

Australia Diary

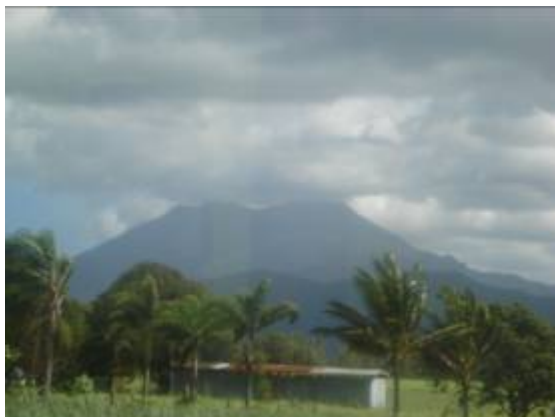
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1. My wife Nandini Nimbkar was invited to give a [keynote address](#) at the 7th International Conference on Safflower in Australia. Hence we thought this would be an excellent opportunity to go and visit that beautiful country. Especially the Great Barrier Reef in the northeast Australia.
2. The journey started in Cairns, a nice small town in Queensland province, which is becoming very touristy. The central part of the town is lovely with great eating-places and is a cross between Miami and a hill station.
3. We stayed in a nice backpacker's hostel called Dreamtime tucked in a small quiet lane just opposite the railway station and the biggest shopping mall in Cairns.
4. Every day there are only a few trains coming to Cairns and hence there was hardly any noise from the station.
5. The weather during late October and early November is lovely in Cairns (spring time) and thus was perfect for ocean trip and visit to other parts of the area.
6. The ocean trip is not for people who suffer from motion sickness as our daughter did. She got sick partly because of cold water and partly because of motion sickness. The snorkeling was great and it allowed us to get a feeling for the beauty of the Great Barrier Reef system.
7. The waters are unbelievably clear and the sun was really bright. In some parts of the barrier reef there are small islands called cays (just few m² area) which become islands only during low tides. Otherwise they are submerged in ocean. We went to one called Upolu cay. The shallow sea, white sands and reefs all around the islands is literally a paradise so well picturized and photographed in all travel brochures.
8. The tour to the Great Barrier Reef is a must and is written up as one of the 10 things to do before one dies. The Great Barrier Reef is one of the seven natural wonders of the world and the only natural system visible from space.



9. Northeast part of Australia called Daintree Rainforest is a lush tropical area with massive rainfall and is the World Heritage Site. It is supposed to be the oldest rainforest in the world. Hence besides the Great Barrier Reef it is also wonderful to visit this area. Part of it has been cut and converted into agricultural land. Still some places have been left untouched and these we visited. The other areas where the forest has been cleared are used for growing sugarcane, fruits and other cash crops.



10. Because of high rainfall the rain forest almost touches the sea in Cape Tribulation, a lovely small town with beautiful beaches. Being remote it is still relatively underdeveloped.



11. The electricity situation in the Cape is pretty grim. It is just like some parts of India where they get 3-4 hours of electricity. Mostly diesel-powered generators provide electricity to shops and hotels. With so much biomass they should be able to produce good amount of electricity. Instead they are going for solar PV systems which might not work since 4-5 months of the year (monsoons) there is no sun. Nevertheless with small towns dotting this area and with not too much development it is a nature lover's paradise with enormous diversity of flora and fauna.



12. We also visited Atherton tablelands – a raised area below Cairns which is the Southern part of Daintree Forest. This area is very productive and is the food basket of Australia. The whole tableland and the Daintree rain forest needs at least a month to thoroughly explore it. There are hundreds of waterfalls and rapids. Hence our 4-day trip was wholly inadequate to see the wonderful nature. Nevertheless this visit to some of the well known waterfalls provided us a glimpse and a sense of the beauty of the area.

13. The birds in this part of Australia are very colourful, big and with huge repertoire of songs. Thus it is a veritable bird lovers' paradise. They are fed continuously by tourists and so have become bold and used to their presence. On a visit to Botanical Garden in Cairns I was sitting on a bench when a blackbird brought in a grasshopper in its beak and put it in front of me probably thinking that I will offer it a piece of bread ! Immediately a kookaburra flew in and grabbed the



grasshopper. Thereafter a big fight ensued between the two birds which was worth watching and quite hilarious. Similarly during one of our picnic lunches a sunbird came and ate a piece of bread from our plate. It would not touch any meat or salad!

