highlands. But as all adventures go, we had to finish this one. A group of strangers had become a lovely group of co-travellers. It was nice to have shared this adventure together but now it was time to leave.

My partner and co-conspirator took the tuktuk to spend the last night in Colombo before going to the next leg of our adventure. Bye Sri Lanka. We'll be back some day.

*) Judging by the many posters and signs using Cyrillic, the majority of the tourists are Russian

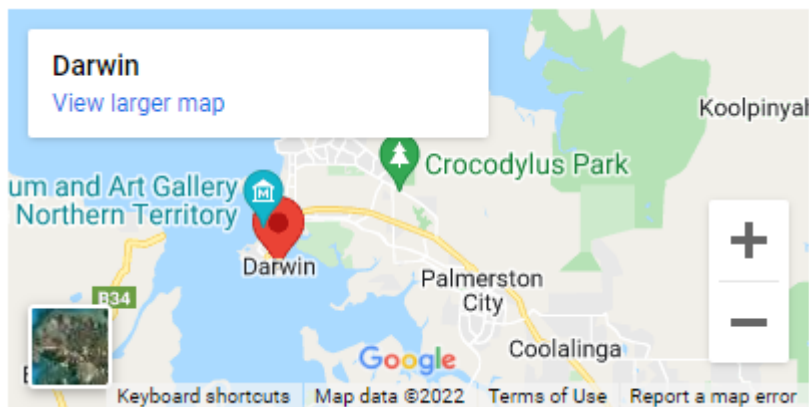
**) Many of whom had the batter skilfully, yet irresponsibly, hitting the ball out from whichever patch of grass, parking lot or whatever served as the cricket ground and into the surrounding traffic

***) Unless, of course, if cleverly concealed in a tea pot

****) No



Darwin, NT, Australia



Leaving Sri Lanka behind, we boarded the plane to our next destination: Darwin, Australia, where the start of our next epic leg of our journey would be. But not immediately, mind you. First, we would check the local sights, eat the local food, drink the local beer and, most importantly, swim with the local saline crocodiles.

It's plane insane

Bandaranaike International Airport likes to act secure. There was a passport check when driving in, another when entering the airport, followed by a bag and body scan. The baggage drop was inside yet another security check, and then there was a surprisingly easy one to get to the gates, where you didn't even had to remove shoes or dignity. Too easy, I thought, as I filled my water bottle. And lo and behold, at each gate there was yet yet yet yet another security check, complete with having to remove every coin and drop of liquid. Goodbye reason, order and water. Hello insanity, stress and dehydration. When, oh when, will airports admit that their so called security checks do fuck all to prevent terrorism and only

causes, at best, annoyance and dehumanisation, and, at worst, missed flights and nervous breakdowns?

JetStar is basically the Ryan Air of Southeast Asia and Oceania, and operated our last stretch, from Singapore* to Darwin. I have no problem flying Ryan style on 1-2 hours flights, but 4:30 is stretching my patience a bit.

We landed in the dead of night**, got a surprisingly cheap taxi to town and realised that the reception hours were way outside of our arrival time. After a brekkie at a nearby diner, we got hold of the front door code and could get in for some intermittent shut-eye in the common area in the back yard, awaiting our room. Since we had been up some 24 hours at this point, we immediately had a snooze as soon as we got access. Not fully rested, we just had a quick stroll in the afternoon, leaving the exploring of town proper to the next day. In hindsight, it might have been preferable to stay a day or two in Singapore for some good sleep, or more importantly, to catch a U2 concert, as their Joshua Tree Tour was playing those exact days.

Aulde Palmerston

Darwin, previously known as Palmerston (they changed the name after The Beagle landed and stayed for a while, with Charles being generally cool enough to make the entire population wanting to rename their town), has had a tough century. The modern architecture and lack of old buildings stem from either of two occasions: the Japanese bomb raids during WW2 and the devastating cyclone Tracy on Christmas eve of 1974. Rumour has it that Harold “Tiger” Brennan, the mayor at the time and renowned drunkard, had managed to sleep through the entire cyclone, waking up on Christmas day to find his roof, as well as a general portion of his town, missing. With 77 casualties and the biggest air lift ever in Australia, cyclone Tracy remains forever in the collective minds of Darwinians.



It's all about the crocs in the Top End

During an admittedly touristy bus ride, we got to see the surroundings, including the few remaining houses built ye olde way, the fancy Cullen Bay Marina neighbourhood, the completely still***, yet unswimmable (due to crocs, box jellyfish, or both) coastal waters and the wharf (complete with a spectacular lightning show on the far end of the bay), amongst other sights.

Barra

Due to its vicinity to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, Darwin is known as the gateway to Asia, and as such, there is large diversity. Koreans, Malaysians and Chinese communities abound, as well as one of the largest indigenous population of any Australian town. The diversity expresses itself by means of the culinary scene. Fine dining can be found both in the city centre and by the marina, and, truly welcomed, craft beers are never far away. With cooking from many different regions, what I really craved was that sublime and typical fish of the country: barramundi. The surf and turf place we had chosen for the night was unfortunately out of barra that day, so we had to settle for some crocodile instead, in the form of nuggets and spring rolls. The next day, however, we finally got hold of that delicious fish, and within a bite, Caroline completely agreed with my ravings as well as my cravings.

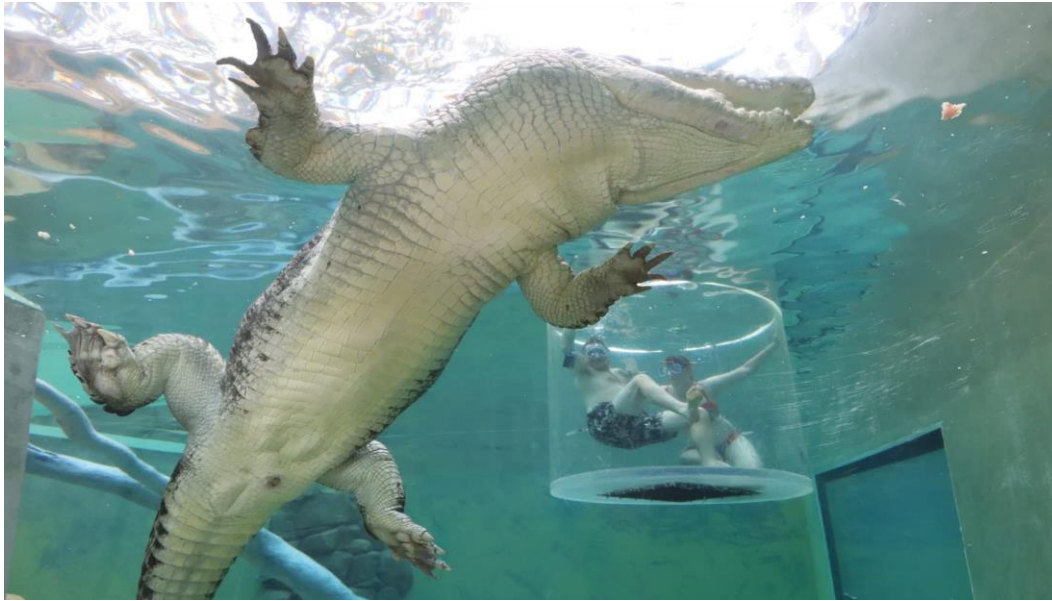


Barramundi – Best fish in the Southern hemisphere, and finally on Caroline’s tastebuds

Cage of Death

At the restaurant, we eat crocodiles. In nature, crocodiles eat you. Unless you are sufficiently protected by a plexiglass cage, of course. Dubbed “The Cage of Death”, we got our swimmers and goggles on, and was lowered into the personal pool of Axel (lovingly referred to as “Big Boy”), a 5 metre long, 900 kg heavy saline crocodile. These massive prehistoric beasts are nothing short of impressive, and the booming sound created when they snap their jaws shut with double the force of a Tyrannosaurus Rex makes you realise how helpless man is when facing nature. Man, yes, but mankind, no.

CAGE of DEATH. Don’t let the name scare you, though: it’s not really a cage, more of a plexiglass cylinder



Axel "Big Boy" McCrocopants has a hard time deciding between chicken and human

We spent a lot of the day at the Cove, watching the feeding, petting the turtles and learning about the proper way to handle snake bites in Australia. 21 of the world's 30 most venomous



About to enter the CAGE of DEATH. Don't let the name scare you, though: it's not really a cage, more of a plexiglass cylinder

snakes can be found here, and their fangs are terrifyingly short. That has two implications: one, you don't necessarily realise you have been bitten, and thus fail to act quick enough, and two, the venom doesn't spread through the bloodstream, but rather the lymph system, meaning that amputation is pointless. Applying pressure to the affected limb will do the trick, and once in the hospital, they will probably be able to save you. Mostly.

All of these encounters made us eager to get to the outback, so that's where we went.

Mostly.

Caroline's corner

A loooong journey filled with funny toilets in Singapore, different cultures clashing slightly with each other in the

washrooms and the completely unfunny, overcrowded last leg of our flight to Darwin (those flights are ok if people are generous and caring with each others but that is a seldom experienced phenomena).

Somehow my face hardly ever works in the automatic passport check so that I had to be manually checked at the Aussie border was not a very big surprise (not for me but for Martin it was). But the extremely friendly and chatty lady who, very thoroughly, checked me was a pleasant surprise. She took her time, (much to the dismay of the line behind me) and talked about Tasmania. But hey, when in Darwin, one needs to talk about Tasmania. Right?

We arrived predawn. And it was warm, and humid, and warm. Did I say warm? Almost 30 degrees Celsius at 0500. So naturally we could not check in at our hostel, nor could we do touristy stuff. But there is always a coffee place open somewhere. My first meal in Australia was a ham and tomato sandwich with a fruit salad. Not bacon. Nope. That came later. The second brekkie. Hallelujah! After a baconfree two weeks in Sri Lanka, we ended the bacon drought in style. Full English style.

Darwin is the capital of the northern territories. C U in the Northern Territories. The no longer official slogan. Which these two swedes abroad just loved. Two stubby holders purchased. Check! C. U in N.T.....

In Darwin, one can find craft beer, and food. Sometimes at the same place

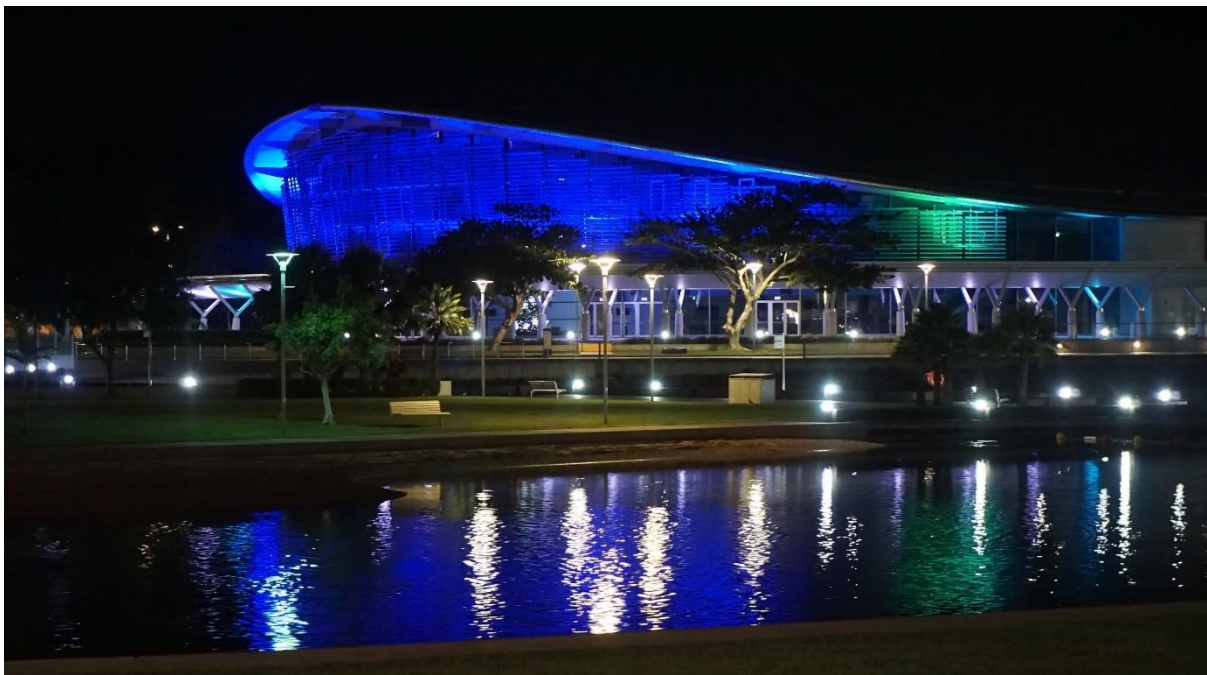
Hurricane Tracy and WWII made sure that only 4 houses in the the whole city were built earlier than 1945. The architecture is very modern, very cool, and rather interesting. An art deco but not as colourful.

