

BILL BRYSON

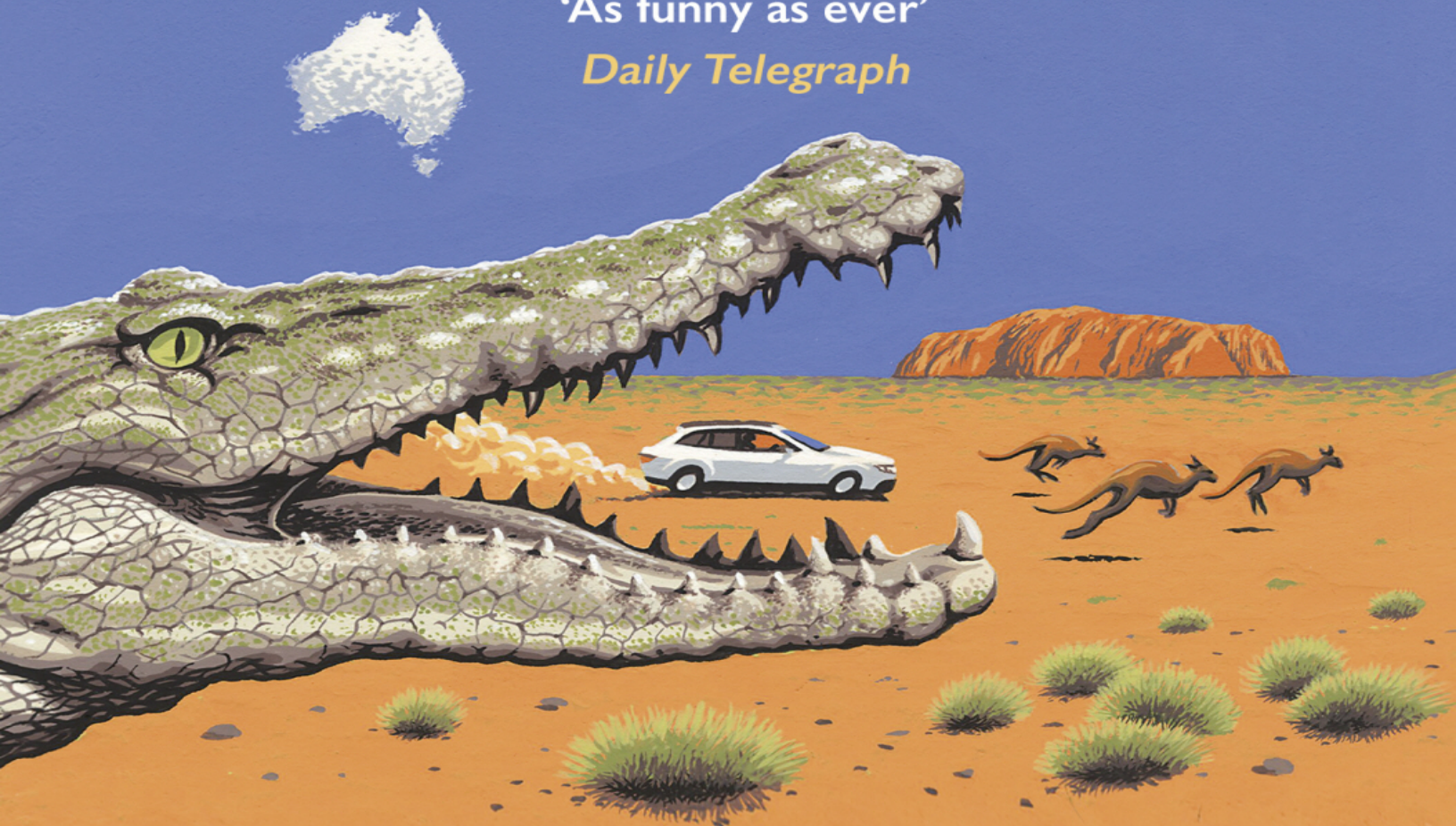
DOWN

UNDER

TRAVELS FROM A SUNBURNED COUNTRY

'As funny as ever'

Daily Telegraph



About the Book

It is the driest, flattest, hottest, most desiccated, infertile and climatically aggressive of all the inhabited continents and still Australia teems with life - a large proportion of it quite deadly. In fact, Australia has more things that can kill you in a very nasty way than anywhere else.

Ignoring such dangers - yet curiously obsessed by them - Bill Bryson journeyed to Australia and promptly fell in love with the country. And who can blame him? The people are cheerful, extrovert, quick-witted and unfailingly obliging; their cities are safe and clean and nearly always built on water; the food is excellent; the beer is cold and the sun nearly always shines. Life doesn't get much better than this.