14. On all our trips we saw a large number of girls traveling individually or in groups in most of these places. There were relatively few males. Probably it is very safe for girls to travel in Australia and partly this is the era of female power!
15. There is tremendous amount of smoking among young girls in Australia and hence it is difficult to sit in public places because of this pollution. Older Australian generation also complain about the younger generation's penchant for drinking. It is a major problem among Australian teenagers.
16. We visited Sydney for 3-4 days and stayed in center of Sydney and close to Opera House. It is a lovely compact city to visit for few days, but quite expensive to live in. The usual touristy places of Harbor Bridge, Darling Harbour, Sydney Opera House and Bondi Beach are worth visiting. With cool clear nights it was a lovely city and a visitors' delight. Sydney also has a very large Chinese and Indian population.



17. Australians are very friendly people. For example whenever we seemed to be lost and were looking for directions in our maps somebody or other would come to help us without our asking. Such a thing is unheard of in US or other European countries.

18. Wagga Wagga where the conference was taking place is a nice small town in New South Wales province. With its population of about 60,000 it is a big city according to Australian standards but small according to Indians. The main industry is agriculture though few light industries are coming along. Wagga Wagga is an aborigine word for many crows. In aborigine language the plural is always denoted by repeating the word.

19. The train journey from Sydney to Wagga Wagga takes around 6 hours. With high-speed trains it should not take more than 2-2½ hours. The train system in Australia emulates the American one and thus most of the people travel by car. Nevertheless the journey was beautiful and it went through Blue Mountain region and ended with parched tableland of Wagga Wagga.
20. Because of recent drought in most of Australia the lands around Wagga Wagga were quite dry. Still it is these small towns which are delightful to live in and offer one of the highest living standards anywhere in the world. Drought conditions are also prompting Australia to explore the possibility of growing safflower – a drought resistant crop on large scale and hence hosting of International conference at Wagga Wagga.

21. The conference was good with all the safflower researchers around the world getting together once in 3 years to take stock of the R&D activities in safflower. Nandini's keynote speech was carried nicely in the local [mass media](#).
22. The Wagga Wagga airport is small and only 2 airlines-Quantas and Rex Air fly from here. The air journey from Wagga Wagga to Sydney took about an hour and was over the beautiful Blue Mountain landscape dotted with innumerable lakes.
23. Wagga Wagga has a good number of eating places. On the last day of our stay we ate in an Indian restaurant. The food was passable and the service horrible with the owner extremely rude. Besides it was overpriced. I have always found that Indian restaurants abroad are generally overpriced with no great fare to offer. Contrast that with the excellent Chinese fast food which is very tasty, cheap and comes with excellent service.
24. The quality of life in Australia seemed somewhat higher than that in America and flying is a pleasure. For example for the flight from Wagga Wagga to Sydney there was no security. After check in we just went to the gate and boarded the plane. However in big airports they do have elaborate security systems but still the security staff are polite – something that Americans should learn.
25. The Charles Sturt University (venue of the conference) at Wagga Wagga is a nice small university located on the hill on an otherwise flat land. The University is known for its agriculture and veterinary science. It also boasts of excellent wine and cheese making expertise.



We sampled these products at their extension center. Since kangaroos and eucalyptus trees are everywhere in Australia, we saw a couple of kangaroos on the university campus also. A local professor told us that in the evening at sunset the kangaroos line up at the compound fence.

26. The facilities available in small towns in Australia are of such high order that it is really good to live in these towns. The excellent medical facilities, schooling, electricity, communications and small universities do provide necessary infrastructure to have a fruitful life and yet be attached to the soil since these are mostly rural-based towns.
27. The big cities like Melbourne, Sydney etc. are vibrant and lovely to visit but quite costly to stay in.
28. There were very few “Australian” things that we saw. Mostly it is like mini USA. The large helpings in restaurants, the eating habits, car culture, shopping malls, the obesity of Australians are reminders of US culture imported enmasse. It was very difficult to get any authentic aboriginal handicrafts. Only in some weekend shopping areas like the Rocks in Sydney were some of these things available. Also we hardly saw any native aborigines. The population is all white with very few natives or people of mixed parentage in evidence.

29. The quality of drinking water from the taps and level of cleanliness everywhere was very high and is a hallmark of a high quality of life. Thus the first thing that strikes anybody going out of India to advanced countries is the cleanliness.
30. Australia is a cricket crazy country. Everybody including taxi drivers, bus drivers, hotel staff and Australian scientists talked to us about cricket. Part of the reason was that we were Indians and their team was visiting India and being thrashed. Nevertheless the fact of Aussie team being beaten by India was always taken in sporting spirit and one wonders why the decency of average Aussie is not shown in the behavior of their team!
31. On November 4 every year whole Australia comes to a halt. It is the day of Melbourne cup (horse racing). How a 2½ minutes event shuts down the whole country is a typical Australian phenomenon unparalleled anywhere else. Everyone told us to be near a TV set at 3 p.m. on November 4 to see the race and be a part of the craziness!

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