In Darwin one does not swim in the sea, the rivers, the ponds or in any non

constructed pools. If, by any chance, the salt water crocs misses you, the the jellyfish will kill you. So we decided to avoid the JF's but not the crocks. In the Crockosaurus Cove one could see snakes, monitors, frogs, fish, turtles, gounas and of course the crocodiles. We had prepaid for the "cage of death" experience. That is to be lowered down in a (sturdy, very sturdy) plexiglas cage to swim with Axel, the very mighty, boat wrecking, tire slasher, ginormous crocodile. Wow. What a beast! Such beautiful creature. And so perfectly evolved. They say that if you go down to a river or lake at the same time three times in a row at the same time then you will be met by a Croc the third time. They watch, learn and kill. Very smart and cunning hunters. I did not anticipate my newfound fascination for this animal. Seriously impressed.



Martin also had to physically remove me from the snake venom medicine department of the Crocosaurus Cove shop. Did you know that most venoms affect your lymph system primarily? If you can stop the venom from spreading then you have a very good chance of reaching the place with antivenom (also called hospital/health stations). So number one is to not move. Keep your muscles immobile. Number two is putting on a pressure wrapping. Aussies have developed a very cool compression bandage with little rectangles printed in top. If you stretch the fabric so that the rectangle becomes a square when you roll it around the limb (the entire limb, fingertip to armpit, toes to your privates) then you have the exact pressure to keep the venom from spreading to the lymph nodes and reaching the blood stream and killing you. But since we are travelling with good tour companies they have all the necessary protection already in stock. And I'm returning to a Scandinavia with only one venomous snake. And it is a ridiculously weak venom compared to the hulks of Australia.



Darwin Marina

Darwin, a very friendly town. But so much alcohol and drugs. It was very sad to learn that so many of the native Australians we met were not originally from Darwin. They had left their families, clans, homes and were not welcome back. Ever. If one, as a indigenous person, chooses to drink, do drugs or smoke, then one is shunned and never allowed back. That was why we saw so many passed out drunk, and miserable people laying or sitting around. Very sad. Very, very sad. The further we travelled into the outbacks the sadder it would be. The open racism, the disdain from so many white Australians, were a shocking discovery. But we also met many, many allies of the original Australians. SO there is hope.

*) Which has adopted the insanity of individual pointless sec checks at each gate, but at least they have the decency to provide drinking water inside.

**) At 5-ish, so I suppose that some would call it morning

***) Due to its complex shelterness, Darwin is quite the opposite of a surfer's paradise

TOP END IN SICKNESS



The Outback, NT, Australia



There are many sights in the Top End, most involving having to endure extreme heat and either ridiculous humidity or dryness. Hiking the hikes, watching the birds and avoiding the crocodiles is, unfortunately, a fair bit more troublesome when having a stubborn and terrible dry cough. But do I quit?

Kakadu

There were early starts, these days. Some due to long driving days, others due to spectacular sunrises. But mostly it was to avoid the most intense heat during midday, not only for us fragile vikings from “thu nerth”, but for the fact that even local wildlife tend to be siesta-ing during the warmer hours.



Posers

First stop was Kakadu National Park, which isn't easily covered in one day (which is why we spent two days there). Named after a mispronunciation of Gaagudju, which is the name of an Aboriginal language spoken in the northern part of the park, the area covers some 20.000 km² (roughly half the size of Switzerland, or the entire Ångermanland, for that matter) and is joint owned/operated by the Australian government and the two local clans, Bininj and Munggyu.



The Rock

To understand Kakadu, one has to gain insight of the people who live there, and has lived there for ages, and who knows the land. The traditional owners have been around for a long time. Exactly how long is up for debate, but we do know that some of the rock art* at places like Nourlangie dates back over 20.000 years. As some of that art depicts figures and events featured in the still practiced Rainbow Serpent religion, that makes it arguably the oldest religion in the world. The typical x-ray style depicts humans, mimis (good-natured spirits) and animals with bone structure visible.



Namarndlog and Namarkkan (the lightning man)

With six seasons** of varying temperatures and downpour, and lots of elevation differences, the landscape changes vastly over the year, and that in turn contributes to the huge variety of wildlife.



Australasian darter

An early morning river cruise is probably the best way of spotting the local fauna. Yellow Water Tours features one of the chattiest and most brutally honest, as well as most knowledgeable and entertaining guides ever. *“You fall off the boat, a croc is gonna get ya, and you’ll doi. You lean too far out, a croc’ll jump outta the watah, and you’ll doi. Your husband jumps in after ya, he’ll doi.”*



Yellow Waters, yellow sunset

Yep. A vague disclaimer is nobody's friend. For two straight hours he kept us edutained whilst the boat passed hundreds of birds, the occasional buffalo, and lots of crocodiles. The days were spent doing short excursions in stunning landscapes, and the nights at permanent camps.

Eventually, the focus turned more towards finding those beautiful waterfalls and natural pools in which to swim, and over the course of the days we dipped in several, each more refreshing and beautiful than the last.

By day three we had left Kakadu and entered Litchfield National Park, with even more swimming than before.

*You fall off the boat, a croc is gonna get ya, and you'll doi. You lean too far out, a croc'll jump outta the watah, and you'll doi. Your husband jumps in after ya, he'll doi.
-Reuben (not exact quote)*

Noises in the night

During the days and nights spent in the bush, the dry cough that I had caught towards the end of the Sri Lankan part started to act up real badly, and even more so during the night. The coughing caused sleeplessness, obviously for me and Caroline, but also within the close quarters of the camp, I'm afraid that the noise reduced the sleeping quality for other co-travellers as well.

We tried to get some medical attention, but that proved to be tricky in the outback. In fact, it even proved to be tricky in Darwin city, which we eventually circled back to. After one cancelled appointment and one failed visit to a clinic that really should do quality control on the information on their website, we eventually had to grab a cab to the 20 km off suburb of Palmerston in order to get consultation, prescription and a late-hour pharmacy***.

The Way Outback

The stop in Darwin was a quick one, as we early next morning set off for the Outback again, this time aiming way south, all the way down to Alice Springs, halfway down the country.

These days consisted of long hours of driving, on straight and desolate roads, through a landscape where trees gave way to bushes, where it got flatter by the kilometre, where the pockets of grass were increasingly lower and scarcer. The days went from hot and humid to hot and dry, but we still would get off the bus ever so often and go for a walk or a swim. While steep and performed under the scorching sun, the walk to the view of Nitmiluk (formerly known as Katherine) Gorge is a short and rewarding one. The river and its gorge is stunning.



Nitmiluk (formerly Katherine) Gorge

It might have been different in 1998. Heavy rains had flooded the river, and had even drowned the town, even though it is located some 20 metres above average wet season level. But this time around, the river run still and low, far from town.

I remember noting my first trip down under, that Aussies seem to have a fondness for showcasing the world's (or country's, or state's) biggest/smallest/oldest/adjectivest this-or-that. It could be inflatable santas, ball of yarn, guitars or anything conveniently specific. In NT, they need to boast something about their particular pub. That's why we managed to, in one day, visit both the country's longest-running pub (that's in Daly Creek) and the second smallest one (that's in Banka Banka). The former is filled with random memorabilia (thongs****, singlets, money, bras, hats, beer caps, registration plates, coasters, photos, knickknacks, id:s and so forth) from floor to ceiling and back, whereas the latter, naturally, has little room for such.

As we were by now deep in the outback, far from any stagnant water, most mozzies had gone, and there was no more need for tents. Add a spectacular starry sky, and the sleeping arrangement of choice would be a swag, a sort of canvas covered mattress, doubling as both a tent and a bed, simply rolled out on the ground beneath the stars. The long driving continued, with pit stops at, amongst others, Mataranka (hot springs in a bat infested jungle. Pretty pointless; who needs hot springs when the air is way warmer, and who needs the allergenes connected to the guano of a million bats?), Wycliffe Well (apparently Australia's Roswell, with the highest number of reported UFO sightings), Devil's Marbles (an astounding collection of granite rocks, eroded into round shapes over billions of years, and held in highest esteem by the original owners, as they represent the eggs of the Great Rainbow Serpent, their highest deity) and an old telegraph repeater station.



Nananananananananana... Pacman!

The red turned redder. The centre turned more central. We were now truly in the Red Centre, and made our way into Alice Springs.

Caroline's corner

The short trip around Kakadu and Litchfield had really vetted our vagabond appetites. Onwards to new adventures. But first we had to find a GP to get Martin some cough repressant.

Some of the experiences were marred by Martin's horrible cough. Especially during the nights. How ironic that we had to sleep in tents in close proximity to others. Oh well, they very nice about it. But try to find somewhere open, and a doctor who won't cancel in the last (im)possible moment due to illness.... Not easy. But we finally nailed it. And Martin could have a few hours of shut eye. (as well as everybody else).

Man, it is beautiful. I'm so going back one day. Rock paintings, stories, fantastic views. I was overwhelmed by the enormous generosity from the indigenous people who owns (well more than owners, they are the caretakers and a part of) their ancestral lands to welcome us and allowing us to experience all this. As a tourist some areas are forbidden for us to enter. Many places are sacred and can only be viewed by a few. Some other places can be visited but not photographed. And that is fine by me. I do not need to photodocument every moment of my life....(shudder, gasp. I know it is a foreign concept for many....) . All this under the cool and charming watchful eye of the lovely guide Candie. She managed to keep us safe, full with lovely food and educated all on time.

We got to meet the wonderful guide Reuben who told us about the land, the animals and what could kill us (everything). He managed to talk without one pause for two hours plus

change. But the way he did it. Oh, he should be a lecturer for the subject ” making education fun and interesting”. What a guy! Apparently there is a youtube clip of him but alas, we haven’t found it yet.



Crocodile in Yellow Waters

We saw crocks in their natural habitat, cockatoos, egrets, birds of prey, wallabies and on and on. All with the ever running fantastic commentary by Reuben. Fantastic. I’m definitely going back.

Road trip. Darwin to Alice Springs. One night in tents, one night in swags. In swags!! Weeeee. Australian outback sleep sack made from waterproofed cloth with a mattress and a pillow. The best camping gear ever. We looked up at the stars. And the milky way. Sorry Northern hemisphere. The stars on the South half is amazing.

This part of the trip was managed by a very sweet young man Jack. The guides we have met have all been so sweet, caring and competent. But all good thing must come to an end. Martin were overjoyed over the oldest and the 2nd smallest pubs but I think that the Reuben experience coupled with my cuddle time with a small donkey family might have been my highlights. But now we have arrived at the red centre.

*) Not to be confused with the much more contemporary art rock

***) and a movie

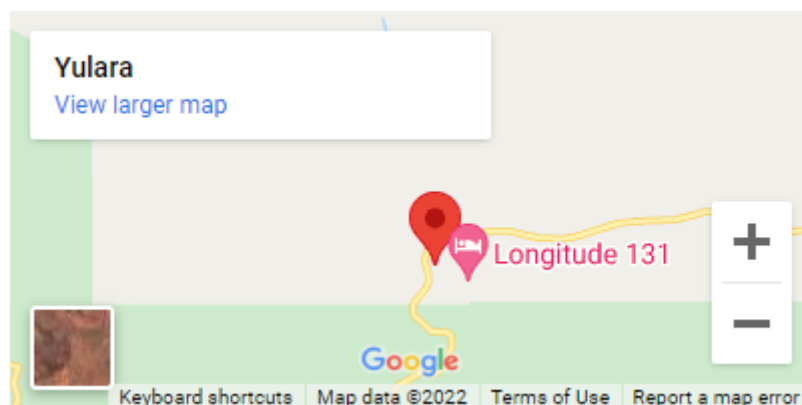
*****) Pharmacies seems to be suffering from the same case of “updating info on our website is kinda, idk, optional, like” as clinics

******) or flip-flops, or jandals....

RED CENTRE IN HEALTH



Yulara, NT, Australia



Alice Springs is the end, middle and start of the Red Centre. A quaint little town, this is the gateway to King's Canyon, Kata Tjuta and that red onion peel monolith they keep talking about.

Who the f*ck is Alice?

Sir Charles Todd, while researching locations for a telegraph station, found a convenient spring not too far away from what is now known as Todd River. He named the spring after his wife, Alice. The town soon followed suit, and he prepared to move the whole family there.

Unfortunately, the spring wasn't, it was rather a hole that had happened to be waterfilled due to recent rains, and the family never moved there. So there was no Alice in Alice Springs, nor was there a spring. Nevertheless, the town persists, and is quite the unique little place. Backpackers abound, and there is a decent number of eateries, cafés and bars around. The town holds many weird annual events, the most famous being the Camel Derby and the Todd River Regatta*. Unfortunately the timing wasn't right for any of those, but we did get to partake in another staple of the town, namely browsing the many art galleries, displaying

aboriginal and often mindblowingly beautiful art. The urge to buy was just precisely thwarted by the combined efforts of money, shipping and the lack of justicegiving walls back home. But in the future, yes, I could definitely go for some mesmerising indigenous art.



Dramatic sky

We only had one free day in Alice, and that was mostly spent catching up and our breaths, but we did get to have a quick look at the dramatic landscapes (driven even more dramatic by means of the irregular sky) of Simpsons Gap. We also got married and got to sample Aussie specialties such as emu and pavlova.

Who the f*ck is Ayers?

