

Dear Friends,

A while ago I published an article in the journal of the Australian Heraldry Society.¹ The Secretary of the Society invited me to speak to the group if I were ever in the neighborhood, which seemed unlikely at the time. But I had long wanted to visit Australia, and this invitation inclined me to attend the biennial flag-scholars' conference opening in Sydney on August 31, 2015.² Also there was a friendly rivalry with a college classmate to see who would get first to all the inhabited continents. I had never been to Australia, but he had never been to Africa, so we were tied 5-5. I had cousins in Sydney whom I had hardly ever seen. And, of course, there was the country count to consider, stalled for more than a year at 75. I myself was past 70, and had stopped buying green bananas. No time like the present for septuagenarians! Do it while you can! So I bought a ticket, and flew off into the sky.

FIJI



My first stop was in Fiji, which is far away but not as far away as Australia; it was helpful to break up the long journey. But who am I kidding? The real purpose of the Fiji stop was to add another country, and so



Fiji became country #76. Its beautiful flag is shown at left; at right are its arms, created as colonial arms by the College of Arms in London in 1908 (note the English lion at the top of the shield, holding a pearl).³ There have been four or five coups in Fiji since 1987, rooted ultimately in conflict between ethnic Fijians and Fijians descended from Indians imported in colonial times to work the sugar fields. The present (ethnic Fijian) strongman, Commodore Bainimarama, who came to power in a coup but whose regime is now *very* shakily constitutional, has decreed that the national flag, dating from independence in 1970, must be scrapped because it looks too British. After a national competition a blue-ribbon commission selected a number of designs for a new flag, including several excellent ones, but then the regime intervened, eliminated all the best choices, added some clunky awkward substitutes, and postponed the replacement process (twice so far). The outcome is uncertain, and I hope the old flag is never replaced.

But I digress. I left on August 22, skipped August 23 entirely because of the International Date Line, and landed at Nadi (pronounced *Nandi*) on August 24. I rented a car and drove

¹ The article, "Coins as a Heraldic Resource," can be read [here](#).

² The 26th International Congress of Vexillology, informally called ICV26.

³ The motto says, in Fijian, *Fear God and Honor the Queen*. Good advice for everyone.

to my hotel, a very elegant, comfortable establishment a short distance away. The main island of Fiji, Viti Levu, is about the size of the big island of Hawaii, larger than Delaware but smaller than Connecticut. There are many intensely scenic spots on Viti Levu, surf breaking on secluded beaches, ocean sunsets seen through waving palms, etc., but I didn't see any of them. This is not Fiji's fault – I didn't look for them, but just explored around the place where I found myself.

There is only one main road on Viti Levu, going around the outer edge of the island. I drove north the first day, exploring the minor roads leading to the interior. What I saw (below left) looked tropical but not especially scenic: red earth and green leaves, some palms and trees I could not identify, patches of sugar cane, some cattle behind rickety fences. Rural but not dramatic.



The second day I drove south, finding more or less the same thing, and visited Nadi, the local town, a dreary and notably unscenic collection of cement buildings (above right) with some Indian strip malls on the outskirts. Nothing to write home about, although I am now writing about it anyway. I hardly saw the ocean at all.

Nevertheless I am glad I went to Fiji, and not only for the number. Fijian people are remarkably handsome, especially the men in their *sulu* skirts (right). Everyone was extremely friendly, and not just inside the tourism bubble. The standard greeting is *bula*, to which the response is also *bula*, making Fiji sound a little like a Yale pep rally. I don't doubt that if I had had more time in Fiji, and had sought out the lush tropical forests and idyllic beaches the tourist literature promises, I could have found them without difficulty, and slurped down many a pineapple cocktail by the seaside. Maybe next time. But this time I went next door to the airport and flew away to Sydney.



AUSTRALIA

My first stop in Australia (country #77!) was its metropolis Sydney, capital of the state of New South Wales. It was quite a shock. People had told me that I would find Australia like the United States in 1950, or perhaps 1870, which led me to expect a lively but unsophisticated place, a pioneer society suitable for patronizing assessment by a visitor from a more advanced culture. Instead I found a city (and as I would learn, a country) considerably more advanced than the United States. Instead of America in 1950, it seemed more like what America would be in 2025 if we ever got our act together, which it doesn't seem we ever will.

Sydney is a happening place. Because I needed to be close to the conference venue, I stayed in a hotel in the downtown business district. The district hummed – people seemed to move more quickly and purposefully than in San Francisco or even New York, and by American standards they were dressed up. Women wore skirts and dresses; men wore ties and spiffy business suits with narrow lapels. There was very little of the track suits and torn jeans that still pass for fashionable in the United States. (Everybody seemed to be smoking, too.) Traffic was heavy but the streets were clean and not choked. On the sidewalks, in the streets, everything *moved*.



The architecture of downtown Sydney (and other districts too, I later found), is an appealing mixture of old and new. There are a lot of buildings that look like Victorian and Edwardian London, before the Germans (and later the British themselves) knocked most of it down. (Left: the Queen Victoria Building, watercolor by [Nancy McAlpin](#)). There are also British-style buildings of older design, and terrace houses with cast-iron balconies that reminded me of New Orleans. There are substantial British- and American-style office buildings in Art Deco and mid-century styles. One secret of Sydney architecture is that these older buildings are mostly undamaged (unlike older buildings in New York, which are almost all brutally vandalized at ground level), and are mixed

in with modern and post-modern towers (some of the post-modern ones are pretty good).

