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October 15, 2004

A Saint Mary's Student's Guide to Sydney

After 21 hours of travelling, I stepped out of Kingsford Smith International Airport, as the sun was rising on Friday, June 4, 2004; Thursday, June 3, 2004 never existed for me – forever lost somewhere between my evening snack and the international dateline. The palm trees were cast in a soft pink yellow hue set against a pure blue sky. A slight chill to the morning air made me thankful I was still wearing the jacket I had on when I left the cool late spring of Chicago. With the weight of my stuffed backpack and purse pulling me back and to the side, I rolled my two suitcases, nearly 70 pounds each, on a complimentary cart and tried to grasp how far I was from everything I knew. This was a task since the people and scenery seemed so familiar. I thought back a couple of minutes to my first steps on Australian land.

I walked through the long terminal. ‘So this is Sydney, Australia,’ I thought to myself. A cheerful woman at the duty-free shop asked me, “How are you going?” I was not sure how to answer so I just smiled and nodded. I next went to the bathroom where I was very impressed with the small amount of water in the commode and two options of flushing, one half and one full. I wondered if this was an airport thing, but soon learned that everywhere I went seemed to be concerned about conserving water.

I tried to convince myself again that I was in a foreign country when my Indian cab driver wound through streets of the nondescript city of car washes, gas stations and laundry mats. I was only convinced that the plane had actually left the San Francisco airport by the cars driving on the left side of the road, a difference I got used to quick enough.

We pulled up to a crumbling terrace house in the heart of Leichhardt, the Italian district, and my friend, Evan, was on the street to open my door and welcome me to Sydney as soon as the car stopped. A familiar face from my life in the US became another factor of my cognitive dissonance. Am I in a foreign country?

After a shower and quick coffee, Evan took me to Circular Quay, the location of the Opera House, Royal Botanical Gardens, and a fantastic view of the Harbour Bridge. As I took in the imposing white shell-like roof pieces of the famous Opera House set against the crisp blue sky, I felt like I was in a virtual world apart from reality. And so would begin my experience with Australia.

QUICK REFERENCE:

The flight:

I first flew for a little over three hours from Chicago to San Francisco, where I had a one hour layover in San Francisco. I then boarded a fourteen hour flight directly to Sydney. The flight from San Francisco to Sydney was as comfortable as it could be. I was lucky enough to have an isle seat and a free seat to my right. I was able to drink a lot of water as I felt dehydrated the entire flight and went to the bathroom numerous times without disturbing anyone. I was also able to use the seat next to me to stretch out a bit when I wanted to sleep. Not long into the flight, the attendants served us a hot dinner. I was starving so the food tasted amazing. They then turned off the lights and started showing movies – there were five or so shown interspersed with infomercial-like shows and a monitor of where we were as we flew over the vast and empty Pacific Ocean. I stayed awake reading for awhile and then curled up with the blanket provided and small neck pillow I brought with me, to try to get some sleep. As I sporadically slept and went to the bathroom, I felt very comfortable and cozy. There were just rows of people all covered in their blankets in the dark cabin, trying

to sleep through this long flight. Sometime in the middle of the flight, the attendants served us a snack that was actually much like a lunch – turkey and cheese sandwich with chips, drink, and cookie. The next meal was a breakfast, served an hour before landing. All in all, it was a lovely flight that I had dreaded for no real reason.

Jet Lag:

I departed from the US central time zone at 6PM on a Wednesday and arrived at 6AM in the Eastern South Pacific time zone. While I did not have much quality sleep during the flight, I stayed awake until 7PM the day I arrived. I took a shower when I got to where I was staying, got ready and went into Circular Quay to see the icons of Sydney: the Harbour Bridge, Opera House, and the Royal Botanical Gardens. I then ate lunch, saw many other sights, went grocery shopping, ate dinner, and finally went to bed not to wake up until 9AM the next morning (about 14 hours of sleep). I basically suffered no jet lag due to this, aside from feeling tired fairly early in the evening for about a week.

Sydney:

Sydney is a clean, diverse, international city. At any one time in my public transport commute, I could hear four or five languages being spoken by even more dialects including Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, German, Indian, British English and Australian English (of course). It is a mix of what is British (driving on the left side of the road, Queen Elizabeth II on the money, and cricket) and American (television, music, food chains, and clothing brands) with subtle reminders (aboriginals playing didgeridoos, cloudless skies, and lethal spiders) that it is neither. I have the impression that Australians in Sydney may have a bit of an identity crisis. And how could they not, when they live miles upon miles away from the western world and are a day ahead of the nations to which they are most similar? The newspapers are concerned

daily with what is going on in the United States, most every Australian knows who the president of the United States is and what his foreign policy is, and so on, when I bet the same number of Americans do not know who the prime minister of Australia is or even that they are governed by a prime minister!

The people:

I have been told by many world travellers that Australians are the most friendly people they have ever met. Everything is relative and in my opinion, nothing compares to Midwest American hospitality, so I have a different take on Australians and their kindness to foreigners. As an American travelling at a time of highly disputed war, especially in Australia, I did not expect to receive wonderful treatment, but I did expect to be at least interesting to most. Many people did find my ‘Americanness’ interesting and they asked me many questions, but I would say overall, I was overwhelmed with a sense of indifference. People realize you are American (or Canadian) from the moment you speak, give you a look and that is that. Don’t get me wrong, every person I asked directions from gave me help above and beyond what I needed and more than one Australian family welcomed me into their home with open arms and fine wine, but the approach differs greatly from the American, giddy, high strung, “Oh my God, are you from Australia?” welcoming reaction. After being here for a while I believe that I understand why. First of all, they are already inundated with everything that is American, making our accent and culture no novelty. And, second of all, even as an American traveller myself, I became annoyed and put off by American tourists on more than one occasion. That having been said, I believe one key thing to do to avoid people feeling this way about you is to not be so loud. Just keep it down.

