



A Season of Happiness

nothing too serious

Popcorn



P07



A Visitor's Guide to the Real Australia

Anyone visiting Australia for the first time is going to be in for a surprise. The tourist brochures don't tell it all, not by a long chalk, and even someone who has read up on the country only has a vague idea of what they will discover in the land downunder. This island continent may not seem much on the map, and closer inspection could reinforce that impression. Much of it, especially towards the interior, is flat as a tack and little more than a dust bowl; but even in these seemingly inhospitable regions there is a magic that has to be experienced to be believed. During the day it can be a furnace, then freezing at night. Sunrise, however, is breath-taking. You can almost hear a distant rumble as a glow beyond the horizon gradually increases, heralding the approach of its maker. Entertainer Rolf Harris captured the awesome moment in a song: "Sun arise, She bring in the morning, spreading all the light all around... bringing back the warmth to the ground." If only just the once, visitors to Oz simply have to witness this, appreciate the true feeling of the outback. Some call it the Never-Never, claiming that whoever goes there will never, never want to leave. Many past visitors from overseas know the feeling only too well and are still there.

This, however, isn't meant to be a come-on for tourists. It will be about Australia as we see it, unvarnished and sometimes coarse - about her people, their customs and idiosyncrasies, the language and phraseology, and especially those elements that make every country unique. Travellers need to know these things if they are to avoid making some terrible blues - that's an Aussie term for a mistake, and there are plenty more like it which I'll get to Ron (later on, that is). For now, if you are squatting comfortably, then I'll begin.

The first lesson for new arrivals usually begins in one of the major cities. They will have seen the pics - the Coathanger, for example. That's the Sydney Harbour Bridge. People drive across just to say they have, while the more intrepid climb it, suitably harnessed I'm glad to say (foreign food tends to give our sharks crook guts!). It is also the source of analogies, particularly with respect to unenviable tasks that take an age, not necessarily alluding to the time taken getting across in the usual way, but for those having to paint it, finishing at one end and immediately having to go back to the other to start again. So, if someone says: "That's like painting the Sydney Harbour Bridge," think twice before committing yourself to what might prove a tedious, eternal grind! Then there's the Opera House, a conglomeration of huge white barnacles clinging to the edge of the water. Mind you, it makes for a good holiday snap and does attract famous artistes whose concerts, so I'm led to believe, are worth every cent.

The cities themselves are pretty much the same as their counterparts the world over - office buildings, shops, hotels, cafes, restaurants, cinemas, you name it. These provide the comforts necessary for weary globe-trotters to lose the jet-lag and take advantage of a way of life that initially seems pretty similar to the one they enjoy back home. Needless to say, some things will need a bit of education. Shopping is a must for tourists and there is plenty to splurge on - high fashion, genuine and not-so-genuine souvenirs and gourmet feasts. Just bear in mind when you are ordering up a plate of kangaroo or emu that you are eating our National icons, something most Aussies wouldn't dream of doing in a fit. If you really want to try a unique local dish, go to Adelaide and hunt out a pie floater - a humble meat pie languishing in a slurry of pea soup!

Maybe not so much in the flash places, but certainly in ordinary shops and life in general, there are a few common expressions that are easily misinterpreted. Shop assistants might ask: "You right, mate?" If you assume they are enquiring after your welfare and say: "Yes," they'll probably smile and leave you to your own devices. Assuming you don't want to browse and need serving, you should come back with something like: "A bag of those lollies, thanks," while pointing to the desired candy. This avoids stretching the intelligence of the assistant and the "thanks" up front saves on a "please" beforehand. That's the way it is here - economising on everything from speech to actions. Most Aussies are laid-back, a point well worth remembering, particularly when you believe they have insulted you. Chances are, they were just passing the time of day with a friendly comment intended to put you at your ease. Another confusing habit they have is qualifying things using opposites or diminutives. So, Bluey might be the nickname of a person with red hair; Scotty could actually be Irish; a really rough sea can be referred to as a tad lumpy; and "down the road a bit" may mean anything from a short stroll to a five-hour drive.

