

Mike's Australia



Fun Tales and Advice

by

Mike Dixon

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By Mike Dixon

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I was born in England but have spent most of my life in Australia. I'm a keen bushwalker and scuba diver and have travelled over much of the big country that I regard as my home. The stories in this book were written to entertain and provide travel advice.

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1 The Big Country



Some call it the world's smallest continent. Others say it's the world's largest island. Either way, Australia is BIG.

The distance from Perth to Cairns is about 3,500 km (2,000 miles), which is roughly the same as Gibraltar to St Petersburg, Vancouver to New Orleans or Tokyo to Hanoi.

Australia is almost exactly the same size as the USA (minus Alaska) but has only 23 million people to America's 300 million. Apart from the coastal fringes, it is a dry sunbaked land. The south has a temperate (sometimes cold) climate and the top third is in the tropics.

A range of mountains runs down the east coast. Rain falls on the seaward side and this is where the bulk of the population lives. Further areas of habitation are to be found in soggy Tasmania, around Adelaide and in the vicinity of Perth. The rest of the continent (marked yellow on the map) is sparsely populated.

2 The Outback



It's Australia's "Never Never Land": If you *never never* go you'll *never ever* know what it's like. But where the hell is it?

That's a frequently asked question and you'll get a heap of different answers from a heap of different people. City folk talk about their outback cousins but the cousins don't necessarily see themselves that way.

Eighty percent of Australians live within a few hours drive of the sea. When you leave the settled areas on the coast and travel inland you enter a different world. The trees get smaller, woodland gives way to scrub and scrub to semi-desert.

The huge, sparsely inhabited interior of Australia stretches all the way from the eastern coastal mountains to the Indian Ocean. It is about the size of the USA (minus Alaska and the east coast). On the map of Europe, it would reach from the Atlantic to the Black Sea.

When I use the term outback I'm talking about Australia's vast dry interior. There are few bitumen (tarmac) roads and few settlements. Names on the map may be no more than that. Sometimes, when you reach them, all you find is a post with a name on it. Bear this in mind when you go travelling. If you have an accident, help may be further away than you think.

Most outback towns have populations numbered in hundreds rather than thousands. The exceptions are mining centres such as Mt Isa and Broken Hill. Apart from mining, the only major industry is cattle and sheep grazing. Homesteads are frequently fifty or more kilometres apart and reached by dirt roads.

Homestead kids receive their early education, via the internet, through the School of the Air. Older children attend boarding schools in the cities.

Over much of the interior, the majority of people are of Aboriginal descent. They live in small communities and own large tracts of land. You require their permission to enter these lands.

Some people think the outback is boring. Others find it fascinating and I'm one of them. It is so totally different from the crowded world in which most of us live. Life is different and so are the people. Some have roots that go back generations. Others were born overseas or have parents who were born overseas. They come from all over Europe and Asia but have a lot in common. When you live in a remote area you have to be resourceful and that shapes the person you become.

Driving in the outback has a lot in common with driving anywhere else ... until something goes wrong. It is easy to forget how vulnerable you are as you drive along, cocooned in air-conditioned luxury. It's as well to remember that people die in the outback when their cars break down.

Aboriginals whose ancestors roamed the lands have died of thirst on their way home from a trip into town. Workers on cattle ranches have got lost and died of exposure. If they are vulnerable, think of what could happen to you as a tourist in a strange land.

For the average traveller in an average vehicle:

1 Keep to the bitumen (tarmac sealed roads) whenever possible. There aren't many and they carry a fair amount of traffic so you shouldn't have to wait too long in the event of a breakdown or accident.

2 Carry lots of spare water. I use 2-litre plastic milk bottles, which are easy to pack amongst luggage.

3 Take a mobile phone but don't count on reception everywhere. Better still: take a satellite phone.

4 Take spare fanbelts, spare radiator hoses and jump leads.

5 Make sure you have enough petrol to get between filling stations. Don't assume you will come to one before your tank is empty.

6 Never drive off the highway.

7 If you do breakdown, stay with the vehicle unless you are one hundred percent certain that help is nearby and you can safely walk to it.

8 Don't attempt to walk anywhere in the heat of a hot summer's day.

9 Bear in mind that accommodation is not as easy to find in the outback as in the more densely populated parts of the country and in some places you have to provide your own in the form of tent, caravan etc. Plan your outback travel accordingly. Make sure you secure your night's accommodation at least a day in advance.