At some point, not too late to matter, Sydney decided to stop demolishing its old architecture and preserve it instead. So good but small old buildings still survive in the downtown business district and elsewhere; the Sydney urban streetscape became a distinctive mix of old and new and very new, respectful of all styles and harmonious despite (or because of) its diversity in a way I have not often seen equaled.



Downtown Sydney has lovely parks – they have ibises (left) the way we have pigeons. At first I stayed close to home, but then began to explore other districts. I passed through many of them on a sightseeing tour in a double-decker bus, and went by taxi to meet with people in other areas of the city. Everywhere I went seemed busy and thriving, full of commerce and amenities and interesting buildings and public art.



I asked about slums, but no one would admit that there were any in Sydney. I took an excursion boat on the magnificent harbor, and later two ferries, and Sydney looked as handsome and advanced from the water as it did from the land. (Sydney has one of the most extensive urban waterfronts anywhere, full of straits and islands and coves – as in Istanbul, a person could take days exploring it by ferry.) Flying in over the city I saw a view just like the one at left.

Discovering in Sydney a 100% First World city, vibrant and active and very extensive, complete with plentiful taxicabs and theatres and skyscrapers and post-modern skyline and every mod con, all run in English, I felt I had suddenly discovered an unexpected extension of the Western World. It was as if, in California at the tip-end of the W.W., I opened a secret door and found a whole new wing I had never known about. The Western World was a lot bigger than I'd thought! Sydney was no colonial backwater. Looking down Elizabeth Street from Hyde Park (!) reminded me of Chicago. The inner so-called suburbs (actually part of the core city) felt like a combination of London and Los Angeles. And everything seemed to work a lot better than it did at home. This brave new world feeling was reinforced as I saw more of the country.



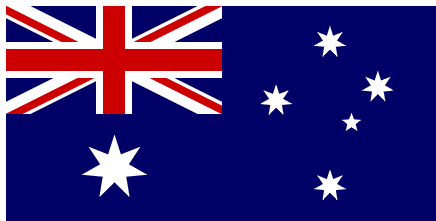
One of my main purposes in coming to Australia was to speak to the Australian Heraldic Society on “Philatelic Covers as a Source of Heraldic Art.” A *cover* is a technical term for an envelope that has passed through the mail; a *philatelic cover* is one designed to appeal to stamp collectors. The special design on the left side of a cover is called a *cachet* – my

study collection of more than 4500 such covers focuses on cachets of heraldic or related design.⁴ The cover on the page above was issued in 1960 to mark the wedding of King Baudouin of the Belgians to a Spanish noblewoman. Covers are a good source of heraldic art because, unlike most other contemporary heraldic designs (for bookplates, or notepaper, or wall plaques, or tomb sculptures), they are not made individually for an elite market but are mass products, printed by the thousands and sold for a dollar or two. I prepared a lecture and slide show to illustrate this topic for the Australian heraldists.

I had all my slides in PowerPoint on my laptop, duplicated on a flashdrive. I got to the venue an hour early to make sure all the equipment worked, but it didn't. All the slides came out stretched and distorted, on the computer and on the projection screen. The Secretary of the Heraldic Society and I tried everything – changing computers, changing settings, multiple rebootings – but nothing worked. The presentation would have failed abjectly if all the



images were distorted. Finally there was nothing to do but pray. I leaned back in my chair and sang the GANESH mantra in a loud, clear voice.⁵ Then we turned the computers on one more time. The images were still just as distorted on the computer screens, but now they came perfectly out of the projector. There was no explanation for this – well, there was *one* explanation!⁶ Everything went smoothly after that; I gave my talk, signed some books⁷, and everyone had a good time.



This was on Friday August 28; the Flag Congress began on Sunday night. This seems like a good place to show the lovely dignified Australian flag, with the Southern Cross, and Australia's lively national arms dating from 1912 (with the flag badges of the six states within an ermine border).



⁴ Look [here](#) for a gallery of heraldic cachets.

⁵ OM GANG GANIPATIYE NEMAH!

⁶ *Om Ganipati!* Above: a painting of Sri Lord GANESHA reading, by [Gujjarappa B G](#). For more on Lord GANESHA, Large-Eared Lord, the Moon-Completed One, auspicious and powerful, remover of obstacles, patron of learning and literature, look [here](#).

⁷ [Emblems of the Indian States](#) (2011) and [The Double Eagle](#) (2014). Copies still available!

The Congress was a more-or-less typical scholarly conference, better run than most, with learned papers delivered one after another over four days of well-organized tightly-run sessions. There were delegates from every continent, and it was a pleasure to see veteran flag-mavens I knew only from their writings. Many of the papers were very interesting indeed to those who are interested, which I accept is not everyone. We had detailed reports from people involved in the flag-revision efforts in Fiji and New Zealand. Australia too has a movement toward revising its flag (to get rid of the British union jack in the canton), and those opposing revision insist that no change is possible because “Australians fought and died under that flag,” especially at [Gallipoli](#). One of the best papers challenged that claim with documents and photographs from the Boer War and both World Wars, proving that while the Australian blue ensign shown above was indeed used at some headquarters installations, fighting and dying was done under the red ensign, or the British flag, or no flag at all. From World War I anyway, Commonwealth forces did not carry colours into battle, to prevent their capture (or casualties in defending them). On one of our lunch breaks we trooped to a nearby square to observe Australian Flag Day, including a performance of *Waltzing Matilda* and other national airs by a high school orchestra.