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DOWN UNDER

Bill Bryson

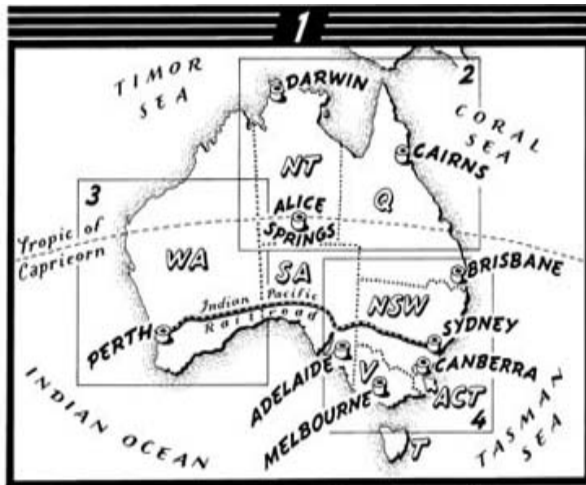
To David, Felicity, Catherine and Sam

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Gower

Part One

INTO THE OUTBACK



I

Flying into Australia, I realized with a sigh that I had forgotten again who their Prime Minister is. I am forever doing this with the Australian PM - committing the name to memory, forgetting it (generally more or less instantly), then feeling terribly guilty. My thinking is that there ought to be one person outside Australia who knows.

But then Australia is such a difficult country to keep track of. On my first visit, some years ago, I passed the time on the long flight from London reading a history of Australian politics in the twentieth century, wherein I encountered the startling fact that in 1967 the Prime Minister, Harold Holt, was strolling along a beach in Victoria when he plunged into the surf and vanished. No trace of the poor man was ever seen again. This seemed doubly astounding to me - first that Australia could just *lose* a Prime Minister (I mean, come on) and second that news of this had never reached me.

The fact is, of course, we pay shamefully scant attention to our dear cousins Down Under - though not entirely without reason, I suppose. Australia is, after all, mostly empty and a long way away. Its population, about 19

million, is small by world standards - China grows by a larger amount each year - and its place in the world economy is consequently peripheral; as an economic entity, it is about the same size as Illinois. From time to time it sends us useful things - opals, merino wool, Errol Flynn, the boomerang - but nothing we can't actually do without. Above all, Australia doesn't misbehave. It is stable and peaceful and good. It doesn't have coups, recklessly overfish, arm disagreeable despots, grow coca in provocative quantities or throw its weight around in a brash and unseemly manner.

But even allowing for all this, our neglect of Australian affairs is curious. As you might expect, this is particularly noticeable when you are resident in America. Just before I set off on this trip I went to my local library in New Hampshire and looked up Australia in the *New York Times Index* to see how much it had engaged attention in my own country in recent years. I began with the 1997 volume for no other reason than that it was open on the table. In that year, across the full range of possible interests - politics, sport, travel, the coming Olympics in Sydney, food and wine, the arts, obituaries and so on - the *New York Times* ran 20 articles that were predominantly on or about Australian affairs. In the same period, for purposes of comparison, it found space for 120 articles on Peru, 150 or so on Albania and a similar number on Cambodia, more than 300 on each of the Koreas, and well over 500 on Israel. As a place that attracted American interest Australia ranked about level with Belarus and Burundi. Among the general subjects that outstripped it were balloons and balloonists, the Church of Scientology, dogs (though not dog sledding), and Pamela Harriman, the former ambassador and socialite who died in February 1997, a calamity that evidently required recording twenty-two times in the *Times*. Put in the crudest terms, Australia was

slightly more important to Americans in 1997 than bananas, but not nearly as important as ice cream.

As it turns out, 1997 was actually quite a good year for Australian news in the United States. In 1996 the country was the subject of just nine news reports and in 1998 a mere six. Elsewhere in the world the news coverage may be more attentive, but with the difference, of course, that no one actually reads it. (Hands up, all those who can name the current Australian Prime Minister or say in which state you will find Melbourne or answer pretty much any antipodean question at all not involving cricket, rugby, Mel Gibson or *Neighbours*.) Australians can't bear it that the outside world pays so little attention to them, and I don't blame them. This is a country where interesting things happen, and all the time.

Consider just one of those stories that did make it into the *New York Times* in 1997, though buried away in the odd-sock drawer of Section C. In January of that year, according to a report written in America by a *Times* reporter, scientists were seriously investigating the possibility that a mysterious seismic disturbance in the remote Australian outback almost four years earlier had been a nuclear explosion set off by members of the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo.

It happens that at 11.03 p.m. local time on the night of 28 May 1993 seismograph needles all over the Pacific region twitched and scribbled in response to a very large-scale disturbance near a place called Banjawarn Station in the Great Victoria Desert of Western Australia. Some long-distance lorry drivers and prospectors, virtually the only people out in that lonely expanse, reported seeing a sudden flash in the sky and hearing or feeling the boom of a mighty but far-off explosion. One reported that a can of beer had danced off the table in his tent.