Pretty soon we headed west though, and before long a reddish, oblong monolith arose from the horizon, and people's camera phones started clicking in the bus. Our ginger tour leader didn't stop for better photo ops, though, but calmly explained that the rock in the distance was jokingly referred to as Fooluru, and so the first of many interesting facts and tidbits was delivered by our soulless leader.



Posing in front of Uluru

The actual rock formerly known as Ayers Rock (after then Chief Secretary of South Australia, Sir Henry Ayers) eventually appeared, and we all got out for real photos before heading in to camp for setup and lunch. Our pack consisted of Europeans, mostly Dutch, German, Scandinavian and Latin speaking**, and we had a bit of an introduction round at lunch.

The afternoon was to be spent much closer to the rock. Due to the extreme heat, the base walk (all around the base, some 10 kilometres) was closed, and we only did a shorter, 2 km walk, but even that proved to be too much for some in the scorching heat.



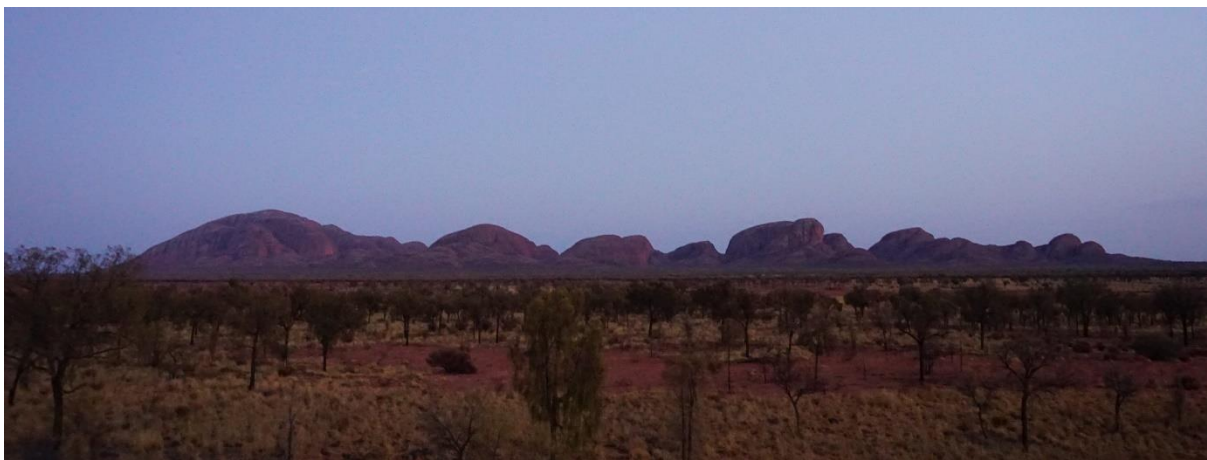
Uluru up close

The whole area, with the actual Uluru in the middle, is sacred to the traditional owners. Some parts are more sacred than others, and some places are only meant to be seen by the men, whereas others are strictly for women. While the rules don't apply to non-origins, there is a ban on photographing those places: photos inevitably show up in the public domain, and if an indigenous man happens to see photos of any sacred female site, or vice versa, they risk being punished for it. Hence, you'll see no such pictures here.

While having dinner and awaiting the sunset on Uluru, the symptoms of the previous walk in the heat (intensified by convection and radiation from the rock itself) began to show. One co-traveller showed signs of heat stroke, and soon enough we had to abandon station to get her to a clinic. We got some nice photos in, and Caroline, being always a nurse, stood by her until the hapless traveller finally got to go to bed in an airconned hotel room. The rest of us rolled out our swags and slept under the stars, ready for an early start next morning.

Who the f*ck is Olga?

Apparently there's a 4 in the morning as well. In order to catch the sunrise on Uluru, we got up ridiculously early and drove to the lookout spot. It was crowded, and the rock was quite a bit away. It was still worth it, though, as a quarter turn anti-clockwise lay Kata Tjuta, much closer and as awesome a rock formation as Uluru.



Kata Tjuta in sunrise

So that's where we headed next. It was still early, and there was a nice breeze blowing up. Unlike Uluru, you can actually get up close and personal in Kata Tjuta (which means Many Heads), and we started our short walk around, by, and in between the giant boulders. Led by our knowledgeable tour guide, the flora and, to a lesser extent, fauna, was laid out. The fact that the wind kept the temperature down on reasonable levels meant that he agreed to let the more adventurous of the gang to follow the full path and complete the full circle. With most of the other tourists out of the way, the stunning scenery turned even stunning. The breeze kept us cool, but it would turn out to be a short-lived friendship. With the wind came the dust, and by the time we reached camp, there was a full on dust storm.

Dinner was crunchy that night. Swags were rolled out in the kitchen tent, by the pool, or anywhere else where one could find some semblance to shelter. On the plus side, though: there is nothing like a bit of rough condition to make people realise that they don't have to sheepishly wait around the trailer for their specific bag; all bags need to be unloaded, and ownership can be sorted out once they're out, much quicker and more efficient-like.

King of the 'o'?

The wind lasted throughout the night, and it was as welcome at Kings Canyon as it had been frowned upon during the night. Another strenuous walk, made easier by the cooling breeze.



Priscilla's Gap – A Cock in a frock on a rock

In Watarrka National Park lies Kings Canyon, yet another stunning set of rock formations in the Red Centre. Kings Creek drains the whole plain, and the part with the Canyon provides a varying rim walk, made more interesting by the facts and tidbits provided by our guide. Pretty much every grass, bush and tree can be used for something, be it spears, glue, poison, spearheads, toothpaste or, you know, all of the above. Just not eating. Just like the fauna, most of the flora in Australia will kill you. Out of the four species of bush tomato, three will kill you, or at least make you seriously ill. The fourth is presumably as nutritious and well tasting as a regular tomato, but they are hard to distinguish. Bush tomato roulette is not recommended.

Pretty much every grass, bush and tree can be used for something

Kings Canyon is impressive enough from up close, but to really get the full scope of the vastness of the surrounding plains, which composes the basin for Kings Creek, it's a good idea to see it from above. We took a helicopter ride of the surroundings, and it was fun, stunning and cool, and gave a new perspective of things.



About to get some aerial view

Caroline's corner

Alice springs. That mythical backpacker place. So much more than a backpacker magnet. The arts, the history and very welcoming locals.

After the farewell dinner at the Rock bar we had a nice sleep in, a nicer English brekkie and then a slow trek around the centre. A slightly tired but happy couple met up with three lovely ladies. We drove out to the Simpson's gap. Under a magnificent Gum Tree I cried tears of joy when I married my best friend, my lover, my travel companion and my partner in crime.

Next day started early, very early. Have you noted that we have consistently had early mornings? 0600, 0700 and hardly any late starts. This leg of the journey would not prove any different. The soulless (his own words) ginger tour guide picked us up at the YHA at six am. The music were (not surprised) from the 90ies. Again.

No complaints from the fuddie dudies. Aka the hubs and me. The millenials though were slightly bored.

A loooong drive later filled with wombats (not the real ones but the code word for loo break) and coffee breaks we finally saw the rock! Uluru the magnificent. So pretty, so large, so smooth and so red. I loved it. I am soo going back when the temperature is not in the high 40ies. We had yet another heatstroke. Rather scary.

Swags are a now my favourite sleeping outdoors gear. Comfy, roomy and quite snakesafe (I think).

Sunrises, sunsets, four different bush tomatoes where three of the will kill you (our tourguide very nicely offered the four vegetarians the possibility to help him find out which tomato is the good one. "we will have at least one of you alive..."). Apart from the dangers from the

flora, the risk of the sandstone rocks collapsing beneath us, the scorching heat, the very steep climbs, and of course the intense thirst the walks were very safe.



Kings Canyon

All over the pathways the rangers, the locals and the landowners (the native Australians) had put up AEDs, satellite emergency phones and helicopter-friendly landing places. If anything would happen it would not be the fault of our hosts. Aussies sure care for the environment and for their guests.

No vegetarians were harmed during this trek.

*) Probably the only regatta to have been (once) cancelled due to the presence of water. Yep, Todd is a dry river, and the boats participating in the regatta are bottomless, and propelled by way of feet, Flintstones style.

***) From The Netherlands, Germany/Austria/Switzerland, Sweden/Denmark and Romania/Italy, respectively

DOWN THE CENTRAL AISLE



Coober Pedy, SA, Australia



After the rock loop the bearings pointed back to Stuart Highway, that goes straight through Australia from Darwin in the north to Port Augusta in the south. But instead of turning left back to Alice, we turned right, turned south, turned further into the desert.

Mine! Mine! Mine!

Whereas Kata Tjuta provided the set for Priscilla's gap, towards Coober Pedy was the setting for quite a few films, mostly of the post-apocalyptic demeanour. Mad Max (the original trilogy) was filmed in the surroundings, and in the town itself the wreck of Riddick's spaceship could be seen.



Riddick's spaceship

Of course, Coober Pedy's real claim to fame is its opals. Discovered by accident by the son of a prospector (the party had, unsuccessfully, been searching for gold, but had given that up in favour of finding water (just as unsuccessfully)) while disobeying his orders of guarding camp, the opals make Coober Pedy the official capital of the gem.



Welcome to Coober Pedy

Due to the immense heat, in conjunction with the obvious need and know-how for excavation, most of the town's housing is actually underground. The temperature is a nice

18-26 degrees all day, year round, which is a step up from the scorching 40-55 in the summer (and indeed the 5-10 it can sink to during winter nights).



Bed in cave

Opals can save, or ruin, your life. Find the right one, and you're economically set for life. Fail to find enough, and you might end up spending the rest of your time digging for duds, like a grumpy gopher. In fact, the name Coober Pedy is an anglicisation of the local aboriginal term for 'burrowing white men'. There's no rational way of knowing where to find the rare gems. The upper limit, as well as the lower, is well established, but the possible layer is some 30 metres thick, and within that, it's purely a matter of chance. If you want to try your luck, you



The world's smallest opal. Or possibly a rather large opal in the world's largest hand

can get a permit, acquire a land lot, get a tunnel boring machine, a rock vacuum, a partner and a metric shit-ton of patience.

If you're in a hurry, you can always dig through the heaps of waste gravel. Back in the old days, the excavation was done by pickaxe. An extremely time-consuming method, of course, but at least you didn't really miss any findings. By using TBM and explosives, some baby gems are bound to be thrown out with the bath gravel, so to speak. It's all being dumped in big piles and is up for grabs for anyone. I spent some half hour in the scorching heat, and immediately found a perfect digging rock. Using that, I managed to find a lot of worthless quartz, as

well as the world's smallest opal, probably worth several dollars.

Some baby gems are bound to be thrown out with the bath gravel

After feeding some rescued kangaroos, eating some real tasty pizza, and watching colourful sunset over an amazing post-apocalyptic wasteland, we went into our underground cave for a good night's sleep.



Sunset over a post-apocalyptic wasteland

Spaceships!

Although both Cober Pedy and Adelaide are in South Australia, it's quite a fair bit of driving to do. It can be done in a day, but how fun is that? There are salt flats, being used for all sorts of testing, including high speed driving and atomic bombing. The military closes sections of the road every year, and for what, we'll never know. There is a sort of Area 51, with space research being done by both Australia and other countries, and in Woomera there's an open air exhibition of actual rockets, bombs, fighters and basically spaceships spaceships SPACESHIPS!



Spaceships and rockets in Woomera

We weren't quite done with the hikes just yet, either. Up Mt Remarkable, Alligator Gorge cuts through, and it is exactly what is says on the tin, but without the alligators, of course. In the dry season there's no water in the creek, and it makes for a fun and varied walk on the dried up river bed, between steep rocks and amidst gnarly trees.



Posers in Alligator Gorge

A final picnic lunch was held in a park where they, among others, kept both polite cockatoos and albino pea poultry, before heading into the second largest wine district in South Australia, Clare Valley. We had a small and confusingly priced wine tasting, after which we purchased a bottle of the fizzy, to be had at our semainersery* the following day. With that stuck in a combined winebag/esky, we eventually arrived in the hottest capital in the world, Adelaide.



Albino pea-hen, or, as Caroline would put it, ladycock

Caroline's corner

Opals! Opals! Opals! Goddess how I love opals. I did feel a little, how should I put it, scared of getting the opal fever and ditching the tour to go opal-digging. But no, I have no eye for finding the beautiful treasure. I did find a fossil (rather nice), a few pieces of quartz and a lot of flies. But I can still spot the high quality gem at the store. The lovely sales woman shared my talent and we both browsed through the high quality section. I had promised my hubs that I would not buy anything so I skipped the less pricey parts of the store, instead I explained to the very very nice woman that I would only be drooling and admiring their fine merchandise. Not buying. We then proceeded to admire the finest pieces together. After having thoroughly enjoyed myself it was time to leave. We had the next activity to get to.

Our very cheeky (but nice) tour guide (I have to add "nice" since he now can read this blog??) took us to a small paradise. A paradise that some have to go through hell to get to. We did not (but one could argue that 45 degree heat in a very drought ridden place could indeed be

the lesser version of Hell, aka Heck) but the sweet kangaroos that lived there had all been. One pretty roo had been through such a horrid experience that she sometimes would fall over and tremble. Not having some seizure but from angst and PTSD. But she was a very kind roo and very soft. I could have petted her for hours and hours, as well as the young joey with the broken tail. Pink plaster is the thing among the baby kangaroos (joeys). But we had to go to our next activity so the good-bye was short and efficient (we had no more wasabi nuts and therefore the roos left us very quickly and unsentimentally). The preferred food of kangas, roos, euros and wallabies is wasabi flavoured nuts. Why they love the wasabi? I don't know. They just do.