I did some tourism in Sydney, and spent quite a while at the lovely Art Deco ANZAC Memorial, where the dome is filled with 120,000 gold stars (left), one for each New South Wales volunteer in World War I.⁸ I spent a pleasant afternoon in the Museum of Sydney, the city history museum, studying a scale model of the

First Fleet, which landed the convict settlement party in 1788. I visited people and sat on the quay near the ferry pier watching the cockatoos; a rainbow lorikeet tried to drink out of my glass.⁹



⁸ ANZAC stands for the [Australian and New Zealand Army Corps](#), whose service in the War was crucial in forming the Australian national identity.

⁹ I would have let her do this but was afraid of [psittacosis](#), which people can get from parakeets. A lovely little bird, but who knows where she had been?

Also I visited the famous Opera House (below), which is every bit as dramatic and beautiful as it is said to be, one of those rare structures that live up to a great reputation.¹⁰ In the National Museum I discovered the secret of the Opera House – after many tries the architect Jørn Utzon hit on the idea of taking all the curves from the surface of the same sphere.¹¹



And then it was time to pile into a rented car and take off for Canberra, the national capital. I drove along the southbound freeway (they call them that in Australia) until I was well free of the city's suburbanizing force, and then turned off onto a local road to look for a cup of tea. There I saw the famous statue of the Big Merino Sheep (below), which I had heard of and seen in pictures but was not looking for. It was monstrous and imposing, as intended, and seemed to stand in an impassive but immovable way for the quadrillions of sheep in Australia.¹²



This part of New South Wales looked like England – rainy, overcast, gray above but intensely green below even though it was wintertime in the Southern Hemisphere. Smallish fenced pastures, an occasional glimpse of a valley spread out below a distant long hill. But the pastures became broader and more spacious than in England. Horse paddocks. Hay. Cattle (perhaps only trillions rather than quadrillions, but definitely no shortage). The trees and shrubs and ground cover did not look English,

¹⁰ I saw it from many vantage points: on land, on the water, from the air, up close and even inside (I saw *The Tempest* there), and it is dazzling in every view.

¹¹ “I call this my ‘key to the shells,’” he wrote, “because it solves all the problems of construction by opening up for mass production, precision in manufacture and simple erection, and with this geometrical system I attain full harmony between all the shapes in this fantastic complex.”

¹² And I do mean *quadrillions*, although I admit this is only an estimate. I would have counted the sheep, but I was driving and couldn't risk falling asleep.

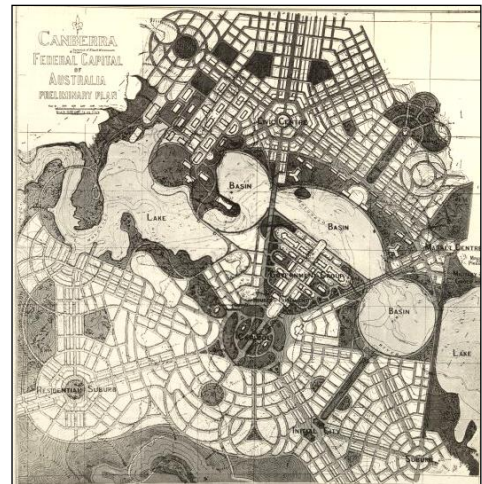
though – most were are unfamiliar. Pine, and eucalyptus, but also trees I didn't recognize. Were those the famous Australian gum trees? How about these, with the white bark? Or those, that look like cypress but have lost all their leaves? Hard to tell. Birds, too, were unfamiliar, and so were their raucous calls.

Magnificently engineered highways; immaculate verges. The small towns looked sort of familiar, especially the storefront marquees; unlike the shattered small towns in the United States, though, shuttered businesses were rare (in NSW anyway). As it grew darker and wetter, I drove toward shelter at the mean, depressing, cramped Ibis Budget Hotel in suburban Watson, ACT.¹³

Canberra was designed from scratch by two American architects, Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion Mahoney Griffin. The basic plan (right) was selected in 1912, after a competition; the plan was changed somewhat before the Australian Parliament moved there from Melbourne in 1927. The original design (right) shows a street plan created entirely from Walter Burley Griffin's head, and indeed he wrote:

I have planned a city that is not like any other in the world. I have planned it not in a way that I expected any government authorities in the world would accept. I have planned an ideal city – a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future.