Weather:

I arrived in June, the beginning of the Australian winter. Basically, winter in Sydney meant sunshine almost every day and temperatures around 60s and 70s. There was a terrible drought on while I was there that was often the topic of lamenting conversations. Due to the drought, it was expected that people conserve on water; the drought also affected prices of produce and meat. The temperatures got cooler as we entered July and there were a couple of days that felt quite cool and windy. I encountered true wintery weather as I travelled outside of Sydney and raised my altitude. Canberra, south of Sydney, was quite cool and it even snowed the day I went west into the great dividing mountain range called the Blue Mountains. I also travelled 800 kilometres north of Sydney toward the Great Barrier Reef and found the temperatures to be comparable to a Midwest spring or early summer without the humidity.

Fashion:

Like any big city, fashion in Sydney is eclectic. Basically, when in the city, you will feel comfortable in anything you desire to wear, from sweats and a baseball cap to spikes and a Mohawk. Different suburbs have varying senses of cool though. Further out from the centre of the city, but still along the coast, you will find people dressed casually in surfer gear, baggy jeans, trucker hats and t-shirts. Billabong, Quicksilver and Mambo are the big names. Inner east suburbs are the most stylish by American standards. You will see people strutting around in slightly outdated pieces from the height of fashion. Louis Vuitton is all around you and even on the dogs. In the northern suburbs, you will find the refined styles of sailors and country club families. Ralph Lauren and prominent Australian designers are big in this area.

While people seem out of date with the cut and fit of their pants, their shoes are fabulous! A plethora of stores have a wide variety of unique styles that will leave

you drooling. And, of course, there is the casual but chic ugg boot that you will see on anyone and everyone, from the surfer dude to the yuppie girl.

Clothes are expensive in Sydney, so watch out! Jeans are especially ridiculous, especially if you are buying mainstream American brands like Levi or Lee. For some reason, Lee, the brand that I have come to know to produce “mom jeans,” are the height of fashion in Sydney (they are a sleeker and trendier style than the ones I have seen in the U.S.!) But expect to pay prices between \$200 and \$400 Australian dollars for these designer pants.

Mind you, I experienced the fashion of a Sydney winter and I assume that people who do not think their winter is long enough to warrant heaters in their buildings, also do not put much stock into their winter wardrobes. People generally try to get by with what they have for the few “cold” months they endure.

I experienced anxiety about this as I tried to plan what to bring for a Sydney winter. Do people wear wool? Do they bundle up? Do they wear coats? It turns out they do all of the above, even if the temperatures do not warrant it and by the end, I found myself doing the same. There is something about the fact that it is “winter” that made me feel like I needed to wear a coat or put on a sweater, even though in past occasions I have laid on the beach in a bikini in similar weather in Florida!

Language

English is the national language; however, Australians use British rules so some things differ from the United States.

British spelling used:

Substitute s for z’s, ‘our’ instead of ‘or’, ‘re’ instead of ‘er’ (e.g. organise, favourite, and theatre)

Terms

Australian Rules Football = very different from American football, more similar to rugby but with different technique and played on an oval field. Really big in Victoria where it originated.

Toilet = bathroom

Bloke = guy

Car park = parking lot

College = the last two years of high school

Entrée = appetizer

Fanny = what little girls call their private part

Full stop = period

Goss = gossip

High School = Year six through twelve

Holiday = vacation

How are you going = how are you doing

Jumper = sweater

Muesli = granola

Prawn = shrimp

Queue = line

Root = have sex (You don't root, root, root for your home team in Australia)

Rugby League = Rugby for the working class with different rules than Rugby Union.

There are league teams for all different regions all over Australia

Rugby Union = Old school rugby for the white collared folks, played at schools and University. There is an Australian national team, the Wallabies, who compete against other national teams. Their rival will always be New Zealand's team, the All Blacks.

School = primary school, if you refer to your college or university years as school you will get funny looks.

Schoolies week = Week of crazy, celebratory holidays high school graduates go on.

Sheila = girl

Stuffed = tired

Yobo = lower class guy

Other Major Differences

Drive on left side of road and right side of car.

Meetings tend to start 15 to 30 minutes after the scheduled time and thus run longer than expected.

The US Dollar is worth more than the Australian Dollar so everything seems more expensive in Sydney than what it really is. The exchange rate fluctuates, but it stayed somewhere around $$.69\text{USD} = \1AUD during my stay. Food is especially inexpensive, especially for a city. Use credit or debit cards as much as possible because this is the easiest thing to do. Otherwise, use ATM's for cash, they are frequent with the best exchange rates and I got by without every having to pay a transfer fee.

Australians love their beer and wine. It is not strange to have a glass of wine with your lunch, even in the middle of a work day. Wine is typically the beverage of choice for dinner.

Measurements – temperatures are in Celsius (convert to Fahrenheit by doubling and adding about 20), weight is in kilos (convert to pounds by multiplying by 2.2), and height is in meters. It will make you wish we were on the metric system.

Final words of advice:

Read up before you get there. I bought a Lonely Planet guide to Sydney and found it immensely helpful, especially because of the maps that were included. I also read Bill Bryson's In a Sunburnt Country, which acquainted me, in a very entertaining and humourous way, with the history of Australia and gave me a good idea of what Australians are like. Make the most of your time and talk to people!