The problem was that there was no obvious explanation. The seismograph traces didn't fit the profile for an

earthquake or mining explosion, and anyway the blast was 170 times more powerful than the most powerful mining explosion ever recorded in Western Australia. The shock was consistent with a large meteorite strike, but the impact would have blown a crater hundreds of feet in circumference, and no such crater could be found. The upshot is that scientists puzzled over the incident for a day or two, then filed it away as an unexplained curiosity – the sort of thing that presumably happens from time to time.

Then in 1995 Aum Shinrikyo gained sudden notoriety when it released extravagant quantities of the nerve gas sarin into the Tokyo underground, killing twelve people. In the investigations that followed, it emerged that Aum's substantial holdings included a 500,000-acre desert property in Western Australia very near the site of the mystery event. There, authorities found a laboratory of unusual sophistication and focus, and evidence that cult members had been mining uranium. It separately emerged that Aum had recruited into its ranks two nuclear engineers from the former Soviet Union. The group's avowed aim was the destruction of the world, and it appears that the event in the desert may have been a dry run for blowing up Tokyo.

You take my point, of course. This is a country that loses a Prime Minister and that is so vast and empty that a band of amateur enthusiasts could conceivably set off the world's first non-governmental atomic bomb on its mainland and almost four years would pass before anyone noticed. Clearly this is a place worth getting to know.

And so, because we know so little about it, perhaps a few facts would be in order.

Australia is the world's sixth largest country and its largest island. It is the only island that is also a continent, and the only continent that is also a country. It was the first

continent conquered from the sea, and the last. It is the only nation that began as a prison.

It is the home of the largest living thing on earth, the Great Barrier Reef, and of the most famous and striking monolith, Ayers Rock (or Uluru to use its now official, more respectful Aboriginal name). It has more things that will kill you than anywhere else. Of the world's ten most poisonous snakes, all are Australian. Five of its creatures - the funnel-web spider, box jellyfish, blue-ringed octopus, paralysis tick and stonefish - are the most lethal of their type in the world. This is a country where even the fluffiest of caterpillars can lay you out with a toxic nip, where seashells will not just sting you but actually sometimes *go* for you. Pick up an innocuous coneshell from a Queensland beach, as innocent tourists are all too wont to do, and you will discover that the little fellow inside is not just astoundingly swift and testy, but exceedingly venomous. If you are not stung or pronged to death in some unexpected manner, you may be fatally chomped by sharks or crocodiles, or carried helplessly out to sea by irresistible currents, or left to stagger to an unhappy death in the baking outback. It's a tough place.

And it is old. For 60 million years, since the formation of the Great Dividing Range, Australia has been all but silent geologically, which has allowed it to preserve many of the oldest things ever found on earth - the most ancient rocks and fossils, the earliest animal tracks and riverbeds, the first faint signs of life itself. At some undetermined point in the great immensity of its past - perhaps 45,000 years ago, perhaps 60,000, but certainly before there were modern humans in the Americas or Europe - it was quietly invaded by a deeply inscrutable people, the Aborigines, who have no clearly evident racial or linguistic kinship to their neighbours in the region, and whose presence in Australia can be explained only by positing that they invented and mastered ocean-going craft at least 30,000 years in

advance of anyone else in order to undertake an exodus, then forgot or abandoned nearly all that they had learned and scarcely ever bothered with the open sea again.

It is an accomplishment so singular and extraordinary, so uncomfortable with scrutiny, that most histories breeze over it in a paragraph or two, then move on to the second, more explicable invasion - the one that begins with the arrival of Captain James Cook and his doughty little ship HMS *Endeavour* in Botany Bay in 1770. Never mind that Captain Cook didn't discover Australia and that he wasn't even a captain at the time of his visit. For most people, including most Australians, this is where the story begins.

The world those first Englishmen found was famously inverted - its seasons back to front, its constellations upside down - and unlike anything any of them had seen before, even in the near latitudes of the Pacific. Its creatures seemed to have evolved as if they had misread the manual. The most characteristic of them didn't run or lope or canter, but *bounced* across the landscape, like dropped balls. The continent teemed with unlikely life. It contained a fish that could climb trees; a fox that flew (it was actually a very large bat); crustaceans so big that a grown man could climb inside their shells.