Canberra still feels that way, at least in its official governmental and diplomatic quarters as seen from a tour bus and later from my car. Wide distances that look lovely on the map are sterile and unwelcoming on the ground; it is much too far to walk from one place to another. The grand ceremonial avenue is lined with imposing statuary groups that are almost impossible to stop and examine. Many of the government buildings, and the embassies, are fine to look at, but have to be approached in a car (or, in the case of embassies these days, not at all).¹⁴

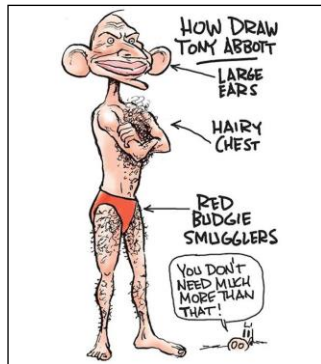


¹³ ACT means Australian Capital Territory, not a state but a much bigger equivalent of our District of Columbia. If you are searching for a reason to accumulate lots of money, a good one to start with would be that you would never have to find yourself in an Ibis Budget Hotel. What more reason would anyone need? Even in the Ibis, though, everyone was very nice to me, waiving charges without being asked.

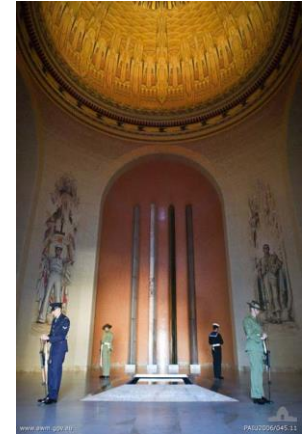
¹⁴ At the time Canberra was indeed "a city ... not like any other in the world." Other such monster designs have since been built (Brasília, for example, and Chandigarh), and continue to be built (like Naypyitaw in Burma and Astana in Kazakhstan) by autocratic governments who thus reveal their preference for grandiosity over the experience of actual people. Washington, although

(footnote continues →)

I took a tour of the Australian Parliament, all modern tapestries and rare woods, and sat in on Prime Minister's Question Time, starring lean, muscular Tony Abbott (left),¹⁵ whose air of relaxed command made him seem like a man in charge rather than one who would lose his job in a party coup just a week later. I went to the National



Museum and learned all about the [great rabbit infestation](#) – 24 rabbits imported in 1859 to provide hunting sport for settlers grew in 90 years to 600 million, who devoured plants and crops and ringbarked trees and drove competing species to extinction. They haven't solved the rabbit problem yet.¹⁶



I spent an afternoon at the famous War Memorial, which has a first-rate military museum and also a high domed chamber for the tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier (left). Every day at quarter to five they post an honor guard and hold a moving memorial service in a colonnade outside, by a reflecting pool, remembering the Australian war dead. A piper pipes a lament and a bugler plays The Last Post.¹⁷ It was Navy Day, so an Australian admiral was there wearing a wide expanse of gold on his cuffs, and some very fancy decorations.

War memorials are good as far as they go, but what I most wanted to see in Australia were kangaroos. The most likely spot, according to the Tourist Office, was the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve – I was advised to go in the late afternoon, when the kangaroos are out grazing, so I drove from the Ibis to Tidbinbilla more than 30 miles away, only to find that late afternoon may be convenient for kangaroos but can be hard on tourists as the gates close at six. Nevertheless the friendly warden let me in, and sure

(footnote continues ...)

- purpose-built from a single plan, has not developed into a place like these, perhaps because it was built so much earlier, on a more reasonable scale, and not by a dictatorship.
- ¹⁵ Cartoon by Mark Knight.
- ¹⁶ They tried guns. They tried traps. They tried ferrets. They tried fences, and gas. They even tried releasing viruses and bacilli to create rabbit plagues. There are still many, *many* millions more rabbits in Australia than most people there find convenient.
- ¹⁷ [The Last Post](#) is used like our Taps, but is much longer and more complex musically, and is often followed by another bugle call known as The Rouse. Using The Rouse, in other circumstances a wake-up call, to close remembrance services is a symbol of Christian resurrection. Look [here](#) for a video of the daily service at the Australian War Memorial, including The Last Post.

enough there was a whole hillside full of kangaroos, grazing and hopping around visiting each other. I watched entranced from my car. A few times I gave a quick toot on my horn, and saw 100 long brown ears rise up in unison.



After the kangaroos there was nothing to do but leave town, so I headed south, back in New South Wales but east of ACT, along the Great Dividing Range.¹⁸ Like the route to Tidbinbilla, this was brown and sere (it was early September, equivalent to our early March), and crowded with small hillocks. Some of them, shaped like cones, lent a Dr. Seuss quality to the landscape (below left).



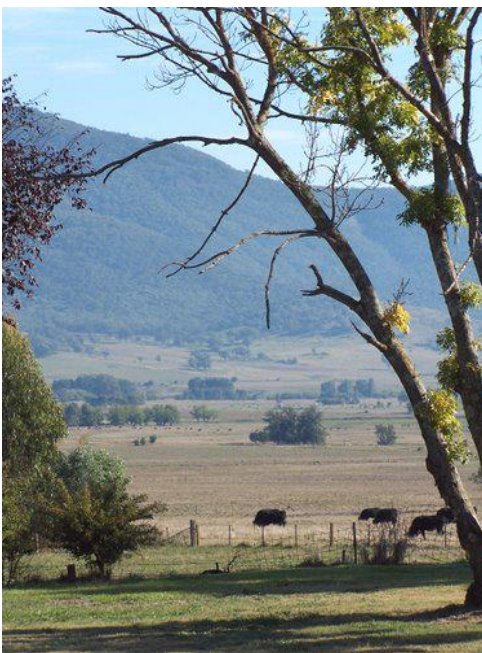
After a few hours I turned west to pass through the Snowy Mountains (above right). The climate had mostly been so mild and temperate, despite its being winter, that I had my doubts whether there would really be any snow. But there was plenty of it (fortunately not on the road), and many spectacular vistas and sylvan interludes. The Snowy Mountains form a part of the Dividing Range called the Australian Alps. Although they are not high by American standards (the highest peak, Mt. Kosciuszko, is 7310 feet [2228 meters]), the Australians are very proud of them, and go there to ski and hike and climb and play in the snow. It took many hours to thread my way along winding roads and over one-lane bridges, and I was dazzled all the way.