3 Great Barrier Reef



The Great Barrier Reef stretches for over 1500 km (1000 miles), along the tropical coast of Queensland, from Rockhampton in the south to the tip of Cape York Peninsular in the far north. It is not continuous, as the name suggests, but is made up of hundreds of individual reefs. Some are tens of kilometres across. Others are much smaller.

The reefs are living. They are built by coral animals that secrete hard shells about their soft bodies. The small creatures crowd together to form colonies and it is these that we think of when we talk about "coral". Break a piece of dead coral and you will see the small tubes where the coral animals once lived.

The corals come in a variety of shapes and colours and are home to a huge variety of iridescent fish, giant clams, conga eels, starfish, turtles, giant manta rays and other creatures ... a veritable wonderland.

You can visit the Reef as a scuba diver, snorkeler or someone who is happy to sit in a glass-bottom boat. The most southerly point is Great Keppel Island near Rockhampton. As you go northward, you will find boats taking people out from McKay, Airlie Beach, Townsville, Mission Beach, Cairns, Port Douglas and other places.

Where is the best point to see the Reef?

As a divemaster, I was often asked that question. People expected me to say Cairns or some other top tourist spot. The answer is not that simple since it depends on what you want to see.

If you are vaguely interested in the Reef and don't want to spend a lot of time or money then I would recommend a trip to one of the inshore reefs or inshore islands such as Great Keppel or Green Island (off Cairns). You won't see the Reef at its most spectacular and the water will not be as clear as further out to sea. Nevertheless, you will experience some nice coral. I rank Keppel and Green Island as good value for money.

Water clarity is important. The sea is muddy inshore and crystal clear further out. This is glaringly apparent if you fly along the coast and take a look downwards. The transition from murky to acceptable varies with the weather. In my experience, you are fairly safe if you go at least 20 nautical miles (40km) offshore.

Suppose you are a snorkeler and want to get into nice clear water. In your place, I would ask two things of the tourist boats competing for my money. Firstly, I would want to know how far out to sea they were going to take me. Some of the reefs off Cairns and Airlie Beach are too close inshore for clear water, by my reckoning. Secondly, I would want to know about safety provisions. There have been horrific tales of poor swimmers left to their own devices. A good operator will provide buoyancy jackets and put out lines to prevent swimmers from being swept away by the currents.

As a diver, my most memorable experiences have been on reefs at the far outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef at the continental drop-off. To reach them you need to go on an extended tour of several days. Looking at a map of Australia, it is easy to

underestimate distance. The outer edge of the Reef is about 150 km (90 miles) offshore in many places. An extended tour, calling at reefs on the way, would cover at least three times that distance.

I've made repeat trips to memorable places only to be disappointed. The Reef is a living thing. It's like a garden. Some parts are spectacular one year and dull the next. By the same token, parts that have been degraded, by storms, starfish infestations or some other cause, can come good again.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is responsible for the protection of the Reef, which has World Heritage status. The Authority's headquarters are in Townsville where it operates an impressive visitors centre featuring a large aquarium and other displays.

4 Rainforest



There have been rainforests in the mountains of tropical Queensland for over 100 million years. Even during the last Ice Age, when the climate was far drier, small pockets survived in mountain gullies and other wet areas. When the Ice Age ended, about 15,000 years ago, rainfall increased and the forests expanded to cover much larger areas.

Australia's rainforests have survived from the time when the first flowering plants appeared on Earth and are home to an amazing variety of species. The forests of Europe and North America date from only 15,000 years ago and are impoverished in comparison. Their plants and animals are newcomers that moved north to colonise land made available by the retreating glaciers of the Ice Age.

Like the Great Barrier Reef, the tropical rainforests are veritable wonderlands. They are luxuriant places where one form of forest gives way to another in rapid succession. Walk along a forest path and you will pass gullies stacked with slender palms. Further on, you will come to trees with huge buttress roots. Turn a corner and you'll see trees bedecked with orchids. Iridescent butterflies flutter in clearings. Ferns cling to branches. Waterfalls cascade down rocks. Tree ferns tower above your head and ancient cycads line your path.