In short, there was no place in the world like it. There still isn't. Eighty per cent of all that lives in Australia, plant and animal, exists nowhere else. More than this, it exists in an abundance that seems incompatible with the harshness of the environment. Australia is the driest, flattest, hottest, most desiccated, infertile and climatically aggressive of all the inhabited continents. (Only Antarctica is more hostile to life.) This is a place so inert that even the soil is, technically speaking, a fossil. And yet it teems with life in numbers uncounted. For insects alone, scientists haven't the faintest idea whether the total number of species is 100,000 or more than twice that. As many as a third of those species

remain entirely unknown to science. For spiders, the proportion rises to 80 per cent.

I mention insects in particular because I have a story about a little bug called *Nothomyrmecia macrops* that I think illustrates perfectly, if a bit obliquely, what an exceptional country this is. It's a slightly involved tale but a good one, so bear with me please.

In 1931 on the Cape Arid peninsula in Western Australia, some amateur naturalists were poking about in the scrubby wastes when they found an insect none had seen before. It looked vaguely like an ant, but was an unusual pale yellow and had strange, staring, distinctly unsettling eyes. Some specimens were collected and these found their way to the desk of an expert at the National Museum of Victoria in Melbourne, who identified the insect at once as *Nothomyrmecia*. The discovery caused great excitement because, as far as anyone knew, nothing like it had existed on earth for a hundred million years. *Nothomyrmecia* was a proto-ant, a living relic from a time when ants were evolving from wasps. In entomological terms, it was as extraordinary as if someone had found a herd of triceratops grazing on some distant grassy plain.

An expedition was organized at once, but despite the most scrupulous searching no one could find the Cape Arid colony. Subsequent searches came up equally empty-handed. Almost half a century later, when word got out that a team of American scientists was planning to search for the ant, almost certainly with the kind of high-tech gadgetry that would make the Australians look amateurish and underorganized, government scientists in Canberra decided to make one final, pre-emptive effort to find the ants alive. So a party of them set off in convoy across the country.

On the second day out, while driving across the South Australia desert, one of their vehicles began to smoke and sputter, and they were forced to make an unscheduled

overnight stop at a lonely pause in the road called Poochera. During the evening one of the scientists, a man named Bob Taylor, stepped out for a breath of air and idly played his torch over the surrounding terrain. You may imagine his astonishment when he discovered, crawling over the trunk of a eucalyptus beside their campsite, a thriving colony of none other than *Nothomyrmecia*.

Now consider the probabilities. Taylor and his colleagues were 800 miles from their intended search site. In the almost three million square miles of emptiness that is Australia, one of the handful of people able to identify it had just found one of the rarest, most sought-after insects on earth - an insect seen alive just once, almost half a century earlier - and all because their van had broken down where it did. *Nothomyrmecia*, incidentally, has still never been found at its original site.

You take my point again, I'm sure. This is a country that is at once staggeringly empty and yet packed with stuff. Interesting stuff, ancient stuff, stuff not readily explained. Stuff yet to be found.

Trust me, this is an interesting place.

II

Each time you fly from North America to Australia, and without anyone asking how you feel about it, a day is taken away from you when you cross the international dateline. I left Los Angeles on 3 January and arrived in Sydney fourteen hours later on 5 January. For me there was no 4 January. None at all. Where it went exactly I couldn't tell you. All I know is that for one twenty-four-hour period in the history of Earth, it appears I had no being.

I find that a little uncanny, to say the least. I mean to say, if you were browsing through your ticket folder and you saw a notice that said: 'Passengers are advised that on

some crossings twenty-four-hour loss of existence may occur' (which is of course how they would phrase it, as if it happened from time to time) you would probably get up and make enquiries, grab a sleeve and say, 'Excuse me.' There is, it must be said, a certain metaphysical comfort in knowing that you can cease to have material form and it doesn't hurt at all, and, to be fair, they do give you the day back on the return journey when you cross the dateline in the opposite direction and thereby manage somehow to arrive in Los Angeles before you left Sydney, which in its way, of course, is an even neater trick.

Now I vaguely understand the principles involved here. I can see that there has to be a notional line where one day ends and the next begins, and that when you cross that line temporal oddities will necessarily follow. But that still doesn't get away from the fact that on any trip between America and Australia you will experience something that would be, in any other circumstance, the starkest impossibility. However hard you train or concentrate or watch your diet, no matter how many steps you take on the Stairmaster, you are never going to get so fit that you can cease to occupy space for twenty-four hours or be able to arrive in one room before you left the last one.

So there is a certain sense of achievement just in arriving in Australia - a pleasure and satisfaction to be able to step from the airport terminal into dazzling antipodean sunshine and realize that all your many atoms, so recently missing and unaccounted for, have been reassembled in an approximately normal manner (less half a pound or so of brain cells that were lost while watching a Bruce Willis action movie). In the circumstances, it is a pleasure to find yourself anywhere; that it is Australia is a positive bonus.