¹⁸ Or Australian Cordillera. It divides the coastal lowlands from the eastern uplands, where Canberra is situated.

I had planned to come out of the mountains near the border with the state of Victoria, so I could cross a bridge and check off another Australian state. The Murray River forms the boundary in that region; arising in the mountains, it becomes (with the Darling and their tributaries) a mighty river system watering most of southeast Australia (see map at right).¹⁹



Although I did spend the night in Victoria, most of this part of my trip was in New South Wales. Captain Cook named it that in 1770 because from his ship the sight of the rocky shore reminded him of *old* south Wales. The interior reminded me of south Wales too – as noted intensely green, full of sheep in fenced pastures and on distant hills. But in the Murray Basin it was as if the view had been magically expanded, and fields and pastures that would have been small enclosures in Wales reached to the horizon. Flowering trees in pink, white, apple-green and vibrant yellow; fields of golden rapeseed. I didn't take many good pictures of the Murray Basin, and the pictures I can find by others do not do it justice. But it seemed to me the most beautiful, opulent agricultural landscape I had seen anywhere in the world.



¹⁹ I crossed the river and entered Victoria more or less where the Murray River label is pointing on the map.

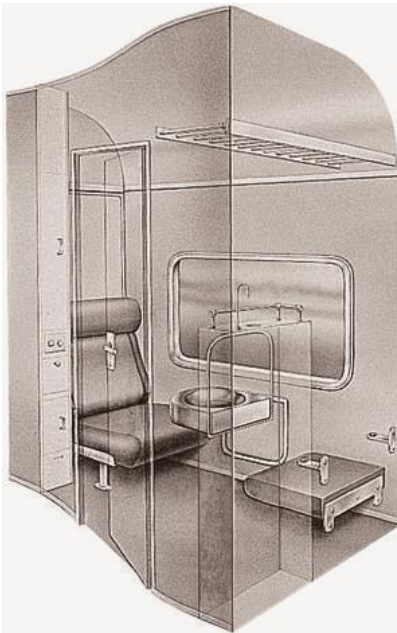


I made my way slowly up the center of New South Wales. The trip took a day longer than I had intended because I stuck fanatically to back roads, working hard with maps and GPS to avoid being channeled onto state highways. Although it took longer that way, it was worth the effort to mosey along among the fields and forests, on roads sometimes only a single lane wide. Single-lane roads in Norway can be a terrifying amusement-park ride as cars zoom past blind curves without slowing down.²⁰ Australia was a lot mellower, perhaps because unlike Norway, where a one-lane road is often the only one around, there was very little traffic on these country lanes. Instead of an amusement-park ride, it felt more like a relaxed, non-competitive video game. As I steered around curves and over hills and across narrow bridges, the difference between the little car icon on the GPS and my actual car on the road began to fade away. This may sound slightly scary, but it felt more as if I had taken the smallest *soupaçon* of LSD with breakfast, just enough to add a touch of sparkle to the day.

Finally the little back roads gave out, and I had to join the main stream of traffic, so I hunkered down and drove through the Blue Mountains (not blue) and through Sydney to the beach suburb of Bondi (rhymes with *blonde sky*). I had arranged to stay at what seemed like a dignified old hotel fronting on the beach. It looked great, but a foolish management had decided it would be even greater if they pumped very loud disco music into *every single* public space, leaving no niche of quiet anywhere. And not just ordinary disco, either, but the mindless thumping robotic kind without even any music, but just a bone-shaking, mechanically repeated pulse. How lucky it was that my idyll through New South Wales should have taken an extra day, reducing to an unavoidable minimum my time in the ruined Hotel Bondi. I managed to sleep, with plugs in my ears (the relentless pulse shook even my distant sealed bedroom for most of the night). The next morning I drove back to Sydney, returned my car, and took a taxi to the central train station to board the Indian Pacific for Perth.

²⁰ As described in my [letter from Norway](#) last year.

The [Indian Pacific](#) is one of the famous trains of the world. The route goes all the way across the continent, from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean (via Adelaide on what



the Australians call the [Southern Ocean](#)), a distance of 2704 miles [4352 km] over four days and three nights. It was a long train with two locomotives, and I settled into a small private cabin (left).²¹ Cramped but comfortable, the cabin was smaller than a cell in San Quentin, but the view was much better. I sat on whichever seat faced forward (the train reversed at Adelaide) and watched Australia pass by.

