

Issue:
June
2010

Australia

Story and photography by Lisa Arcella

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For lots of people around the world, Australia is on the bucket list -- one of those places you have to one day figure out how to see before you die. And when many ultimately take the trip, Sydney and Melbourne are usually the first stops on the itinerary. But while those are certainly great cities (more on Sydney later), when Australians decide to take a walkabout in their homeland, they are far more inclined to choose the sunny state of Queensland.

Queensland encompasses a vast area in the northeastern part of the continent, from the city of Brisbane to Cairns and all of the amazing coastline in between including the Great Barrier Reef. Warm days and cool evenings are the norm year round making the state always a great place to vacation. And Australians



and New Zealanders love it here so much; they seem to be relocating in droves, with a migration estimated at over one thousand people per week.

The flight to Australia can be daunting from most places, but my 14 hour trek from LA was (almost)

enjoyable because of seats that fold down flat in Qantas business class. If you can afford it, it's definitely the way to go. My journey finally began in Brisbane after taking a quick hour and a half flight from Sydney.

The first stop after landing was the famed Australia Zoo (www.australiazoo.com.au) —which of course was made famous by the late Steve Irwin. The "Crocodile" lives on as a testament to the iconic wildlife expert and conservationist and offers 14 shows a day to see ferocious crocodiles up close and personal - but not too up close thankfully. There are also hundreds of other animals kept in a very clean, well organized and humane environment.

But the zoo visit was short lived. After all of that traveling I was anxious to kick off my shoes so I headed to the town of Noosa on The Sunshine Coast. It is virtually impossible not to relax at the beautiful Sheraton Noosa Resort & Spa (www.starwood.com/redirect/sheraton/noosa). The Lifestyle Spa Studios - there are seven here - all have large, private balconies, kitchenettes, big beautiful bathrooms with spa tubs and a sleek, modern design.

Just through the lobby and garden, you'll find yourself on the famous Hastings Street, the main shopping district of this up market beach town. Surfing, rock-climbing, mountain-biking, sea-kayaking, fishing, diving, snorkeling is all here, but mostly the vibe is quiet and stress-free. There isn't a t-shirt shop or hotdog stand in sight and young families and couples are just fine with that.



Hastings Street runs parallel to the beach and boardwalk, where there are several great restaurants including Berardo's Bistro on the Beach (www.berardos.com.au) which offers tasty Mediterranean and New Australian cuisine.



The seafood, beef and produce in Australia are some of the best in the world, if not the best. There's also an emphasis on free range organic and biodynamic cooking. All combined it adds up to be a food lover's paradise. Don't miss an opportunity to try the Barramundi or the unfortunately named, but very delicious Moreton Bay Bugs (kind of a cross between a crab and a lobster). Noosa can be pricey, so also check out the lovely little town of Mudjimba for some real local and less expensive flavor.

An easy two-hour drive leads me back to the cosmopolitan city of Brisbane. Surrounded by the winding Brisbane River, much of the city has a waterfront view and much of life here is spent outdoors. Bike paths, footbridges, and cafes are everywhere and there's a big botanical garden in the center of the city that shouldn't be skipped. There's also a thriving art scene. GoMA (the Gallery of Modern Art) is the country's largest modern art museum and features five stories of galleries including a number of terrific interactive exhibits for children. (gaq.qld.gov.au)

I stayed in two very good and very different hotels in Brisbane. The Sofitel Brisbane (www.sofitelbrisbane.com.au) has a big, international feel, and guests at its luxury club level have access to the executive lounge, which offers incredible 360-degree views of the entire city.

While there, I visited Stephanie's Spa Retreat for perhaps the most unique spa experiences I have ever had. The Opal Rasul Temple is its signature treatment and is said to provide an uplifting soul-strengthening journey. In a Moorish-tiled room, several body and face masks are provided for you to slather all over your body. Soon the room is enveloped in an herbal steam and all you can see are the twinkling lights above you that look like tiny stars. That's followed by a gentle rain shower until you are fully detoxed. An hour later I was puddle of relaxation with glowing skin. (www.stephaniessparetreat.com.au).