Let me say right here that I love Australia - adore it immeasurably - and am smitten anew each time I see it. One of the effects of paying so little attention to Australia is that it is always such a pleasant surprise to find it there.

Every cultural instinct and previous experience tells you that when you travel this far you should find, at the very least, people on camels. There should be unrecognizable lettering on the signs, and swarthy men in robes drinking coffee from thimble-sized cups and puffing on hookahs, and rattletrap buses and potholes in the road and a real possibility of disease on everything you touch - but no, it's not like that at all. This is comfortable and clean and familiar. Apart from a tendency among men of a certain age to wear knee-high socks with shorts, these people are just like you and me. This is wonderful. This is exhilarating. This is why I love to come to Australia.

There are other reasons as well, of course, and I am pleased to put them on the record here. The people are immensely likeable - cheerful, extrovert, quick-witted and unfailingly obliging. Their cities are safe and clean and nearly always built on water. They have a society that is prosperous, well ordered and instinctively egalitarian. The food is excellent. The beer is cold. The sun nearly always shines. There is coffee on every corner. Rupert Murdoch no longer lives there. Life doesn't get much better than this.

This was my fifth trip and this time, for the first time, I was going to see the real Australia - the vast and baking interior, the boundless void that lies between the coasts. I have never entirely understood why, when people urge you to see their 'real' country, they send you to the empty parts where almost no sane person would choose to live, but there you are. You cannot say you have been to Australia until you have crossed the outback.

Best of all, I was going to do it in the swankiest possible way: on the fabled Indian Pacific railway from Sydney to Perth. Running for 2,720 pleasantly meandering miles across the bottom third of the country, through the states of New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia, the Indian Pacific is the queen of the southern hemisphere trainwise. From Sydney it climbs gently through the Blue

Mountains, chunters across endless miles of big-sky sheep country, traces the Darling River to the Murray and the Murray on towards Adelaide, and finally crosses the mighty Nullarbor Plain to the goldfields around Kalgoorlie before sighing to a well-earned halt in distant Perth. The Nullarbor, an almost inconceivable expanse of murderous desert, was something I particularly longed to see.

The colour magazine of the *Mail on Sunday* was doing a special issue on Australia, and I had agreed to file a report. I had been planning for some time anyway to come out to write a book, so this was in the nature of a bonus trip - a chance to get the measure of the country in an exceedingly comfortable way at someone else's expense. Sounded awfully good to me. To that end, I would be travelling for the next week or so in the company of a young English photographer named Trevor Ray Hart, who was flying in from London and whom I would meet for the first time the next morning.

But first I had a day to call my own, and I was inordinately pleased about that. I had never been to Sydney other than on book tours, so my acquaintance with the city was based almost entirely on cab journeys through unsung districts like Ultimo and Annandale. The only time I had seen anything at all of the real city was some years before, on my first visit, when a kindly sales rep from my local publisher had taken me out for the day in his car, with his wife and two little girls in the back, and I had disgraced myself by falling asleep. It wasn't from lack of interest or appreciation, believe me. It's just that the day was warm and I was newly arrived in the country. At some unfortunate point, quite early on, jet lag asserted itself and I slumped helplessly into a coma.

I am not, I regret to say, a discreet and fetching sleeper. Most people when they nod off look as if they could do with a blanket; I look as if I could do with medical attention. I sleep as if injected with a powerful experimental muscle

relaxant. My legs fall open in a grotesque come-hither manner; my knuckles brush the floor. Whatever is inside – tongue, uvula, moist bubbles of intestinal air – decides to leak out. From time to time, like one of those nodding-duck toys, my head tips forward to empty a quart or so of viscous drool onto my lap, then falls back to begin loading again with a noise like a toilet cistern filling. And I snore, hugely and helplessly, like a cartoon character, with rubbery flapping lips and prolonged steam-valve exhalations. For long periods I grow unnaturally still, in a way that inclines onlookers to exchange glances and lean forward in concern, then dramatically I stiffen and, after a tantalizing pause, begin to bounce and jostle in a series of whole-body spasms of the sort that bring to mind an electric chair when the switch is thrown. Then I shriek once or twice in a piercing and effeminate manner and wake up to find that all motion within 500 feet has stopped and all children under eight are clutching their mothers' hems. It is a terrible burden to bear.

I have no idea how long I slept in that car other than that it was not a short while. All I know is that when I came to there was a certain heavy silence in the car – the kind of silence that would close over you if you found yourself driving around your own city conveying a slumped and twitching heap from one unperceived landmark to another.

I looked around dumbly, not certain for the moment who these people were, cleared my throat and pulled myself to a more upright position.

'We were wondering if you might like some lunch,' my guide said quietly when he saw that I had abandoned for the moment the private ambition to flood his car with saliva.