The dining car was too far away for convenient access, but they brought me excellent meals in my cabin. In 1962 I took a trans-continental trip from New York to California (and back from Seattle to Boston), and one of the great amenities was an observation car with picture windows and a clear dome. The closest thing to this on the Indian Pacific, though, was a bar car set up like a pub –

banquettes facing in, so people could socialize over their pints, but not a single seat with a view out the window. After one quick visit I stayed away from the bar car too, and kept to my cabin.

As far as Adelaide it was mostly suburbs and farmland. We had a six-hour layover in Adelaide (in South Australia, another state). A walking tour was provided, but it would have been too strenuous for me, so I got into a taxi at the station and asked the driver (an emigré engineer from Pakistan) to show me around. Adelaide has some of the features of Sydney – clean, well-organized, with an appealing mixture of old and new buildings and open space – but unlike Sydney it is a provincial town I would probably have found rather dull if I had stayed there long enough to be bored. But soon I was back at the station (wholly owned by the railroad, including the cafeteria where dinner was free with a coupon), waiting to reboard. Above: a map of the route.

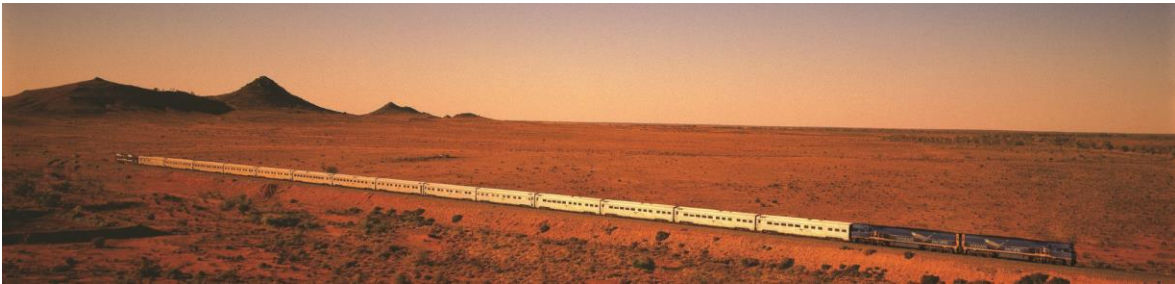


²¹ The table folds down, and then the bed is lowered from behind the main seat and rests on the other smaller seat. There is a washstand with running but not potable water in the corner opposite the main seat.



After Adelaide came the [Nullarbor Plain](#), a vast flat slab of limestone with reddish soil, low-lying saltbush and bluebush shrubs, and *nothing* else for hundreds of miles.²² The word *Nullarbor* means *no trees*; there was no road either (except a dirt track for railroad maintenance), no animals I could see (there are said to be some camels, but none visible), all *absolutely* flat and featureless except for the shrubs stretching to the vanishing point

in all directions, as far as the eye could see for a day and a half. We chugged along the longest absolutely straight stretch of railway in the world (297 miles, 478 km). There was no Internet or phone service, and when the train manager went on the public address system and announced that Australia suddenly had a new prime minister, no one knew what had happened, or could learn about it for another two days.



Finally we arrived in Perth (another state: Western Australia), and I left the train and took another taxi to another rental car and drove off to another suburban hotel (as in Canberra, there was no particular reason to stay in the city center). Western Australia, especially from my vantage point half a block from the ocean, seemed a lot like Southern California only much more so. People there say that W.A. has the climate California *thinks* it has, and indeed when I was there every day was clear and mild, not a cloud in the sky, the ocean an unrealistically perfect sapphire blue. The roof-tiles were red and unweathered; the streets were immaculate and empty, dotted with planters of bright green cactus and palm. It was like an ideal San Diego of the mind. Here are some pictures of my suburb, called (amazingly) North Beach.

²² The Nullarbor Plains Xeric Shrubland Ecoregion is said to rest on the largest single limestone formation in the world.



In Perth I took yet another bus tour.²³ The city is jammed with new construction, a lot of it focused on tourism. Infrastructure was gleamingly new (or maybe it was just so well cared for that it *seemed* new). There was a lot of advanced post-modern architecture, some of it quite good. I took an excursion boat down the romantically named Swan River to the busy Indian Ocean port of Fremantle, and back again past parks and marinas and opulent mansions. Right: a witty street sculpture from Perth.



After Perth I headed north along the Indian Ocean. Suburbs grew further apart and were succeeded by beachfront settlements, mostly built around marinas or boat-launching areas and showing signs of intensive development. Tourism had been the obsession in Perth, but here it was all about real estate. Signs everywhere implored, indeed *commanded* me to BUY BUY BUY HERE NOW! The beachfront communities had the same scrubbed groomed new-out-of-the-box look as the Perth suburbs. It was more Southern California than Southern California could ever hope to be. Not that that's a *bad* thing, exactly, but I would have welcomed a rundown lived-in fishing town like those strung along the Texas Gulf Coast. If I'd found one of those I would have settled right in and stayed there for my remaining time in Australia.

²³

These tours are an excellent way to get oriented and have at least a quick view of all the standard-issue sights of any city. Wherever you are, there is usually narration in English; often they have an open upper deck with an excellent view. Trips rarely last more than 90 minutes. Many companies offer the chance to "hop on, hop off," but that is not an efficient way to do tourism, and leaves you spending unpredictable blocks of time waiting for the next bus. It is better (and sometimes cheaper too) to stay on the bus for the complete tour and then return later on your own to places you'd like to explore.