Across town, I also stayed at the Emporium Hotel, guaranteed to appeal to those with a sense of fashion and an eye for design. Located in the hipster Fortitude Valley neighborhood, the luxury boutique hotel has a gleaming red glass and chrome lobby and gorgeous suites with just about the biggest in-room flat screen TV I have ever seen. (www.emporiumhotel.com.au) Also check out the Bell Époque cafe next door, for a little taste of France Down Under.



My two favorite excursions in Australia were just outside of the city. From behind the arts complex I boarded a MV Mirimar Cruise (www.mirimar.com) for a leisurely cruise up the river to the Lone Pine Sanctuary - the world's first and largest koala rescue center. Of course, koalas and kangaroos are old news for



Australians, but I was so excited to hold one of those fuzzy little bears in my arms I felt like it was Christmas and my birthday on the same afternoon. And, by the way, they are in fact not bears but marsupials and at Lone Pine they are everywhere, including hanging out sleeping in the trees that surround the on sight café.

It is indeed a sanctuary more than a zoo, with an open area to walk among and feed kangaroos, emus, wallabies and multicolored lorikeet birds, plus many other native species. There's also a topnotch sheep dog show that gives a little peak at what outback life is like. (www.koala.net)

Another must see in Brisbane is the Tangalooma Island Resort on Moreton Island, which is about an hour boat ride away. The resort is a popular weekend getaway spot for locals, who can partake in dozens of activities from tobogganing down huge sand dunes to scuba diving around a shipwreck. But for me the real reason to come here was a chance to see the wild dolphins that turn up almost every night at dusk to be hand fed by the resort's staff and guests. The dolphins come right up to shoreline and actually line up in an orderly way down the beach waiting for their free meal. It's an amazing sight. (www.tangalooma.com)

Leaving Brisbane, I headed south towards the Gold Coast, but first it here was a fun afternoon at Tamborine Mountain in the Hinterland. If your vision of Australia is what's been popularized by the media - a land where there are few trees and lots of red dirt - Mount Tamborine will completely change that perception. Lush farmlands and rolling pastures lead to an artistic little hamlet of art galleries and wineries set on the edge of a rainforest.

Toward the end of Long Road, also known as the Gallery Walk is Witches Chase Cheese Company, which is a great place to have lunch or dinner. The complex houses an open-air restaurant, a microbrewery where you can sample a variety

of local beers and a fine cheese shop, which produces lots of award winning and delicious cheeses. It's a must stop. (www.witcheschasecheese.com.au).

Australia is also a wine lover's paradise. The Mount Tamborine Winery & Homestead (www.mttamborinewinery.com) on the Gallery walk is a great place to sample some of Queensland's finest. I particularly loved the chocolate-infused port - yum. If your tastes tend to lean more toward spirits, you must visit a local character Michael Ward at the [Tamborine Mountain Distillery](#).

Even if you never touch the stuff, you should meet Michael. Lots of unique local flowers and fruit have helped this small family run distillery create a large and delicious variety of Schnapps, liquors and brandies. He'll let you sample before you buy, but a word to the wise - do keep in mind travel restrictions that may have you leaving your precious purchases here at the airline customs counters.



After sampling all this alcohol, it may be wise to spend a night or two here. Even if you never touch a drop, you won't be sorry if you don't stay at the stunning Songbirds Rainforest Retreat. Individual villas in this lush, tropical setting provide for one of the most romantic getaways imaginable. (www.songbirds.com.au)

Only about 45 minutes away from Mount Tamborine is Surfer's Paradise, but the terrain and vibe are completely different. Suddenly there's a stretch of gleaming high rises, night clubs, a great expanse of beach frequented by many tourists and of course lots of local surfers. Race fans also make a pilgrimage for the annual Indy competitions that actually run through the local streets once a year.