How you doin'?

The southward journey continued. We got to see the former secret space centre, Womeera. The Swedes in the happy gang of travellers giggled a bit since the name in Swedish is the fancy, uppity word for vomiting. But we got to see albino peacocks, wild emus on a cricket lawn and a bunch of wild kangaroos, euros and other hoppityhops.



Alligator Gorge

The alligatorless Alligator gorge in the Mount Remarkable was very remarkable. Very nice, very warm and very, very impressive. I would very much have liked to have our resident flora and fauna expert with us to tell us all about the cool stones, plants and fauna we saw but alas, someone had to drive the bus to the end of the walk. Turning back and trekking upwards in the scorching heat would surely have sent another one of us to the hospital. Heatstroke is serious business. And so is driving a bus full of vagabonds, so we let our ginger tour guide rest from our questions and wait for us at the end of the hike (with the bus).

*) which, surely, is the expression for the celebration of one week being married?

ADELAIDE IN HEAT



Adelaide, SA



Adelaide is basically the Brooklyn, Masthugget and Portland, ME of Australia. Possibly Portland, OR as well, I wouldn't know, I've never been. There is fine eating, fine wine and even finer craft beer. Close by lies Barossa Valley and Kangaroo Island, and the city itself hosts cinemas, theatres, art galleries and music venues, so there is nature and culture aplenty. It's also the hottest capital in the world, and the on-going heat wave and the bushfires made it even hotter.

Mmmm.... beer....

Even though there are a baker's dozen microbreweries per person, the bulk of the beer is brewed in Australia's largest family owned brewery, Coopers. 33 aussiebobs will get you on a guided tour of the brewery, followed by a tasting session of every beer they make. The guide, Frank, was knowledgeable and entertaining, and provided insight into the chemistry, biology and hydraulics of the brewing process. The four coloured cans can be found all over SA and NT, but that's not always the case with some other sorts. Resisting the urge to buy a Coopers

themed Hawaiian shirt*, we nevertheless left the premises with a baseball cap each, thanks to Caroline's magic WiFi restoring fingers.



Brewdog

The timing was a bit off, though. Adelaide is a wonderful town; beautiful architecture, lots of venues, theatre, art, music, parks and a general atmosphere of coolness and sophistication. However, we only had one day off, and that day was hot. Not 'oh, we'd better find some shade every now and then' hot or 'an ice cream or a cold beer would be nice' hot, but 'I'm going to be seriously ill if I don't get inside where there's aircon, stat!' hot. The evenings were marginally cooler, and what we lacked in daytime sightseeing, we got back in food and brew sampling at night time. Mostly.

Mmmm.... kangaroo....

Adelaide is the only capital named after a queen, apparently, which is a bit of a left fielder when it comes to Australian naming convention. Mostly, they go for the obvious. Is it a bay, and someone noticed a shark? Shark Bay, obviously. Is it a rock, larger than the surrounding rocks, and also a bit round? Big Round Rock, natch. Is it an island with kangaroos? Name it Kangaroo Island, and be quick about it! Roughly two hours drive from Adelaide lies Cape Jervis. Another 45 minutes on the ferry, and you'll be on Australia's third largest island, Kangaroo Island.



That's a-paddlin'

Separated from the mainland a long time ago, the island (soon to become two, as the isthmus is a mere two km at its narrowest) has an interesting wildlife. Emus and eucalyptus provide refreshing oils, and at Seal Bay, Australian sea lions frolic on the beach, and you can get pretty close to them if the temperature allows it. It was touch and go for a while, as they close the beach when the mercury rises above 40, but we just made the cut.



Sea lions fighting over the sea lioness, and she fights back

After the sea lion encounter it was time for some sport in the form of kayaking (much better floating abilities than those in Sri Lanka) and swimming in the crystal clear ocean, before heading off to camp at a farm. We had encounters with three staple Aussie animals: opossum, kangaroo and koala. The 'possum crept around the common area, looking for food scraps. The koalas were up the trees in the property, and the skippies were on the barbie, and later on our plates.



Koala. Technically a wild koala, insofar they ever can be.

Due to its isolation, and the fact that they had to introduce koalas into an environment that lacks their natural enemies, the furry little critters are quite common on Kangaroo Island. Other than the locals at the farm, the walk through the national park provided 36 more of the dim-witted, chlamydia ridden, poop eating, lazy teddybears.



Kangaroo coastline

Being an island, with the open sea attacking its south coast all the way from Antarctica, there's bound to be some dramatic coastlines, and indeed there are. The change in wind dropped the temperature drastically, and for the first time in forever, people decided to get their jumpers and jackets out. The slightly more sheltered part had another reason for the awesome coastline, though.



Some see the head of a snake. My pareidolia is not working properly, but I kind of see the head of a turtle.

The Remarkables are indeed that. Similar to Kata Tjuta and Devil's Marbles, they're inselbergs of granite, and they're cool as. It was heating up again, but before we left the island, we made a quick stop at Little Sahara for some sand boarding in the dunes. The heat was a bit too much and the wax was a bit too little to get in more than a couple of rides, though. And soon enough we left Kangaroo Island, all while hearing that it would be closed the next day; the heat and dryness made for too high a fire hazard to be deemed safe for visitors.



Jump!

Mmmm.... wine....

Yes, the heat wave persisted, and it had reached Barossa Valley as well. Australia's biggest wine district, the valley is a popular destination for a day trip from Adelaide. We went for four different vineyards, from the immense Jacob's Creek to the tiny, family owned Kies. By lunch, a bush fire had started in Adelaide Hills, making our tour guide worried she might have to either keep us in the valley or take a long detour back to the city. With two more tastings to go, us passengers were not too bothered, though. Worst case scenario, we'd be stuck in a wine valley, or arriving late and tipsy. The express way opened soon enough, so we eventually made it back into town on schedule. And therefore, we had plenty of time to grab dinner before seeing the latest** Star Wars film. A few more days, preferably in more passable weather, had been nice, but we did get a taste of Adelaide, wanting more. And that's how one should leave them.

Caroline's corner

Our stay in Addie started with a slow but determined search for food and good beer. We got neither. A visit to a Chinese restaurant did not do anything more than a belly full and a taste bud tear. But we got to see a reunion of some sorts. 5 young women and three young men. Their joy and laughter spread out through the otherwise dull restaurant. We got to meet them later on when we finally found a place with good craft beer. Although then they were singing (I guess that cats in March would call that singing) and dancing on the bar. We had fun, the bartender did not enjoy it as much as we did.

Adelaide. What a cool city. Well, not cool as the temperature did not go below 31 degrees at any point of our short stay. 46 degrees during the day meant that we had to find indoor activities during our only day in Adelaide. So adult adulating activities it was. A nice tour at the fine Aussie owned family brewery Coopers. Frank, our cicerone and beer aficionado took us on an informative and pleasurable tour of the plant. We also got to sample some of the products. Very appreciated. We did look at the Cooper Hawaii style shirts and felt a strong "I need this. Badly" but since we are travelling very light we did not buy anything. Although I managed to repair the Internet connection for our fine Frank. Yes. I did. The computer dyslexic, the data moron solved a techie problem. Miracles do happen. So we got two caps as a thank you and left the cool brewery to bravely stroll out in the unforgiving heat. One does not walk fast, nor brisk in 46 plus. One drink a lot of water and mosey oneself from shady shelter to shady shelter.

Kangaroos, possums, sea lions and the chlamydia infested, poop-eating (but cute, very cute) little koalas. That was our main feature on Kangaroo Island. I also got to try sand-boarding. Lots of fun. Ramblin' Rick, our bluegrass loving tourguide took god care of us. I got to experience the best loo in Australia. The indoor, outdoor loo at the Flinders Chase farm. Very cool and good fun.

We were lucky. The cut off temperature at the sea lion park was 40 degrees. We had 39,5 so we got to go to their beach and see them live. The day after our departure they locked down the island. Total fire ban and no visitors. Some groups had to cut their trip short due to that, we left according to plan. But safety above all and that is what our fine tour guides adhere to.

I finally got to visit the famous Jacobs Valley Winery. My fathers house wine. A very happy Caroline got to taste some "fojn vajn". Around the second place our tour guide got a bit worried. A large bush fire had caused all roads back to Adelaide to be closed off. The group took a quick sip of the lovely wine offered by the Kies family winery and decided unanimously that since we had two more places to visit and that the fire did not threaten the Barossa Valley we would not worry and instead continue our tasting.



Jacob's Creek ships worldwide

The valley had plenty of little B & B's that had a lot of unused beds. If we could not return to our hostels, hotels etc then we would stay in Barossa a bit longer. We were right not to worry. The firefighters had the fires under control in the afternoon and we could return unharmed. Although the fire was big. Several lost their homes and workplaces. Pretty scary. But with a fire and a Star Wars movie, we said good bye to Adelaide. New adventures awaited us.

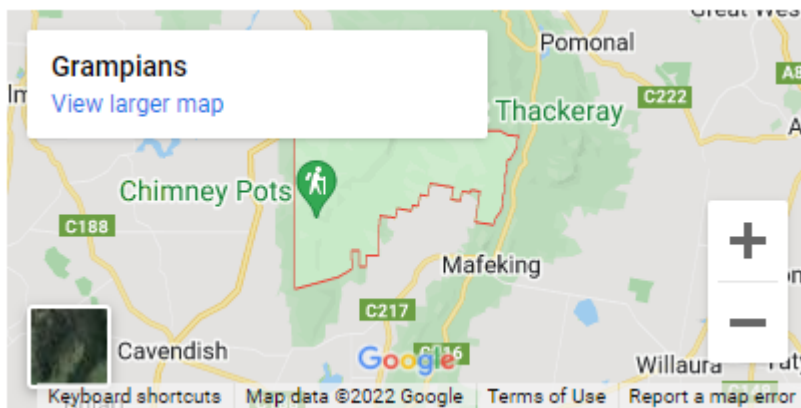
*) partly due to them not accepting cash, partly due to the shirts being the lousiest material ever: cotton

***) Last, they say, but I shouldn't be so sure

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD



Grampians, VIC

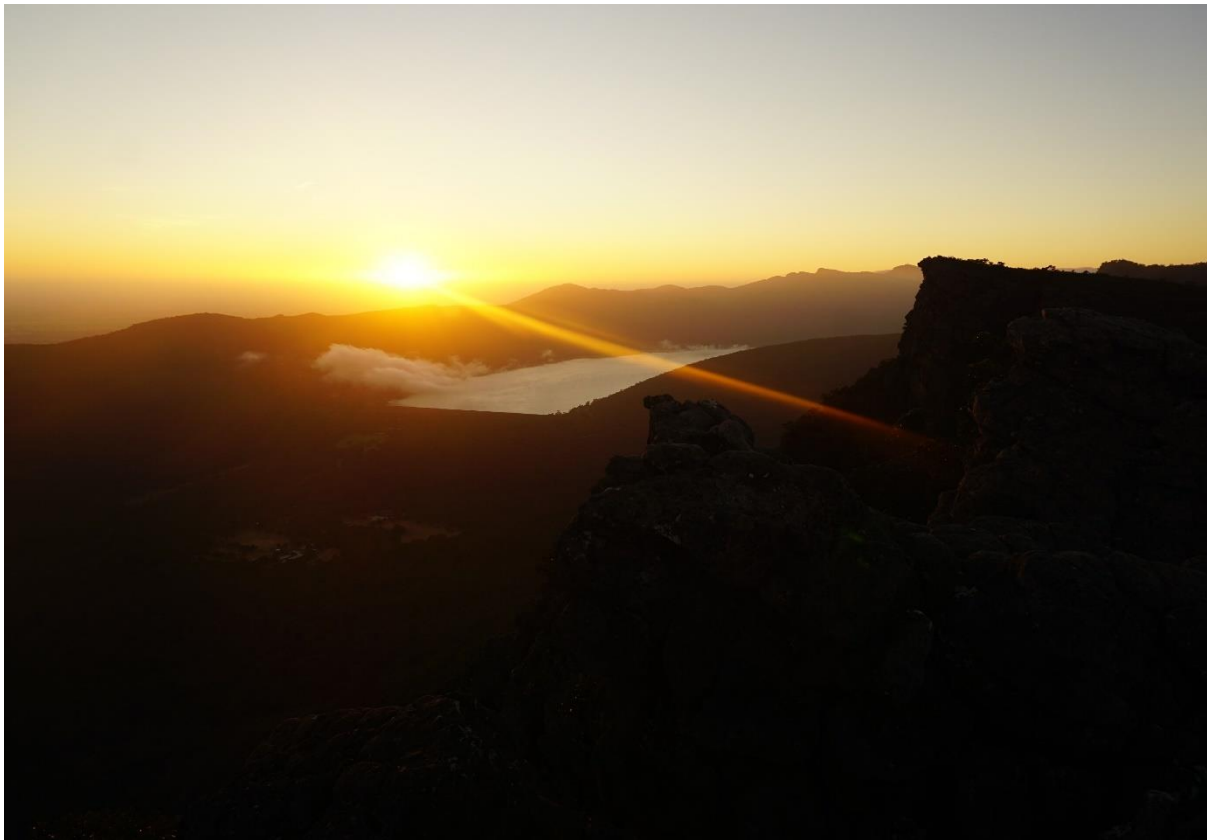


The last leg of our mainland Oz tour would take us from Adelaide to Melbourne through highlands, shipwrecks and winding ocean roads. The Great Ocean Road, in fact.