But since I didn't find one, I chose the town of Jurien Bay, about 133 miles [223 km] north of Perth, because it had a reasonably comfortable-looking motel with an attached restaurant, found and confirmed on the shiny new smart phone I had bought for just such a use. Jurien Bay was yet another beachfront town, with a beach and a pier but also some civilian services; the motel had an active restaurant and bar with Guinness on tap.²⁴ So I



stayed there for the rest of my time, and rested up, and did some rural exploring. This is not a very interesting part of the country, away from the coast – it might have been different further north, but Australia is a whole continent and distances are enormous. Here are maps comparing Australia to the



contiguous United States (about the same size), and to Europe (all of Europe could fit comfortably into Australia with room for more).

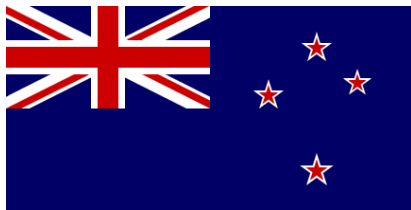
Finally it was time to leave, so I drove down the Indian Ocean Highway (where, ironically, you can hardly ever catch more than a fugitive glimpse of the ocean itself) to the Perth Airport, which was shielded from view like some mystical Himalayan kingdom by a carapace of highway construction and road-closed barriers and misleading signs. I finally had to get them to talk me in on the phone. And then I left for New Zealand, on the red-eye to Auckland,²⁵ taking with me an extremely positive impression of Australia. I can't remember when I have been so impressed before. I love America because it is my own country. I love India, but at least half for its chaos and madness and disorder. I love Britain and France and Italy, but as I thought about it I realized I love them as much for what they *were* as for what they *are*. But Australia – though I hadn't been there quite long enough to *love* it, yet, it wasn't what it had been that appealed to me, but what it is now and what it is visibly becoming. A healthy, democratic society, with a vigorous economic and cultural life and a varied and beautiful landscape, where everything at least *seems* to work, an extension of the Western World without (apparently) dragging along most of its nightmares, where everyone speaks English, where there is a whole continent's worth of opportunity (and kangaroos!) –what's not to like? Australians

²⁴ One of the many good things about Australia is that you can get draft ale and cider and sometimes even Guinness, all usually unobtainable on tap outside the British Isles. The Australians chill all these to Arctic levels, which no one should ever do as it blots out most of their delicate flavors. But cold draft Guinness is better than no draft Guinness, which is not true of bottled Guinness, not worth feeding to a pig.

²⁵ I remember, as I was being wheeled through the airport, seeing a sign that said OVERSIZE AND FRAGILE ITEMS. I felt I should stop right there – that was me!

reminded me of Texans, but (Texan friends please forgive me) without the belligerence or the swagger. Australians also have a swagger, but it is not intimidating – you are invited to join in and swagger a bit too. They use the phrase *no worries* to mean *you're welcome* – it is sort of like *no problem*, but with this subtle distinction: *no problem* means *no problem for me*, but *no worries* means *no worries for you*, which sums up the difference. They say Australia is the Land of Second Chances. I was fortunately situated as a young man not to feel blocked or shut out of my society, not to feel that opportunities were denied to me, and when I needed a second chance I was able to find it at home. But to anyone feeling a need, or even just an *urge*, to make a new start or a find a new horizon, I would certainly say *consider Australia!*

NEW ZEALAND



I landed at the International Airport in Auckland at the convenient hour of quarter to six in the morning, and was in New Zealand (country #78; flag at left, arms at right).²⁶ The first thing I noticed

was that it was much colder than Australia, and seriously raining. This was a shock after the mild climate of the past few weeks.



Following my new policy of staying outside of town if I had no need to live in the city, I had arranged to stay at a bed-and-breakfast place in Ramarama that was also a berry and emu farm. A German couple kept the emus for their eggs, not to eat but to sell hatchlings to people who wanted to raise an emu for a pet. It is surprising that there should be any such people, as emus are large hungry birds like ostriches, outstandingly stupid and with nasty sharp teeth. But my hostess fed them from her hand (across a wire fence), and



²⁶

The New Zealand flag not only has the British union flag in the canton, offending nationalists and republicans, but it looks something like the Australian flag, which annoys New Zealanders who are tired of being mistaken for Australians. So as in Fiji, there is a movement to change the flag. This resulted in a [semi-final selection](#) with several brilliant candidates (many suggested by a Maori motif called the *koru*, based on an unfolding fern leaf). But also as in Fiji, the political authorities intervened and chose as the final four the dullest and least imaginative designs available. Many people think they did this so the ultimate vote will go against the dreary survivor and keep the flag unchanged.

seemed to enjoy being mobbed by avid emus. Also enjoying the feeding was Hobart the ram, who went first for some of the food himself, and then took advantage of the feeding to try to mount as many emus as he could. He never succeeded in his efforts to mate with even one – he was several feet too short, and really not their type – but he kept at it. You have to give him credit for trying, anyway.²⁷

After a day off among the emus, I went into Auckland for the usual bus tour. Auckland (population 1.4 million, 30% of the national population) has some lovely parks, and some good museums and moderately distinguished buildings, but I would not say it is a destination city. There *are* destination cities in New Zealand, and lovely mountains and other famous sights, but they are mostly on the South Island. Auckland is on the North Island, where I decided to stay for my few days in-country rather than mount an expedition to the south. I was pretty tired after more than four weeks on the road, and I was really just there for a taste of the place, so I kept it simple.