'That would be very nice,' I replied in a small, abject voice, discovering in the same instant, with a customary inward horror, that while I had dozed a 400-pound fly had evidently been sick over me. In an attempt to distract

attention from my unnatural moist sheen and at the same time re-establish my interest in the tour, I added more brightly: 'Is this still Neutral Bay?'

There was a small involuntary snort of the sort you make when a drink goes down the wrong way. And then with a certain strained precision: 'No, this is Dover Heights. Neutral Bay was' - a microsecond's pause, just to aerate the point - 'some time ago.'

'Ah.' I made a grave face, as if trying to figure out how we had managed between us to mislay such a chunk of time.

'Quite some time ago, in fact.'

'Ah.'

We rode the rest of the way to lunch in silence. The afternoon was more successful. We dined at a popular fish restaurant beside the pier at Watsons Bay, then went to look at the Pacific from the lofty, surf-battered cliffs that stand above the harbour mouth. On the way home the drive provided snatched views of what is unquestionably the loveliest harbour in the world - blue water, gliding sailboats, the distant iron arc of the Harbour Bridge with the Opera House squatting cheerfully beside it. But still I had not seen Sydney properly, and early the next day I departed for Melbourne.

So I was eager, as you may imagine, to make amends now. Sydneysiders, as they are rather quaintly known, have an evidently unquenchable desire to show their city off to visitors, and I had yet another kind offer of guidance before me, this time from a journalist on the *Sydney Morning Herald* named Deirdre Macken. An alert and cheerful lady of early middle years, Deirdre met me at my hotel with a young photographer named Glenn Hunt, and we set off on foot to the Museum of Sydney, a sleek and stylish new institution, which manages to look interesting and instructive without actually being either. You find yourself staring at artfully underlit displays - a caseful of immigrant

artifacts, a room wallpapered with the pages of popular magazines from the 1950s - without being entirely certain what you are expected to conclude. But we did have a very nice latte in the attached café, at which point Deirdre outlined her plans for our busy day.

In a moment we would stroll down to Circular Quay and catch a ferry across the harbour to the Taronga Zoo wharf. We wouldn't actually visit the zoo, but instead would hike around Little Sirius Cove and up through the steep and jungly hills of Cremorne Point to Deirdre's house, where we would gather up some towels and boogie boards, and go by car to Manly, a beach suburb overlooking the Pacific. At Manly we would grab a bite of lunch, then have an invigorating session of boogie boarding before towelling ourselves down and heading for—

'Excuse me for interrupting,' I interrupted, 'but what is boogie boarding exactly?'

'Oh, it's fun. You'll love it,' she said breezily but, I thought, just a touch evasively.

'Yes, but what is it?'

'It's an aquatic sport. It's heaps of fun. Isn't it heaps of fun, Glenn?'

'Heaps,' agreed Glenn, who was, in the manner of all people whose film stock is paid for, in the midst of taking an infinite number of photographs. *Bizeet, bizeet, bizeet*, his camera sang as he took three quick and ingeniously identical photographs of Deirdre and me in conversation.

'But what does it entail exactly?' I persisted.

'You take a kind of miniature surfboard and paddle out into the sea, where you catch a big wave and ride it back to shore. It's easy. You'll love it.'

'What about sharks?' I asked uneasily.

'Oh, there's hardly any sharks here. Glenn, how long has it been since someone was killed by a shark?'

'Oh, ages,' Glenn said, considering. 'Couple of months at least.'

‘Couple of months?’ I squeaked.

‘At least. Sharks are way overrated as a danger,’ Glenn added. ‘Way overrated. It’s the rips that’ll most likely get yer.’ He returned to taking pictures.

‘Rips?’

‘Underwater currents that run at an angle to the shore and sometimes carry people out to sea,’ Deirdre explained. ‘But don’t worry. That won’t happen to you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we’re here to look after you.’ She smiled serenely, drained her cup and reminded us that we needed to keep moving.

Three hours later, our other activities completed, we stood on a remote-seeming strand at a place called Freshwater Beach, near Manly. It was a big U-shaped bay, edged by low scrub hills, with what seemed to me awfully big waves pounding in from a vast and moody sea. In the middle distance several foolhardy souls in wetsuits were surfing towards some foamy outbursts on the rocky headland; nearer in a scattering of paddlers were being continually and, it seemed, happily engulfed by explosive waves.

Urged on by Deirdre, who seemed keen as anything to get into the briny drink, we began to strip down – slowly and deliberately in my case, eagerly in hers – to the swimsuits she had instructed us to wear beneath our clothes.

‘If you’re caught in a rip,’ Deirdre was saying, ‘the trick is not to panic.’

I looked at her. ‘You’re telling me to drown calmly?’