Sunrise

A reasonable number of travellers boarded the groovy bus in Adelaide. The route went east and up, to Brambuk in the Grampians. A wilderness area at high-ish altitude, the Grampians offer plenty of opportunities for walking and hiking in the woods and mountains. As the wind had turned, and now was blowing from the south, all the way from Antarctica, the temperature dropped. So low, in fact, that some travellers bulked up in long-legged trousers, jumpers and/or jackets, and some even wrapped themselves in gloves and woolly hats. Of course, the fact that we were chased up in the middle of the night did contribute to the chillier air. Yes. The middle of the night. Not early in the morning. Not early as fuck in the morning. The middle of the night. Breakfast was at 4 o'clock each night, in order to catch the

sunrise. The first one was, in all fairness, a rather beautiful one, preceded by a nice walk in the forest and mountains. However, the tour guide both dillied and dallied, and we reached the intended lookout spot some 15 minutes after the actual sunrise. So one could question whether the horrifically early start was worth it.



Sunrise, the decent one

There was no reason to question the waking up in the middle of the night for the next sunrise, though. First of all, it was some 15 minutes drive from our accommodation, so there was no need to get up, have breakfast, load the trailer and so forth two hours before. Therefore, one could easily save brekkie and all other morning to-dos until after sunrise. Secondly, the sunrise wasn't all that. So, we could have gotten two more hours of sleep, alternatively three, for those who could have opted out.

The more stops we did along the way, the more I realised that we were going in the wrong direction: Gorges, cataracts, waterfalls.... all stunning and beautiful, and would have been awesome had we not been seeing plenty before; grander, bigger, cooler and, most importantly, without as many bloody tourists.



Thar she blows!

Grate Ocean Road

Yes, the Great Ocean Road is scenic. The Shipwreck Coast is dramatic and harsh, and the limestone cliffs amazing. But there are tourists everywhere, posing for selfies, blocking the view, chatting and shouting. The stop at the Sow and the Piglets* was horrible. I got a quick photo and got the hell out of Dodge as soon as my anxiety could muster. The sunset visit was less crowded and had better lighting, making the afternoon stop completely inexplicable and worthless.



The Twelve Apostles looked greater in the light of the setting sun

Massacre

By far the least enjoyable part of this trip, on many accounts, the Adelaide – Melbourne stretch at least offered a visit to Brambuk Cultural centre, where one could read up on the atrocities committed to the original inhabitants of the land. The Massacre, they call it, and justly so. Although, the Europeans called it anything but. Euphemisms ruled in the Orwellian doublethink. The endgame was complete genocide, but they used terms like integration instead. They indoctrinated the aboriginal children in concentration camps they called “missionaries”. They placed those with fairer skin in white families in order to wipe out the bloodline. The Stolen Generation, so called. A truly dark chapter, one of many, in European colonial history.

The saint killed a....

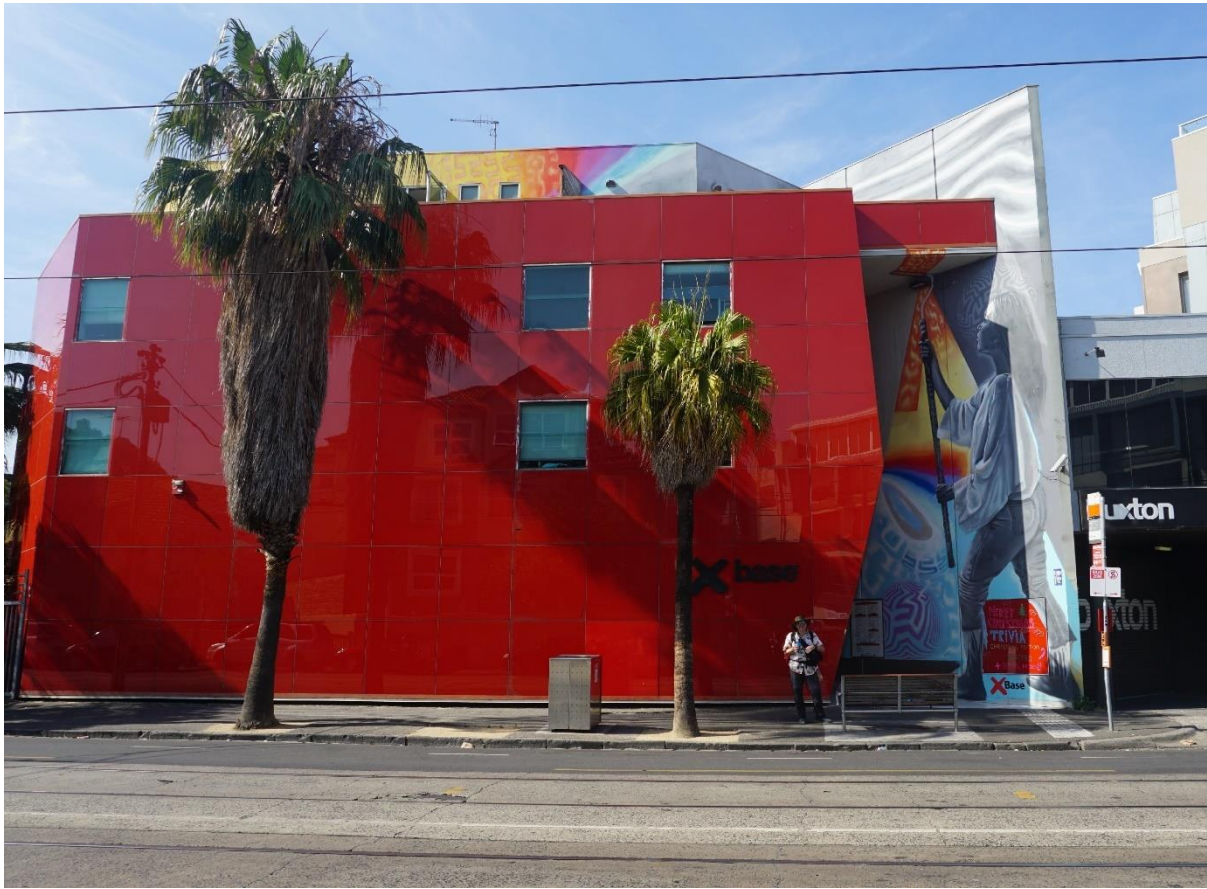
The tour eventually came to a stop in Melbourne City centre. Our bus driver dropped us off at a random spot, beset by road work, pointed at a possible tram station some kilometre away, claimed that the tram there would take us to St Kilda and left. Roughly 45 minutes later, we had both reached the tram station AND formed a rough idea on how to pay the fare, and an additional 45 minutes later, we were checked in at Base, St Kilda. So that’s what you get when you buy a trip that supposedly includes transport from your Adelaide accommodation to your St Kilda one, with certain bus drivers.



One rhinoceri

14 years ago, I stayed at the very same Base Backpackers in the very same St Kilda. I loved it then. There were nice, same-aged, like-minded people everywhere. Red Eye Bar was pumping with fun activities and affordable shots. It was festive and easy-going. But the place has changed. Now, there are noisy, drunk kids everywhere. Red Eye Bar is playing loud,

obnoxious 'music' and have silly venues and tacky shots. It's crowded and smothering. Yep. The place has changed in 14 short years. Not me. The place.



Base, you've changed. What happened, man? You used to be cool.

Merry happy!

Last time, I didn't see much of the neighbourhood, though. But this time around, we had one evening and a full day to explore at our own pace. That day was Christmas Eve, and I actually started with a morning run in the parks and by the beach. We had a stroll, a beer, watched Donald Duck and handed over Xmas prezies. For dinner, we forwent any traditional ham, sausage, rice porridge and pickled herring and instead had the most incredible oven-baked barramundi with pasta pesto. A stroll by the beach and out to the old pier ended Christmas eve, complete with watching the penguins come home from a day at sea to roost among the rocks of the pier. A daily event that nevertheless draws a crowd, and triggered several bursts of squee from my penguin encounter virgin companion. When everyone else in the land celebrated Christmas with their families, we left Victoria for Tasmania.



The Meltyman cometh

Caroline's corner

Adelaide to Melbourne. Our last adventure with Groovy Grape. We left a smokey Addie. The fires the day before were pretty big. Several lost their homes and livelihoods. More got smoke inhalation damage to their lungs. First day towards the Great Ocean Road was more a transport day. We saw a lot of public bathrooms which were surprisingly interesting. An old jail had been converted into a rest room. Yes the loo signs were aptly striped.



Cells converted into dunnies

Our goal for this leg of the tour was the Grampian mountains. A fantastic cluster of valleys and crests. Trees and bushes. All with the scars of bush fires. The oh so needed bushfires. When controlled and small. As the customs of the aboriginals prescribed. But the white man did not listen to the advice from the former care takers of the land.....

In the Grampian mountains we got to visit the Brambuk national park and Cultural centre. It hit me straight through my heart. I cried. I could not accept the genocide we were shown. The English sure did a number on the native Australians. They wiped out a complete culture. For example, out of a group of 1000 individuals only three remained alive after the arrival of the English. That only took one year. One year to kill 997 individuals. Persons who had survived the harsh conditions of this land, but not the arrival of Europeans.

The ocean road paled in comparison. It was very beautiful but i could not let go of my experience in the Grampians. It took a day or two for me to bounce back. I bounced back in a very happy way. As a child, I spent my summers with my brother and sister in our parents' summer house in Sweden. Wherever we lived in the world we would always spend glorious wild summers in Scandinavia with our godfather. In the mornings, on Swedish TV, they would broadcast kiddie TV shows. And one particular from Australia. "Around the twist". Siblings living with a rather unusual father in a light tower. So many adventures and weird things happened to them. And now I got to visit that light tower! Well, not visit it but stand



on the outside and touch it, because a visit to the top cost 10 aussie dollars and i felt that to be a rip off. 10 dollars to walk up, walk around and the walk down. Nope, I had enough of squeezing my 180 cm tall body from the 12 apostles visit. Try to take a picture without 10 selfie sticks peeking in on the view.

But I saw the light house from the Twist-series. I was happy again. And to spend a nice, warm, sunny christmas with my husband was a great way of celebrating christmas. Oh yeah, I saw penguins! Real live penguins! Wild penguins jabbering, chattering and walking around. I guess I squeeed a bit and weeeed a lot. So much that we got our own guide. A lovely penguin expert who were a volunteer in the Penguin Team. A group of penguin lovers who turn up every sunset and sunrise to protect the Grumpy (yes they are called Grumpy) penguins. He heard my joy and started to tell us about these little buggers. What a Christmas. Fantastic.

Around the Twist



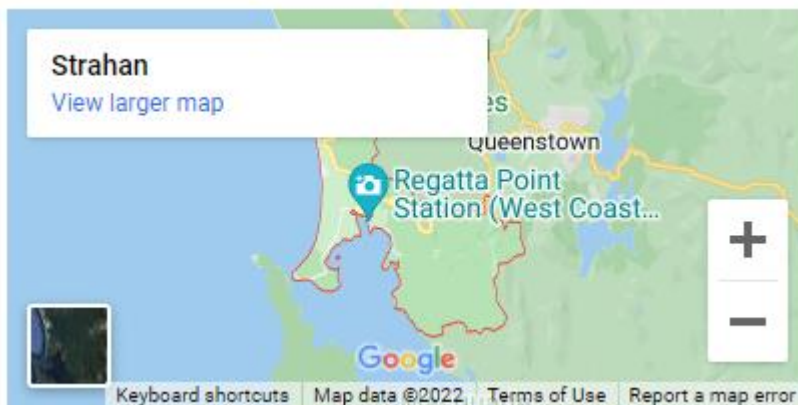
Grumpy penguins

*) That's the original name, and I'm sticking to it. There's not even remotely 12 of them, not by a long shot.

TASSIE RING, THE ONE



Strahan (et al), TAS



Australia's largest island is also her smallest state (ACT notwithstanding). It's probably the most varying, easy-going, coldest, most scenic and cosiest state, and well worth a visit or three. Starting in the capital, we toured around the Apple Isle to the lush pine rain forests and jagged mountains of the west, the scallops of the north, the scenic bays of the east and wildlife of the whole island.

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas

Hobart on christmas day is almost a ghost town. Being dropped off a fair kilometre from our hostel, we followed the street up, past closed boutiques, bars and coffee shops, until it halfway through swapped to being lined by carpet shops, auto repairs and the occasional cat café. It seemed only the Asian restaurants were open*.