New Zealand was one of the last areas in the world to be settled. The Polynesian people who developed the culture now called Maori (rhymes with *Bowery*) arrived there only in the 13th century, which was still 600 years before the Europeans. Unlike the Aborigines of Australia, whose multiple cultures and languages were overwhelmed and nearly obliterated by the European settlers, the Maori signed a treaty with the British (below)²⁸

that at least nominally recognized Maori identity as a people, and their right to land titles and a measure of local self-government, none of which was afforded to the Australian Aborigines. Although British compliance with the treaty's terms was far from perfect, it did permit at least the partial preservation of Maori culture. It was striking that in Aus-



tralia I hardly ever saw an Aborigine, but in New Zealand Maori faces were everywhere.

²⁷ Well, OK, maybe you don't.

²⁸ The [Treaty of Waitangi](#) in 1840. Painting by Marcus King (1950).

I find Maori decorative art deeply fascinating – their carvings are world-famous, but I am especially interested in their flat painted designs, mostly in red, white and black (right).

The New Zealand War Memorial Museum in Auckland has the world's finest collection of Maori art and artifacts, and I spent an afternoon there gawping not only at these



but their collections from other Pacific Island cultures. Below is a Maori [*wharenui*](#) (communal meeting house), assembled inside the museum – note the designs painted on the rafters.



After a day in Auckland I headed out into the countryside, choosing Rototua as a destination because it was said to be a center of Maori culture.²⁹ There is a sort of *ersatz* native village there, where people dress in “authentic” costumes and explain their quaint folkways to paying visitors, and perform dances drained of social context. Places like that give me the creeps; I always avoid them, and did here too. But I hoped to find *Maorikeit*

²⁹ *Rototua* is stressed on the third syllable: Ro-to-TU-a. Americans of a certain age will remember this song:

Call Rototua, that's the name,
And away goes trouble, down the drain.
Rototua!

in the neighborhood, and besides I needed *some* destination in order to choose a direction. In Rototua I tried to track down books with structural analysis of Maori decorative painting, even looking for titles in a special Maori collection in the Rototua Public Library, but didn't find much – investigation continues.

It was Scottish weather – chilly and foggy and intermittently raining, but never mind, everywhere can't be Fiji. As in Australia, I used the GPS to escape the highways and find the back roads.³⁰ Once I got out into the sticks New Zealand was every bit as beautiful as it is supposed to be. If Australia was like Wales, but enormously expanded, New Zealand was like Wales, but with the vertical exaggeration dialed way up.³¹ Hills rose and plunged like roller coasters; sheep and goats grazed on 75° pastures; valleys dove giddily to streams far below. It was thrilling.



Also there were deep ferny forests, and avenues like burrows through the trees, and placid brown rivers, and high waterfalls. There were many more one-lane roads and bridges than in Australia. In Australia the wide distances and broad pastures meant sheep and cattle were usually far away; in New Zealand, where everything was so much smaller, they were startlingly close.

³⁰ The technique for this is to start with a *really good* paper map, with a scale of at least 1:300,000. Then pick out the road you'd like to take, and direct the GPS to guide you, by the *shortest* rather than the fastest route, to a village you couldn't reach on any other road. When you approach this village, pick out the next one on the same route. If you choose a destination too far away it will direct you onto the largest highway it can; even selecting AVOID HIGHWAYS only eliminates limited-access freeways. But by inching along from hamlet to hamlet (and they can be widely separated if there is no alternative route) you can outsmart the GPS and keep to lightly traveled rural byways, where the country can be experienced instead of just the road.

³¹ [Vertical exaggeration](#) heightens the vertical features on relief maps, where if drawn in their natural ratios to horizontal features (for example in gentle rises over wide distances) they might barely register.

I spent several days roaming the back roads of the North Island, and then it was time to leave. On my last day (September 26, which I had to do twice because of the Date Line) I returned to Auckland to see a stunningly effective museum show of miniatures about Rama, the Indian god and hero of the [Ramayana](#) epic.³² The show collected Indian miniature paintings from many periods and schools illustrating the *Ramayana* and the life of Rama – it was a high point to end my trip on.³³ I went directly from the museum to return my car and begin the long, long journey home. I had driven more than 2000 miles,³⁴ and seen a lot, including much I did not expect. But no worries, mate!



David

October 2015



³² Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, married Sita, an avatar of Lakshmi. She was abducted by Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, but Rama rescued her with the aid of Hanuman, the monkey god (perhaps an avatar of Shiva). Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*, available free [here](#), is a brilliant animated retelling of the epic.

³³ My first stop in New Zealand was Ramarama, and my last stop was Rama! Also Rama Rama ("Ram! Ram!") were Gandhi's dying words – he had a special devotion to Rama.

³⁴ 2041 miles [3265 km]: 100 in Fiji, 922 in eastern Australia, 497 in Western Australia, and 522 in New Zealand, all (except for single-lane roads) on the left-hand side.