I would suggest that this casual attitude stems from the time of colonisation. Today's "True Blues" are descendents of the early settlers. They ranged from the wealthy hoping for greater riches, to transported convicts. In between came sailors, soldiers of the Rum Corps, a few government officials and a growing host of ordinary folk who had been given an assisted passage and a grant of land. All had high hopes, even prisoners who dreamed of the day they completed their sentence and were handed their ticket of leave. Most failed to realise that Australia was like nothing they had ever experienced before. It was harsh, unforgiving and hot - most days were a fair cow! If their intention was to stay and make a go of it, they had to adapt just to survive. No longer was it a case of who you were or where you came from - that didn't matter in a country that ignored government directives and made its own rules. Co-operation was essential and would see landowners rubbing shoulders with commoners as they worked the soil together and helped each other in times of trouble. Class barriers diminished, mateship grew and a new breed began to emerge, one that found life was better lived at a slower pace; and when misfortune struck, as it seemed to quite frequently, the best thing to do was laugh it off and get stuck in to fix it.

So, when Aussies say: "She'll be right," they really do mean it; and if concerted attempts fail to make it so, they won't be deterred, truly believing that luck or something will come along to give a hand. Pondering such complex issues can make a bloke thirsty enough to suggest: "Reckon it's about time for a drop of the amber fluid." To which his mate will doubtless reply: "You're not wrong, Blue." Advice like that can turn even the worst of days into a pearler.

I might just have a tinnie myself while I come up with some other stuff. There's quite a bit more, so feel free to drop in later and find out what else the land downunder has in store for you. The light's always on and someone will be home to welcome you.

Colloquialisms used in the above text:

Amber fluid: beer, specifically light-coloured, lager-type.

Assisted passage: the British Government's contribution towards the cost of a voyage to Australia.

Blue: a mistake ("He's made a blue"); a fight or heated disagreement; a person's name, especially someone with red hair and blue eyes (also ***Bluey***).

Crook: Sick, ill or under the weather. Ask for an explanation of the word and an Aussie might reply: "Not real well."
(Fair) cow: really horrible and hard to bear. "She's a fair cow of a day," can apply equally to one which is oppressively hot, or cold and raining in torrents.

Fair dinkum: genuine, without a shadow of doubt, honest, a perfect example of its kind. Probably originated in the goldfields where many Chinese were employed as waiters in bars and pubs. Dishonest proprietors would water-down liquor or give short measure and irate patrons who found out they were being cheated were likely to take it out on the waiter. To avoid repercussions, the waiter would assure his customer that the drinks he served were correct weight and unadulterated saying: "Fair dinkum." In other words, this is a fair drink. The phrase came to be used to describe any thing or person worth trusting implicitly; plus **dinkum** on its own, and **dinky-di**.

Flash: flamboyant, swanky, upper-class, loud (as in appearance); also a person who is over-confident and self-important, ("He's a bit too flash for my liking.")

Lollies: sweets or candy, not a frozen ice on a stick which is usually called an icy-pole or paddle-pop.

Mate: same as buddy or friend, but often said to a complete stranger. Tone of voice is probably the only way to tell if the term is amiable or reproachful; **cobber** is an older form, uncommon these days.

Pearler: the best, great, outstanding, wonderful, priceless.

Pie floater: a unique Adelaide snack which is a small bowl of pea soup with a meat pie sitting in it; can be enhanced by a generous squirt of tomato sauce.

Ron: an abbreviated form of later on.

She'll be right: it will turn out okay in the end. Can be applied to almost anything.

Splurge: splash out, or overindulge oneself (usually costing money).

Ticket of leave: a written declaration that a prisoner had served his or her sentence and was, under certain conditions, at liberty to seek shelter and employment within the colony. It did not, however, grant permanent freedom and could be rescinded for the slightest misdemeanor, seeing the unfortunate back behind bars again.

Tinnie: a can, usually of beer, which must be ice cold; also a small aluminium dingy, or runabout.

The Coathanger: The Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The Outback / The Never-Never: areas of native bush, desert, or anywhere away from town that seems uninhabited; also **Woop-Woop**.

The Rum Corps: the military force charged with keeping order in the colony following early settlement. The name derives from the Army's control of the import and distribution of this liquor. The common practice of payment in rum rather than money exerted a strong hold over civilians, many of whom would trade their goods for it, then drink away the proceeds, leaving themselves, once again, at the mercy of the Corps.

True Blue: a genuine Australian, born and bred, as opposed to a naturalised immigrant; also applied to objects, products, in fact anything that is unique to the country.

You right? Are you okay? Do you need serving, want something, can I help you in some way?

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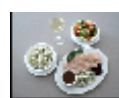
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