Our hostel lacked lobby, reception or staff. A chalked telephone number above a row of key boxes gave a clue, and our Australian SIM card came to use for something other than data. As we had already had our Xmas in Melbourne** we were fine with eating Indian, before

checking out the local cinema's screening of Frozen II. In Australia, you can have beer at the movies. And I'm not talking 'bout a paper cup, I'm talking' bout a glass of beer.

Go west

A full bus left Hobart, setting course for the former fishing and logging town of Strahan on the west coast. The way there was not really long, but it was winding and full of sights.



Cradle Mountain

Lake St Claire is a nice stop for a lunch sandwich, with a distant view of Cradle Mountain, which would be further explored later. We also had a quick stop in Queenstown before reaching our main destination. Queenstown, TAS is nothing like Queenstown, NZ. An old mining town, it has since declined. The surrounding area is one of the few really environmentally messed up in Tasmania; as the purification processes leaked various contaminants into the water, the evaporation also contributed to acidic rain, causing the vegetation, and with it, the wildlife to gradually vanish. The mining has since stopped, but the town itself doesn't exactly prosper.

Musts in Strahan

Strahan is another example of a town that used to rely on environmentally questionable activities: logging. The mighty Huon Pine can be found in the area. A truly impressive tree, its wood produces a natural oil that makes it impervious to rotting. It is also extremely slow-growing, and as such exceedingly strong. Needless to say, the pines cost a hefty price, and wasn't made cheaper by the difficult terrain in which they grow. Taking a boat cruise in the harbour also takes you up Gordon river, lined with lush rainforests and tranquility, the former in which the pines grow.



Gordon River

Nowadays, the logging has declined, partly due to the area now being a protected one. Strahan instead relies mostly on salmon farming and tourism. Macquarie Harbour is the natural bay and was at a point the ship building hub of Tasmania. The Huon Pines, along with the fact that the penal colony of Sarah Island providing free labour, made for good conditions for ship building.

Sarah Island has been described as Hell on earth, as well as a reasonably comfortable place to stay. Quite polarising for a place that hosted repeat offenders; convicts of convicts. The change was as gradual and sudden as the fall of the eastern block in the late 1989's. The death of a corrupt warden, the arrival of an enterprising ship-builder, the organisation of convicts who had had enough, the firing of a regional governor.... it all added up, and Sarah Island went from, for example, issuing over 9000 lashes with the double cat-o-nine-tails*** one year, to merely a few the next, and the convicts pretty much went from hell to heck.

Being a penal colony, Sarah Island has its fair share of escape attempts. One of the most infamous must be Alexander Pearce. Successfully escaping the island and making it to the mainland, he and some fellow convicts nevertheless had to make it through the dense forests and hilly terrain. Not being trained bushmen, they eventually reverted to cannibalism, with Pearce being one of only two to make it into open land. He was later found, captured and hung by the neck until dead.

A remarkably less macabre escape was that of *The Frederick*. Ten convicts, under the unofficial leadership of former whaler James Porter, managed to hi-jack the ship they themselves had built from the design of esteemed Scottish shipwright David Hoy. Allegedly, all ten convicts made their way to Chile, where they lived as free men for some time. Four were later recaptured, and at least two made it to USA and died in freedom. The whole story is hilariously acted out in the play "**The Ship that Never Was**". Australia's longest-running stage play, the performance is played out with audience participation with children and adults alike, and is one of the highlights of the whole trip. A must in Strahan.



The Ship that never was

There are other musts in Strahan. Strahan Backpackers is one of the cosiest hostels you'll find, and it's run by the unique and loveable man known simply as Bumpy. Funny, original and welcoming, he invites each traveller not to his backpackers, or his hostel, but to his home. He's quite the character, and he knows where to go for some fish and chips. And that is Bay Fish Co. Another must in Strahan. Located by the beach, wherein a shipwreck has made its home, inside a non-impressive shed of corrugated steel, stands a fish'n'chippery that serves the best fish&chips in the world.



Wreck-it Strahan

Scratch the “L”

Further up, it was time to re-acquaint us with Cradle Mountain, this time through a hike. Starting at the scenic Dove Lake, the easy walk became increasingly rougher, steeper and more jagged. Eventually it was more climbing than walking, but all who set off reached the peak, Marion’s Lookout. Reaching either of Cradle Mountains double summits is a much grander commitment, though, taking a few days hiking. We had some photo ops, had our packed lunch and had the option of going down the same way (shorter) or via Wombat Pool (longer and more strenuous). I chose the longer option, natch. And at every sign for Wombat Pool, someone had scratched off the last “l”, natch. I saw the pool, I saw the poo (which I photographed, much to my wife’s slightly jelly squee), but I saw no wombats.



Marion, lookout!

That happened some hour later, after visiting Waldheim Chalet, a wilderness getaway built by German immigrant Gustav Weindorfer, and to an almost unearthly squee from my significant other; Tasmania had delivered!

An almost unearthly squee from my significant other; Tasmania had delivered!

Caroline’s corner

After a lovely, albeit unorthodox Christmas eve we flew over to Hobart, Tasmania, on Christmas day. Apparently everyone and their auntie do celebrate Christmas. Especially in

the restaurant under our hostel. But we got them back since most of the guests had gotten rooms at the hostel and we woke them up at pre dawn. We started our new adventure at 0600. In Taz one does not see white swans, one sees black swan-appalooza. So I had high hopes for my wombat search. Finally I would see the famed animal with the square poop. Black swans, paddymelons, echidnas, kangas and roos but no wombats and not a speck of poop. I was slowly starting to lose hope. But in a place as lovely, fascinating and multi-faceted as Tasmania I soon got other thing on my mind. We drove trough almost ghostly towns filled with despair and depression. When the mines closed no other employment could be found and with the surrounding nature destroyed by the poisonous bi-products nothing could be harvested nor eaten. Not an easy feat to attract tourists then. But a place that has seen their main trade almost disappear is Strahan. The place where it rains 300 days out of the year (we had two lovely rainless days) has managed to turn around and cater to tourists in a charming and ecological way. We got to stay at the home of Bumpy. A true original with an enormous heart as well as a bunch of platypi living in the stream bisecting his property. No, we did not see a single one of them but that was probably due to our inability to not giggle and laugh. Bumpy made sure that we would get the best fish and chips ever. He called his mate and told us where to go, and oh boy am I glad we did. Or am I? The best fish and chips ever. And it is on the other side of the world....

Sarah island. It hurt going there. The evil, the nastiness and the awful way of punishing humans and profiteering from it. It was a hard pill to swallow. As well as the treatment of the indigenous people of Tasmania. The genocide, the rapes and the enslavement. I won't go into detail but it was awful. That day was day filled with impressions. Good and bad.

But i did get to see a lot of wombat poop at the bottom of Cradle Mountain. A lot. But no wombat. Our guide had never seen so much poop before and he was very concerned over the lack of wombat sightings. Normally he saw half as much poop, and plenty of wombats. I did feel rather sad when we left the park but Lo And Behold! A fat little butt wiggled its way down the hill. YEEEEESSSSSS! A Wombat!!! Joy! Happy!!! Nobody on that mountain missed my squees of happiness.



Close encounter with a wombat

*) Which was doubly disappointing as our hostel was literally door to door neighbour with a brewery tap room

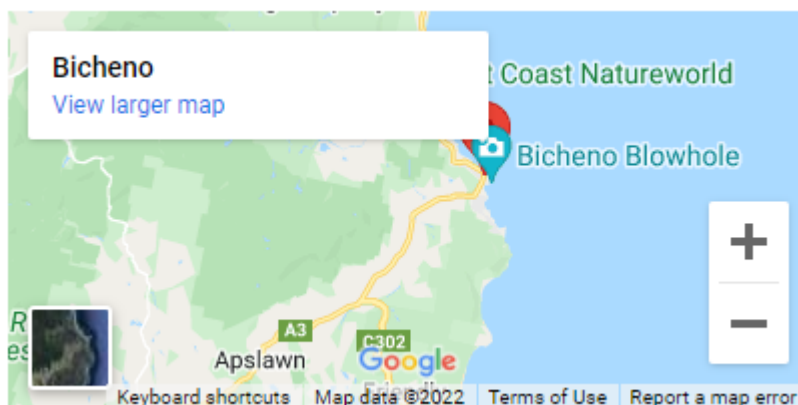
***) on Xmas eve, as one should

****) allegedly named Macquarie Cat

TASSIE RING, THE OTHER



Bicheno, TAS



After a short stop in Launceston we headed back towards Hobart, with stops in Freycinet National Park and Bicheno, for even more extraordinary views and wildlife encounters, closer this time.

Up and down again

Launceston, which may or may not be worth a visit of it's own, provided too short a stay to say much about, other than that the backpackers we stayed at was sub-par and the steak at the repurposed gaol was really good. We did have a nice walk in the town's most prominent green getaways, though, Cataract Gorge. A nice park, a lake, a waterfall, a suspension bridge, a rotunda.



Cataract Gorge

The east side of the island is significantly dryer than the west. The wind mostly comes from the Roaring Forties, so called because they form in the vast oceans on the 40:th latitude south, and therefore brings the rain to the west coast, slowing down in the central plateaus, and adds little precipitation to the east. Still, that only means a lack of rain forest; there is still plenty of vegetation to go around, and with it, fauna.

Devils in a box

In Bicheno, there's a wildlife sanctuary, home of kangaroos, birds, and many more. The head-liner, though, is the Tasmanian Devil which, despite it's modest size of roughly a stout cat, is the top predator of the island, since the thylacine (or Tasmanian Tiger (called so despite being more similar to canids in size, shape and behaviour; guess the stripes earns the title....)) was extinct in 1933*.



Devils chasing one another's meat

The devil, called so because of its rather demonic screeching noise, is an endangered species at the moment. It used to be so numerous as to be considered a pest, but in fairness, humans tend to see any number too high if they choose to. Even a single animal is an invading horde, according to some.

Culling, loss of habitat, roads and decrease in prey have thwarted their numbers, but the main threat right now is Tasmanian devil facial tumour disease (DFTD). It is a transmissible cancer that affects Tasmanian devils. The disease is spread by biting and causes the appearance of tumours on the face or inside the mouth of affected Tasmanian devils. The tumours often become very large and usually cause death of affected animals. In conjunction with lessened gene pools, measures have to be made to ensure the continued existence of what is basically the Earthly equivalent of Nibblonians**.

One such is the sanctuary in Bicheno. Other than caring for hurt, wounded or abandoned devils, it's also a part of a network of other sanctuaries, wherein they help breeding, not by size, or hunting skills, or speed, but by genetic diversity. DFTD is yet untreatable, but there is progress (they have a vaccine that lasts 6 months, which is far from enough). And the devils are an essential part of the Tasmanian eco system, not the least through all the roadkill they scavenge.

Tasmanian devils [...] basically the Earthly equivalent of Nibblonians

The sanctuary had, as previously mentioned, many more cuddlies. Birds, macropods, lizards. The kangaroos lazed in the shade, but became alert when outstretched hands offered pellets.

Some of the pea-fowls were albino, the cockatoos were intelligent yet talkative, the devils were fed, as was a baby wombat. Three guesses as to who enjoyed that the most. Hint: it wasn't the baby wombat.



There'll be your best friend, for the 10 seconds you feed them pellets

Beaches and blocks

The relatively sheltered east coast is the go-to destination for surfers, sunbathers, hikers, fishers and pretty much all who enjoys the nature. In Freycinet national parks, there are more bays than you can throw a perfectly rounded glacial rock at, one of which is the stunning Bay of fire. Not named so after the red-orange lichens covering some of the boulders that line the otherwise ivory white sandy beaches, but rather the fact that the original owners, you know, lived there, what with all the fires that entails, which supposedly baffled the early explorers.



And it burns, burns, burns; the Bay of Fire

Eventually, we had to say adios to the turquoise waters, the white beaches, the black-and-white devils, the orangey boulders and the wombat-coloured wombats, and set course back to Hobart.

Caroline's corner

Launceston. The little we saw of it seemed nice. An old jail had been turned into a restaurant. Two tired travellers ate like we had not seen food in days. Which we had. In heaps. But I guess that we had to compensate for a rather sad hostel. But the joys of finding peacocks high up in trees compensated for shitty digs. A rather fun sight. Several peacocks and peahens high up in trees. The weather forecast had predicted temperatures in the 40ies so our tour guide had to change the itinerary a bit. The longer walk up in the national park got moved up as well as the swim in the oyster bay. The crystal clear water, the bright turquoise colours and the sandy beaches. Tasmania has got it all. But no more wild wombats. We looked and we looked. But they had decided that one look was enough for me. Guess the joy when I got to pet a small wombaby at the wild life sanctuary. It is hard to try to look good when your inner child just wants to erupt into sparkling fizzy fireworks of joy. My hubs have not learnt to use filters..... But who cares! I got to see and pet a wombat!!! And see cool tasmanian devils. And feed and cuddle Kangaroos.



Aaah, look how cute! There's also a baby wombat.

The Tassie devils are protected and part of several programmes to make sure that they are not lost to us. But since nobody knows the number of wombats out there and since nobody has made a proper survey they are considered a non endangered species. According to the very informative guide they are probably just as endangered species as the tasmanian devil. The ass in assume.....

Five days on the road meant that we were back in Hobart for the last 3 days. It also meant that we would “loose” our tour guide Phil as his part was done.

