

An American in Oz
Discovering the Island Continent of Australia
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Excerpt:

PART ONE – Arrival Sydney and the Train to Perth

Day 4, Saturday December 11, 1999

My kangaroo count was low this morning. South Australia is the driest state on the driest continent on earth, not much can survive in the southern outback. The earth was colored in deep red, orange and purple hues. An occasional splash of green was thrown in for good measure. The wispy shrubbery, I figured out, is called spinifex. Eucalyptus trees were growing in seemingly impossible odds, and the spinifex reminded me of the sage bushes we have in the West with their dry twisted branches. Wild galahs, also known as pink cockatoos, appeared in the trees today. After my initial excitement, I realized they are as common as crows. The beautiful pink heads and the bright red coloring under their wings made a nice contrast to the outback landscape passing by.

Instead of giving in to the lulling sound of the train on the tracks and take a nap whenever the mood struck, I stayed awake from sunrise to sunset and finally got a good long night's sleep last night. It wasn't helping me get through the jet lag to sleep whenever I wanted to. It was actually making things worse. Ugh. Live and learn. I decided to keep the cabin chairs set up as seats throughout the day rather than collapsed into sleeping bunks with an open invitation to lie down. Whenever I retreated to our berth to write or sit quietly with my thoughts, the seats were a constant reminder to stay awake.

At 9:30 a.m., the train stopped in a small town called Cook, situated in the middle of nowhere. The sign posted

nearby read “Population 3 or 4.” If there was a road to this town, I didn’t see it, and if it did exist, it was a really, really long and lonely ride from who knows where. The area around Cook was what I imagined the outback to look like with its super flat terrain, no trees, and dry as a bone. There were a few homes scattered around and, surprisingly, one hospital. The sign at the hospital read,

*If you’re crook come to Cook.
Our hospital needs your help – get sick!*

(“Crook” means sick in Australian slang)

In addition to the unusual signs, within 50 feet of the railway tracks were two old jail cells. The single cells looked more like outhouses than anything else. With a population of three or four, and supposedly, a hospital to run, who has time to get into trouble? Something told me that the train pulling into the station was the only activity that town ever truly saw.

It was during our stop in Cook that I had another revelation, an *aha!* moment concerning our train. Up until that point in the journey, I hadn’t questioned what was in the other boxcars that we had no access to, and I decided to find out. As I walked up and down the red desert floor, I took a good look at the long line of cars. Some were filled with automobiles just like our auto trains back home. There were several large container cars obviously transporting cargo, and half a dozen other boxcars that will forever remain a mystery. But I wasn’t concerned with those. What interested me were the extra passenger carriages, the ones with berths so large a person could stand up when the beds were down and may have included a private bath. Dining cars where the food was surely an improvement over hot dogs, hamburgers and grilled cheese sandwiches, where tables were draped with linens, silverware and real china plates, and a different menu was presented at each meal. Today I learned about “First-Class.” *Now that’s the way to see the outback.*

After a short stop, most likely to deliver mail, water, and various supplies, the train slowly pulled out of Cook. Throughout the rest of the day and night we continued deeper into the Nullarbor Plain.

The name “Nullarbor” translated means “no trees.” Looking at the map, there wasn’t much at all between Tarcoola, South Australia, the eastern edge of the southern outback, and Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, at the western edge of the desert. I was beginning to believe Cook’s sole existence was to give us an interesting place to stretch our legs. The Nullarbor Plain is also where the Indian Pacific Railway holds the record for the longest stretch of perfectly straight track in the world at 478 km long (296.36 miles). Elementary math teaches us that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and with absolutely nothing, and I mean nothing, in the way, those railway surveyors did their job well.

I’ve noticed that Jeff has been adjusting to the time change quite nicely. Throughout the day, he could be found in the Nullarbor Lounge and much preferred it to the cramped quarters of our berth. He enjoys hanging out with the younger passengers telling stories and learning Australian slang (also known as ‘strine or “stroin”). I would go back and forth between the quiet of our cabin and the social scene. Each time I visited the group Jeff was ready with a new story or phrase. One ‘strine phrase was particularly memorable. Jeff and the others were in tears of laughter when he said to me, “Okay, okay, here’s one....I’m going to ‘have a slash.”” “Have a slash?” I asked, “What’s ‘have a slash?” My mind was racing with crazy thoughts. Jeff answered, “It means ‘take a piss!”” Australians sure have a strange way of expressing themselves, but I’m sure they say the same about us.