Just down the road is my last and most luxurious stop in Queensland - the incredible Palazzo Versace. High style is what you would expect from the world's first hotel to bear the name of the famous design house (another is soon to premiere in Dubai) starting with the Ferrari parked outside the front door. Inside the gleaming lobby greets you with an intricate mosaic of the Versace signature Medusa logo and a huge chandelier that came from the late Gianni Versace's home. Everywhere you turn there are gorgeous bouquets and beyond the lounge there are views of the multiple pools (including one with a sandy beach and another indoor adults-only grotto) and dozens of fountains beyond.



There are 205 rooms, decorated from top to bottom in Versace furniture, linens, crystal and fine china. Plus there are condos, three restaurants, two bars, and a state of the art spa. It was everything you would expect a five star property to be, but with a distinctly warm and friendly Australian charm.

(www.palazzoversace.com) Next door to the Versace is a luxury shopping mall called Marina Mirage that's worth visiting. Being surrounded by all this beauty will definitely have you wanting to upgrade your wardrobe!

After a wonderful dinner at the hotel, its time to bid a sad farewell to Queensland and travel back to Sydney and more wonders down under before I head home.

IF YOU GO:

Of course Sydney is the most popular tourist destination in Australia. If you are planning a trip to Queensland and the Sunshine Way, you'll definitely want to spend at least a few days in Sydney. Here's some of our favorite-don't miss stops:

STAY:

You know that any hotel that offers you Bulgari soap and shampoo is going to be a high end luxury property. We loved the Establishment Hotel. It's small, very sophisticated but never stuffy. Our beautiful suite featured a sunken tub that looked out over the living area and raised platform bed. It's also centrally located and an easy walk to many of the favorite tourist venues. www.establishmenthotel.com

Next door is the huge Establishment club, which had practically everyone up and dancing to a rumba beat on the night I wandered through. Upstairs is the more low key Hemmesphere Bar. With its comfortable leather lounges, it's a great place to have an after-dinner cognac. www.merivale.com

Just up the street is Ivy—the hottest nightclub in town and a favorite of Lady Gaga and other musicians whenever they are touring down under. There's also a huge complex of restaurants and lounges here. Don't miss it. www.merivale.com

EAT:

A virtual who's who of Aussie celebs, from Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman to Barry Humphries (aka Dame Edna) have lined up to eat at Swell restaurant at Bronte Beach. They come in part for the great modern Australian cuisine (they serve a casual lunch and breakfast too) and in part because of the charms of the oh-so-friendly owner Sandy Bruns. The restaurant is right across the street from the beach and there's a wonderful coastal walk that will lead you to Bondi Beach. www.swellrestaurant.com.au

At Bondi, check out the up market Icebergs Dining Room and Bar (definitely make a reservation if you plan on going for dinner). Australia is known for its fantastic seafood and we're thinking that whoever said that must have eaten here. Plus the views of the ocean are just about perfect from every seat in the house. www.idrb.com

Take incredible local seafood and combine it with the best in modern Italian cooking and you'll find Otto Ristorante on the pier in Woolloomooloo. The tuna seared in black peppercorn and honey glaze was the best we've ever tasted. Russell Crowe has a home at the complex and we're told its not unusual to see him jogging by. www.otto.net.au

DO:

If you love fashion and want to find that one really unique piece to complete your wardrobe, you won't want to miss the Fashion Secrets tour that takes you on a guided tour of Australia's established and up and coming designers. The 3-hour walk is \$95 (including lunch and a glass of champagne) and takes you through the hipster enclave of Paddington where hot designers like Lisa Ho (a favorite of

JLo and Tyra) and Camilla (Beyonce is a loyal client) are just down the block from Collette Dinigon and designer to watch Hanna McNicol. We were excited to run into milliner to the stars Neil Grigg in his very cool little shop, where he was busy creating hats for brides and princesses alike (and some brides who think they are princesses!) There are also tours for design and food lovers too, and the best thing is that if you have a limited amount of time, Urban Walkabout does all the work for you and helps you discover gems you may never find on your own.
www.urbanwalkabouttours.com

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