*) allegedly

***) A Tasmanian Devil can eat up to a third of their own body weight in one sitting, and they eat all of the prey, including skin, fur and bones. They might not poop anti-matter, though

TASSIE RING, THE ONE TO BIND THEM



Hobart, TAS



Stationed in the capital, we ventured on a couple of excursions, to Bruny Island, Port Arthur, the base and summit of Mt Wellington, and the city of Hobart itself.

Blessed are the cheese-makers

Bruny Island is basically a big artisanal farmer's market. There are honey-farmers, cheese makers, chocolatiers, brewers, you name it. The local whey stout went down magnificently with the just as local oyster, in a second breakfast for champions. While the whole island, and its isthmus, provided plenty of photo ops and a spectacular shoreline, it's not really necessary for a Bruny Island day trip for those who have done the whole Tasmania loop.



Bruny beer

That day was New Year's Eve. The Sydney-Hobart race had just ended, but the yachts, the crews and the spectators had mostly lingered, so the town was bustling. We found a decent restaurant for our NYE dinner, but later met up with our co-travellers for drinks and fireworks. They had found a more or less perfect table at a nice place by the harbour, so we partied well into 2020.



Fireworks

Port of the who?

We got up early next morning, though, for yet another day trip. The whole of Tasmania was once a penal colony (though went by the name of van Diemen's Land until 1856), but as we know from Sarah Island, even convicts sometimes commit more crime, and need to be sent to another level of punishment. Such as Port Arthur.



Port Arthur penitentiary

The southernmost tip of the peninsula is an entire historic site. Along with the penitentiary, there were also lodgings for the military and the wardens, and therefore most of the site is lush green, botanical gardens and groves of trees. Well worth a visit, but skip the boat tour, which adds little to the experience. Other than the historical aspect, the area also has some spectacular shoreline, such as tessellated rocks (looking like man-made tiles), blowholes and a cool-looking arch. Named Tasman Arch, natch.



Tasman Arch

Hob-art

Hobart itself is quite a different town when it's not Christmas day. There are plenty of eateries, microbreweries, theatre, and an entire street of basically outdoors shops and comic book stores. The Sydney-Hobart regatta in conjunction with the New Year's celebration also draws a crowd. Thus Taste of Tasmania, a festival that provides, you guessed it, the different tastes of Tasmania. Street food, vendors, cideries, dessert wagons and everyone and their aunt exhibits their gastronomical merch. Well worth a visit, although the actual breweries outside the festival area are often cheaper and provide better spread. And they always accept cash, which some of the venues inside sadly don't.

The, probably, most interesting thing to see and do in Hobart is MONA, Museum of Old and New Art. Started by a rich man who owned a lot of cool art and wanted to show it, the museum and its surroundings is a cultural and epicural getaway a little distance off the city centre. That distance being 25 minutes, because in Australia, they measure distance in time units. So, it's 25 minutes by bus, 40 minutes by bike and 25 minutes by the ever popular MONA ferry. Sipping drinks on benches made to look like sheep or tigers on the graffitied boat is part of the experience.



MONA: Art not found

The museum itself is as interesting as can be. Outside the building complex are statues, installations and interesting architecture. There is a park area with barbecues, restaurants and it's own local brewery and winery. The exhibitions focus mainly on the N (new), with the old mostly just there to give the complex a better acronym. Not sure how many visitors MNA would attract. Among the more noteworthy exhibitions is an augmented reality enhanced number on mining in a post-apocalyptic world, and an artwork on human skin, which means that there's a man sitting there 16 hours a day, showing visitors his tattoos. Apparently, he will donate his skin after his demise.

Now this is pod-racing!

After seven weeks of full speed activity vacay, it's nice to kick back, relax, maybe even hide away. A short drive from Hobart lies Kingston, and an even shorter drive from there lies Hobart Hideaway Pods by the foothills of Kunyoni, aka Mt Wellington. It is run, or rather cared for, by an old friend and former tour leader of mine, and it is a delight. Serene and eco-friendly, the pods (two at the moment), lie in a slope, with big panorama windows presenting a stellar view. The loo is water and odour free and the shower water is treated bio-wise on-site. We had a nice barbecue dinner with the host and her family, and got a nice, quiet night's sleep.



The Pinnacles atop Mt Wellington

The next day was excursion day. Starting off at Willie Smith's orchard and cidery, and followed by a drive up to the peak of Mt Wellington. The view, both near and far, is stunning. It's above the tree line, so it's barren and pinnacle laden and something out of Middle Earth. There are many outdoors activities to partake in, such as trekking, bouldering, climbing and mountain biking. During winter they sometimes need to close parts of the road, and construction of a cable car has been proposed, to much political divide in the community. We ended the little day trip slash reunion with lunch at Tasmania's biggest brewery, Cascade.

Back at Hobart, we took the last chance to visit **ToT**, and on our way back got surprised by a little jazzy concert in a park, to which people, old and young, spontaneously started to dance. Tasmania had truly delivered, and is highly recommended. On the morning of our departure, I ventured through

some of the steepest streets I've ever ventured, up to the recreational area Queens Domain, where I participated in my very first **Parkrun**.

Caroline's corner

Our final three days of the Tassie round-trip started on new year's eve. A new tour guide who spoke with a rather soft aussie twang, that is until she spoke with other aussies. Then her twang became a full on slabang. Full on aussie speak. I think we all enjoyed hearing it. In Tasmania the swans are full on black. I did not see a single white Swan. Hmmm, I wonder how the aussies received the first performance of Swan Lake..... But the island is so much

more than a gathering spot for black swans. Foodies galore. Chocolate, honey, oysters (nomnomnom), food, craft beer produced locally using only local produce, wine and everything delicious you can eat, taste and smell. In between all the tastings we did do some short hikes into the fantastic nature. But all things come to an end and so did our day on Bruny Island. As the old year ended and the new began we celebrated with good food, good wine and even better company, our new friends from the tour.

To start the new year with another early start and another excursion is perhaps not the most brilliant thing to do, but we did and it was good. We visited a small town that boasted having the oldest stone bridge in Tassie as well as the oldest Catholic Church. Apparently the Anglican Church is a little bit older but lacks some historical paperwork so they can't claim that "oldest" title as well. Port Arthur was a mixture of horror and beauty. The horror consisted of its history. Such suffering and so many evil characters mixed with not so evil ones. I would have loved to explore the grounds a bit more but time was limited so we only got to scratch the surface. More fantastic natural sculptures were on the program. We had oh'd and aaah'd so much I thought that I'd ooh'd out myself but the traditional pizza on the international pizza day made me go ooooh again. Or perhaps it was the hour and a half we spent searching for a pizza place that actually stayed open on new year's day. Google did not deliver that day.

The Mona. Oh, the visit to a magical, fantastic and amazing place. Filled with art, dreams and seriously cool architecture. A winery, a brewery and seriously good food. I could have stayed there for an entire day. Or two or three. They had a poop machine for goddess sake. A proper gastrointestinal machine that got fed twice a day and poops once. We got to see (and smell) the pooping. This is apparently very modern art. Love it.

The Hobart hideaway pods are the brilliant brainchild of an old travel bud of Martin. Two pods with a view to die for and a very green approach. Spend a night there and your soul relaxes completely. It is beauty combined with an excellent environmental green approach. Next time we go back we will definitely spend more time at that lovely place.

But as all things must end so did our Tassie adventure end. It ended with good food, good eats and beautiful music at the Taste of Tasmania festival. We had a lovely last evening tasting this and that. And listening to good music. What a wonderful way to end this leg of our journey.



Another Tasmanian arch

MELBOURNE, WHEREFORE ART THOU?



Melbourne, VIC



The last few days were upon us. We were back in Melbourne, but this time around, we had left to explore the city proper, rather than St Kilda. And while the skies were grey, the city was just as cool as I remember.

Lanes

And just like my first big odyssey, it was the final stop before going home. We took the Skybus into city, but unlike in St Kilda, there was no stop just outside our accommodation. Luckily, we travel light.



Flubber University

We got a bit of a sleep-in (much needed, seeing that our hostel lacked soundproofing, meaning that the guests chatting in the common area just outside our room kept us awake until 2-ish) we ventured on a free walking tour at 10:30. The light rain kept the group size small, and our guide had received some training in carrying her voice.

Taking the fabled free tram, we started out at Gordon Reserve and checked out Old Treasury, Flinders Lane, the Myer christmas window exhibit on Collins, the Library and Melbourne University, among others. We were advised to check out the back lanes, which differ significantly from back lanes in other cities: In Melbourne, the coolest bars, restaurants, galleries and so forth can often be found, with little to no advertising, in the back lanes. Safe and adventurous at the same time.

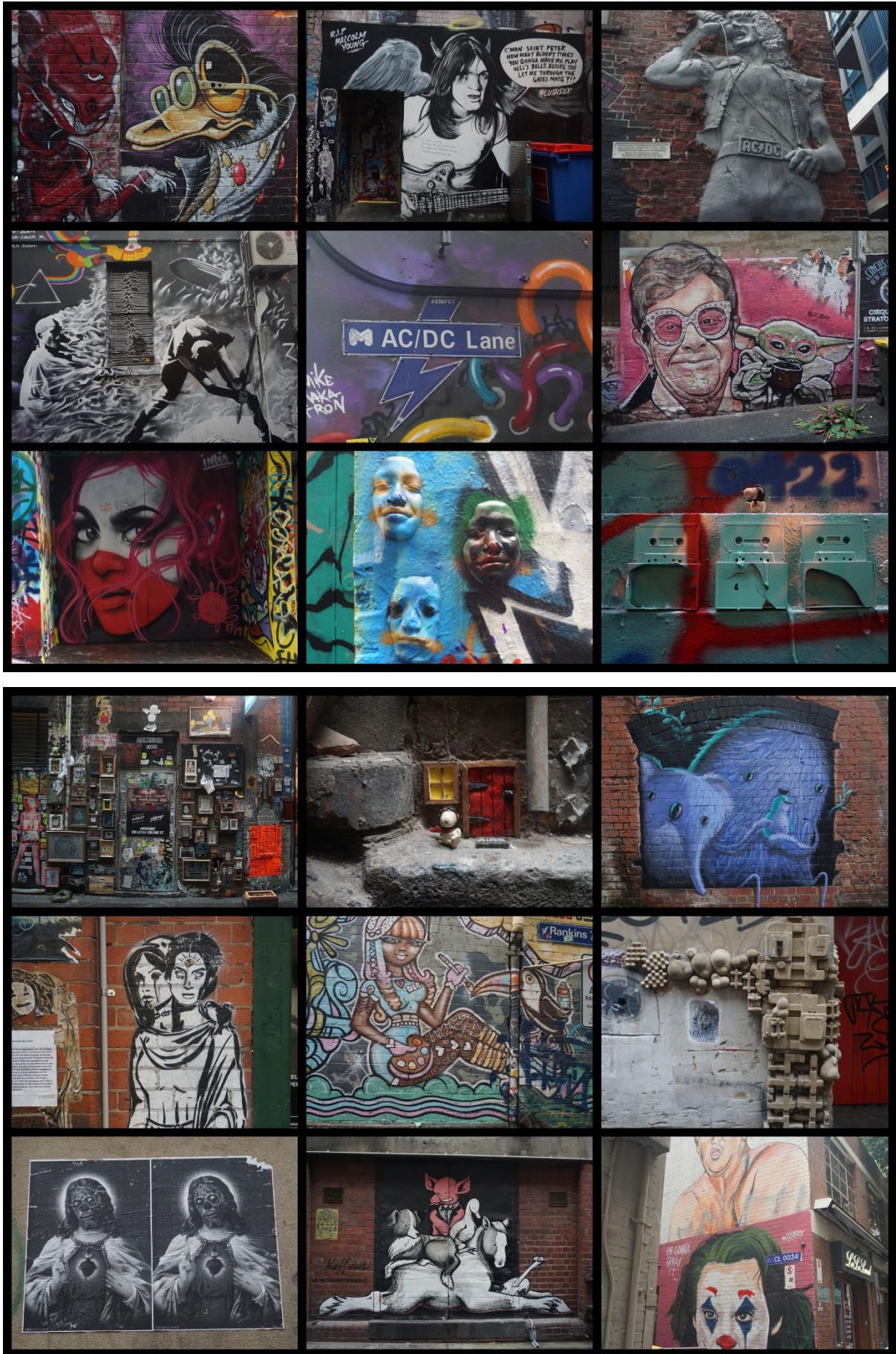


The trams in central Melbourne are free to ride

The lanes are also where the Street Art is. Similar to some European cities, Melbourne boasts a thriving art scene, and street art is not frowned upon, or dismissed as vandalism as in some countries. Although lacking some of the bigger murals and pieces that interact with existing objects, Melbourne's street art can almost rival that of Berlin. There is a lane that now officially has changed name to AC/DC Lane, in honour of the local legendary band*, and the artwork there all follow the musical theme.

There are tours you can take that guide you through the labyrinth** that is inner city lanes and their art and/or hidden gems, but they are quite pricey. Spending an entire day, unraveling these things in your own pace, is something I highly recommend, although since we never took a back lane bar tour OR street art tour, it's tough to tell if they compare. Spending time in the lanes definitely is worth it, though.