‘No, no. Just keep your wits. Don’t try to swim against the current. Swim *across* it. And if you’re still in trouble, just wave your arm like this’ – she gave the kind of big, languorous wave that only an Australian could possibly consider an appropriate response to a death-at-sea situation – ‘and wait for the lifeguard to come.’

'What if the lifeguard doesn't see me?'

'He'll see you.'

'But what if he doesn't?'

But Deirdre was already wading into the surf, a boogie board tucked under her arm.

Bashfully I dropped my shirt onto the sand and stood naked but for my sagging trunks. Glenn, never having seen anything quite this grotesque and singular on an Australian beach, certainly nothing still alive, snatched up his camera and began excitedly taking close-up shots of my stomach. *Bizeet, bizeet, bizeet, bizeet*, his camera sang happily as he followed me into the surf.

Let me just pause here for a moment to interpose two small stories. In 1935, not far from where we stood now, some fishermen captured a fourteen-foot beige shark and took it to a public aquarium at Coogee, where it was put on display. The shark swam around for a day or two in its new home, then abruptly, and to the certain surprise of the viewing public, regurgitated a human arm. When last seen the arm had been attached to a young man named Jimmy Smith, who had, I've no doubt, signalled his predicament with a big, languorous wave.

Now my second story. Three years later, on a clear, bright, calm Sunday afternoon at Bondi Beach, also not far from where we now stood, from out of nowhere there came four freak waves, each up to twenty-five feet high. More than 200 people were carried out to sea in the undertow. Fortunately, fifty lifeguards were in attendance that day, and they managed to save all but six people. I am aware that we are talking about incidents that happened many years ago. I don't care. My point remains: the ocean is a treacherous place.

Sighing, I shuffled into the pale green and cream-flecked water. The bay was surprisingly shallow. We trudged perhaps 100 feet out and it was still only a little over our knees, though even here there was an extraordinarily

powerful current – strong enough to pull you off your feet if you weren't real vigilant. Another fifty feet on, where the water rose over our waists, the waves were breaking. If you discount a few hours in the lagoon-like waters of the Costa del Sol in Spain and an icy, instantly regretted dip once in Maine, I have almost no experience of the sea, and I found it frankly disconcerting to be wading into a rollercoaster of water. Deirdre shrieked with pleasure.

Then she showed me how the boogie board works. It was promisingly simple in principle. As a wave passed, she would leap aboard and skim along on its crest for many yards. Then Glenn had a turn and went even further. There is no question that it looked like fun. It didn't look too hard either. I was tentatively eager to have a try.

I positioned myself for the first wave, then jumped aboard and sank like an anvil.

'How'd you do that?' asked Glenn in wonder.

'No idea.'

I repeated the exercise with the same result.

'Amazing,' he said.

There followed a half hour in which the two of them watched first with guarded amusement, then a kind of astonishment, and finally something not unlike pity, as I repeatedly vanished beneath the waves and was scraped over an area of ocean floor roughly the size of Polk County, Iowa. After a variable but lengthy period, I would surface, gasping and confused, at a point anywhere from four feet to a mile and a quarter distant, and be immediately carried under again by a following wave. Before long, people on the beach were on their feet and placing bets. It was commonly agreed that it was not physically possible to do what I was doing.

From my point of view, each underwater experience was essentially the same. I would diligently attempt to replicate the dainty kicking motions Deirdre had shown me and try to ignore the fact that I was going nowhere and mostly

drowning. Not having anything to judge this against, I supposed I was doing rather well. I can't pretend I was having a good time, but then it is a mystery to me how anyone could wade into such a merciless environment and expect to have fun. But I was resigned to my fate and knew that eventually it would be over.

Perhaps it was the oxygen deprivation, but I was rather lost in my own little world when Deirdre grabbed my arm just before I was about to go under again and said in a husky tone: 'Look out! There's a bluey.'

Glenn took on an immediate expression of alarm. 'Where?'

'What's a bluey?' I asked, appalled to discover that there was some additional danger I hadn't been told about.

'A bluebottle,' she explained and pointed to a small jellyfish of the type (as I later learned from browsing through a fat book titled, if I recall, *Things That Will Kill You Horridly in Australia: Volume 19*) known elsewhere as a Portuguese man-of-war. I squinted at it as it drifted past. It looked unprepossessing, like a blue condom with strings attached.

'Is it dangerous?' I asked.

Now before we hear Deirdre's response to me as I stood there, vulnerable and abraded, shivering, nearly naked and half drowned, let me just quote from her subsequent article in the *Herald*:

While the photographer shoots, Bryson and boogie board are dragged 40 metres down the beach in a rip. The shore rip runs south to north, unlike the rip further out which runs north to south. Bryson doesn't know this. He didn't read the warning sign on the beach.¹ Nor does he know about the bluebottle being blown in his direction - now less than a metre away - a swollen stinger that could give him 20 minutes of

agony and, if he's unlucky, an unsightly allergic reaction to carry on his torso for life.