Spending an entire day, unraveling these things in your own pace, is something I highly recommend



Street art in the various lanes of Melbourne

At special request, we had dinner at Young And Jackson's, just opposite Flinders Street Station**, before which we promptly asked the bar staff: "Where is she?"

Walks

Our journey was coming to an end. Our departure flight was at 1:00, so we had the entire day to explore Melbourne further. Storing our luggage in a locker at the bus station, we set out on foot to take in the last sights before leaving the Land Down Under.

Two of the most culturally significant details in Australian history are the life and deeds of Ned Kelly, and the Ashes. The former; a bush ranger, a bank robber, a freedom fighter, a trouble maker, a Robin Hood-esque hero, a murderer, depending on whom you ask, and the latter; the ashes of one of the bails from the wicket at the game where Australia first beat England in cricket on English ground. Both the in-/famous armour Ned Kelly wore and an urn containing the fabled ashes can be found at Melbourne University Library, which also holds exhibitions of art, photography, and more.



Ned Kelly's armour and The Ashes. Spread some vegemite on and you're as Aussie as you can be.



After lunching some Australian hams, cheeses and sausages by Yarra river, we crossed it and followed its banks to the Royal Botanical Garden, via Olympic Park, past Rod Laver Arena (some two weeks too early for Australian Open, my favourite tennis tournament), where I re-fell in love with the city: Many cities have bike pumps placed here and there, but the ones in Melbourne are also equipped with all sorts of tools to repair a flat tyre, reattach a chain, alter saddle, and so forth. Awesome! Following the other bank of Yarra, we eventually found our way back to Federation Square for the last taste paddle of beer of the trip.

Hoping against hope that google wouldn't let us down, we had planned to bookend the tour by having our last supper at one of the reputedly excellent Sri Lankan restaurants in Melbourne. We eventually found the one Maps suggested, but as seems to be more often than not, it was closed, despite google's assurance it wasn't. And so, we bookended

by going as Aussie as you can (without vegemite): Hungry Jack's.



Posers

Caroline's corner

Melbourne.

A big but friendly city. That was not my impression when we came to Melbourne the first time on the day before Christmas eve. It felt like a hard and rough city so I were happy to stay in St Kilda those two days. But back in Melbourne we would start our last part of this journey. A long walk with a lovely guide Lucy from [walks101](#) made me a bit more positive to Melbourne. Although the barista who gave me full milk in my flat white instead of lactose free/non dairy made me very suspicious of Melbournian baristas. We had to cut our day short to....recuperate....

But the moment I fell in love with Melbourne was the next day. When we spent an entire day exploring street art and small pubs/eaterys in the laneways of Melbourne. In other cities one is discouraged to leave the big streets and avenues but in Melbourne all small laneways are safe. They are either equipped with cctv or filled with activities such as small businesses, speakeasys or coffeeshops. So they are safe. We walked and talked and took an obscene amount of pictures. What a lovely but smokey day. The winds had turned so the smoke from all the bushfires filled the city. A rather scary feeling of vulnerability. We had managed to just miss all the fires and only seen a few in the far distance but now the smoke was thick and heavy.



Statue and high-rises

Our last day in Melbourne. With the combination of smoke and a lousy hostel (unhygienic kitchen, loud noise until wee hours of the morning) had led to my mancold. A slow walk to

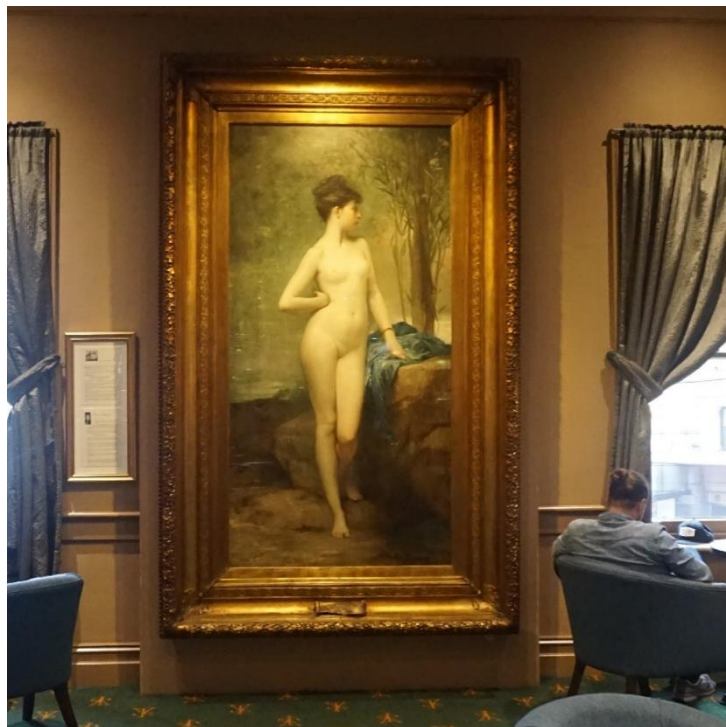
the Melbourne library to check out, amongst other things, the armour Ned Kelly wore and a slow but loong walk to the botanical garden concluded our last day in Melbourne. A nice day albeit a snotty day.



Australasian Swamphen in Botanical Garden

The 34 hours it took us to get home were not fun at all. It could have been nice since I got to do the entire return trip with my favourite person but my cold made the journey back rather uncomfortable. But a skip and a hop later and then several repeats of the skip and the hop we got back home. And promptly started to plan our next walk about.

PS. And yes I asked where she was and there she were and she was. And the barramundi at Young & Jackson was just as lovely as her.



Where is she?

-
- *) not the types of current
 - **) or possibly maze
 - ***) you know, under the clocks

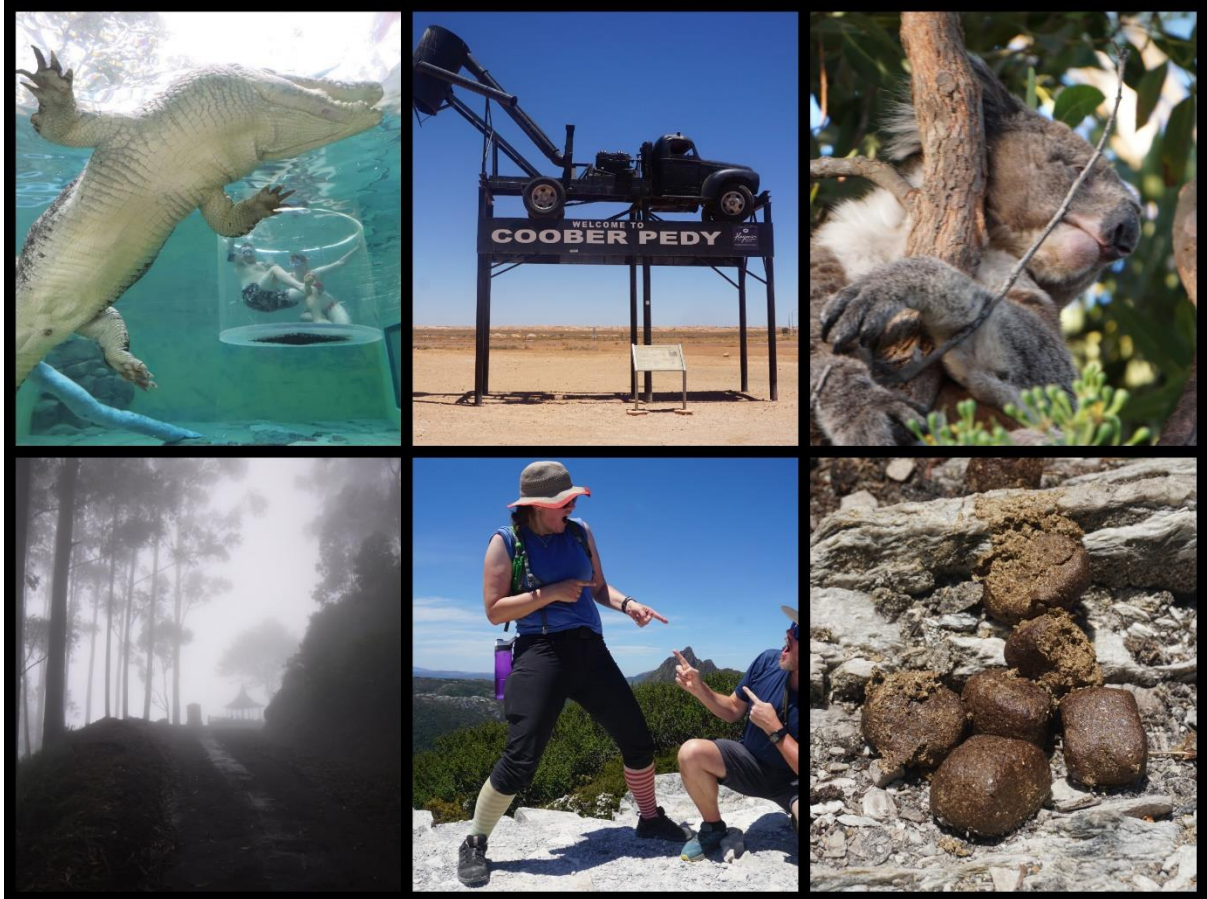
EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE



Göteborg, Sweden



Every journey must end. Every journey must also have its ups and downs. One of the downs is always flying, and this one was no exception. 34 hours home, filled with ineffective check-in processes, chaotic crowds, idiots reclining their seats and placing their over-sized carry-on everywhere they shouldn't, inedible food, you know the deal. And yet, I had a breeze compared to my poor partner. Sneezing and fevering throughout the journey, she soldiered on without complaint, but I don't envy her situation.



Some, but not all, of the highlights

Flights aside, which we all know always is somewhere on the spectrum from annoyance to nightmare, this trip's down was, for me, the persistent dry cough I contracted and kept Caroline, as well as other co-travellers on nights of camping and/or swagging, awake at night.



Wave about to hit

That said, the ups far outweigh the downs. It's a well-known fact, for those that know it well, that I hand out symbolic awards, The Backpacks, after every trip, highlighting the, er, highlights in some chosen categories. It's a tradition, or an old charter, or something. As there were two of us, there are sometimes more than one winner, and note that we're not being consistent on which opinion goes in what column.

Note also that the little event taking place near Simpsons Gap, just outside of Alice is outside contest, to be fair to the other contenders.

So without further ado, it's time to present...

The Backpacks of 2019-2020

Backpack	for	according to one	according to the other
The Cotton Backpack	best accommodation	Hobart Hideaway Pods	Hobart Hideaway Pods
The Rubber Backpack	best adventure experience	Tied: Hiking in The Knuckles / Kings Canyon	Hiking in The Knuckles
The Jade Backpack	best cultural experience	Tied: Brambuk Cultural Centre / Mona	Street art in Melbourne
The Brick Backpack	best city	Melbourne	Tied: Adelaide / Melbourne
The Malt Backpack	best drink	Citrus Haze IPA from Sauce Brewing	Tied: G&T at Arlanda airport / Silver tea in Negombo
The Silver Backpack	best eating	Oven baked barra, Vineyard, Melbourne	Gamine's spread during the glamping in the Knuckles
The Argent Backpack	best fish'n'chips	Bay Fish Co, Strahan	Bay Fish Co, Strahan
The Gunpowder Backpack	best fireworks	NYE Fireworks, Hobart	NYE Fireworks, Hobart
The Khaki Backpack	best guide (tour)	The Soulless Ginger	The Soulless Ginger
The Twill Backpack	best guide (local)	Reuben	Reuben
The Glass Backpack	best hang	LT 42, Hobart	Farewell dinner in Matara
The Granite Backpack	best landscape	Tasmania's east coast	Kings canyon from above, in a helicopter

Backpack	for	according to one	according to the other
The Fur Backpack	best nature experience	Clouds slowly rolling in around us high up in the Knuckles	Wetlands cruise, Kakadu
The Worsted Backpack	best penguin	The one that wobbled across the pier	Grumpy penguins in St Kilda
The Celluloid Backpack	best photo	Tropic of Capricorn	Wave about to hit local bathers, Negombo
The Calico Backpack	best surprise	C fixing Cooper's interwebz, earning us baseball caps	The turtle
The Terry Backpack	best swim	Natural pool, Knuckles camp	Spider Lake, Litchfield
The Copper Backpack	most price-worthy experience	Cooper brewery tour	Hobart Hideaway Pods*
The Satin Backpack	best sleep	Hobart Hideaway Pods	First night home
The Velour Backpack	softest experience	Barossa valley	Cuddling and feeding donkeys on Bundy farm
The Pleather Backpack	experience extraordinaire	Caged with crocodile	Caged with crocodile
The Vinyl Backpack	song of the trip	<i>Everything is Awesome!</i>	The lack of <i>Last Christmas</i>
The Borax Backpack	best marsupial	Tasmanian devil	Kangaroo hospital in Coobers pedy
<i>And last,</i>	<i>but not least:</i>		
The Gold Backpack	best experience in total	Red Centre	Yellow Water river cruise with Reuben the not so silent guide



Tropic of Capricorn

*) We were guests, but even if we had payed full price, it would have been worth it and plenty more