'Dangerous? No,' Deirdre replied now as we stood gawping at the bluebottle. 'But don't brush against it.'

'Why not?'

'Might be a bit uncomfortable.'

I looked at her with an expression of interest bordering on admiration. Long bus journeys are uncomfortable. Slatted wooden benches are uncomfortable. Lulls in conversations are uncomfortable. The sting of a Portuguese man-of-war - even people from Iowa know this - is *agony*. It occurred to me that Australians are so surrounded with danger that they have evolved an entirely new vocabulary to deal with it.

'Hey, there's another one,' said Glenn.

We watched another one drift by. Deirdre was scanning the water.

'Sometimes they come in waves,' she said. 'Might be an idea to get out of the water.'

I didn't have to be told twice.

There was one more thing that Deirdre felt I needed to see if I was to have any understanding of Australian life and culture, so afterwards, as late afternoon gave way to the pale blush of evening, we drove out through the glittering sprawl of Sydney's western suburbs almost to the edge of the Blue Mountains to a place called Penrith. Our destination was an enormous sleek building, surrounded by an even more enormous, very full car park. An illuminated sign announced this as the Penrith Panthers World of Entertainment. The Panthers, Glenn explained, were a rugby league club.

Australia is a country of clubs - sporting clubs, workingmen's clubs, Returned Servicemen's League clubs, clubs affiliated to various political parties - each nominally,

and sometimes no doubt actively, devoted to the well-being of a particular segment of society. What they are really there for, however, is to generate extremely large volumes of money from drinking and gambling.

I had read in the paper that Australians are the biggest gamblers on the planet - one of the more arresting statistics I saw was that the country has less than 1 per cent of the world's population but more than 20 per cent of its slot machines - and that between them Australians spend \$11 billion² a year, or \$2,000 per person, on various games of chance. But I had seen nothing to suggest such risky gusto until I stepped inside the World of Entertainment. It was vast and dazzling and immensely well appointed. The club movement in Australia is huge. In New South Wales alone, clubs employ 65,000 people, more than any other industry, and create an additional 250,000 jobs indirectly. They pay over \$2 billion in wages and \$500 million in gaming taxes. This is huge business and it is nearly all based on a type of slot machine popularly called a pokie.

I had assumed that we would have to bend the rules to get admitted - it was a club, after all - but in fact I learned that all Australian clubs allow instant membership to anyone, so keen are they to share the diverting pleasures of the poker machine. You just sign a temporary members' book by the door and in you go.

Surveying the crowds with a benign and cheerful eye was a man whose badge identified him as Peter Hutton, Duty Manager. In the manner of nearly all Australians, he was an easygoing and approachable sort. I quickly learned from him that this particular club has 60,000 members, of whom 20,000 will turn up on busy nights, like New Year's eve. Tonight the figure would be more like 2,000. The club contained bars and restaurants almost beyond counting, sports facilities, a children's play area, and nightclubs and

theatres. They were just about to build a thirteen-screen cinema and a crèche big enough to hold 400 infants.

‘Wow,’ I said, for I was impressed. ‘So is this the biggest club in Sydney?’

‘Biggest in the southern hemisphere,’ Mr Hutton said proudly.

We wandered into the vast and tinkling interior. Hundreds of pokies stood in long straight lines, and at nearly every one sat an intent figure feeding in the mortgage money. They are essentially slot machines, but with a bewildering array of illuminated buttons and flashing lights that let you exercise a variety of options – whether to hold a particular line, double your stake, take a portion of your winnings, and goodness knows what else. I studied from a discreet distance several people at play, but couldn’t begin to understand what they were doing, other than feeding a succession of coins into a glowing box and looking grim. Deirdre and Glenn were similarly unacquainted with the intricacies of pokies. We put in a \$2 coin, just to see what would happen, and got an instant payout of \$17. This made us immensely joyful.

I returned to the hotel like a kid who had had a very full day at the county fair – exhausted but deeply happy. I had survived the perils of the sea, been to a palatial club, helped to win \$15 and made two new friends. I can’t say I was a great deal closer to feeling that I had actually seen Sydney than I had been before, but that day would come. Meanwhile, I had a night’s sleep to get and a train to catch.

1 The statement is inarguable. However, the author would like the record to show that he did not have his glasses on; he trusted his hosts; he was scanning a large area of ocean for sharks; and he was endeavouring throughout not to excrete a large housebrick into his pants.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all dollar signs refer to Australian dollars. As of early 2000, \$1 was worth roughly 40 British pence (or £1 sterling to \$2.50 Australian).