The forest birds are as colourful as the butterflies. Many have the raucous voices that film producers like to use in their jungle movies. It's not difficult to picture Tarzan and Jane swinging on jungle creepers.

Tropical rainforest begins near Coffs Harbour in northern New South Wales and patches dot the coastal mountains all the way to Cape York Peninsular. You can visit rainforest from the Gold Coast, Mackay, Airlie Beach, Hinchinbrook, Cairns and Daintree to name a few places. For more detailed information, surf the net using tags: rainforest, Australia, World Heritage, National Parks.

5 Beach



Whether you are into marine sports or just want to laze around and relax, you will love our beaches. There are awesome opportunities for wave surfing, wind surfing, kite surfing, kayaking, jet skiing, scuba diving, snorkelling, swimming and much more.

The golden sands, fringed with palm trees, are what dreams are made of but have their hazards. Bear in mind that it's not healthy to sun bake, drowning is bad for you, jellyfish sting, sharks bite and crocodiles kill.

Australia is the skin cancer capital of the world. When I was a divemaster, my gear for supervising dives from boats was dark blue cotton shirt, jeans and a wide-brimmed army hat. I applied sun screen to every inch of bare flesh including the tops of my bare feet. A fellow divemaster of Maori ancestry took a good tan but was equally diligent. He had an uncle who died of skin cancer. It's not just fair-skinner northern Europeans who are at risk.

The golden rule for swimmers is "swim between the flags". Our tourist beaches are patrolled by lifesavers and they put out flags. You will find surf lifesaving clubs in most coastal communities, sometimes within a kilometre of one another.

The main beaches are protected by shark nets and it is easy to think you are safe everywhere. You are not. I vividly recall a trip to the far northern gulf country. I went for a stroll down the beach and my family went for a paddle. The sea was flat and everything seemed safe to my over-relaxed mind. Then I saw a fin in the muddy water. A wave took it towards me and a sizeable shark was deposited at my feet. Although in the shallows, the ferocious animal propelled itself at me, jaws snapping. My heart missed a beat and I sprinted back to my family, yelling for them to get out of the water.

In remote tropical areas, crocodiles are a real risk. Signs warning you about the big amphibian are not put up as a tourist gimmick. There are laws to stop us killing them but no effective legislation to stop them eating us.

The other big hazard is the box jellyfish. I'm not talking about its cousin, the bluebottle or Portuguese man-of-war, which merely imparts a nasty sting. The box jellyfish kills. It is common in tropical waters in the summer months. (see 12 Hazards, below).

The internet provides a heap of information on what the water sports people have to offer. Remember that the surf gives out where the Great Barrier Reef begins.

6 Aboriginal Communities



Australia's original people have a culture that goes back to the Old Stone Age. It's not known exactly when their ancestors first arrived on the Australian continent but good circumstantial evidence indicates that people were here at least forty thousand years ago. The silly theories about families being washed ashore on tree trunks following tsunamis have been discarded.

The current view is that the first Australians were competent seafarers who made the voyage in boats or rafts. Australia has never been joined to the Asian mainland and the voyage from the nearest islands would have taken the early settlers far out of the sight of land.

With such a rich culture it is not surprising that visitors from overseas want to visit Aboriginal communities and see something of it themselves. In the more settled parts of Australia, you won't find people living in anything like the old lifestyle. They live in houses like everyone else and their kids attend the local schools. That doesn't mean they don't have a sense of community. Sometimes this finds expression in the communal ownership of land belonging to their ancestral clans.

The Minjungbal people in Tweed Heads, just south of where I live on the Gold Coast, are a good example. They have a patch of land at the mouth of the Tweed River and they have developed it as a cultural and environmental reserve. Visitors are welcome. There are walkways amongst the mangrove swamps and fringing woodlands. The diverse habitat is rich in plants and wildlife. In the old days it was capable of supporting a substantial number of people.

If you visit the Minjungbal reserve you will find a visitors centre with displays illustrating the old way of life. Outside, on the paths and walkways, information boards tell you about different plants and how they were used. You will see plants with medicinal properties and plants that need skilled preparation before they can be eaten. Other plants were used for basket making, babies' nappies (diapers) and adults' clothes. The reserve has an ancient clearing where the tribes used to gather for corroborees.

If you want to visit an Aboriginal heritage centre, inquire at the tourist information offices on your travels.

7 Clubs



You'll find them everywhere. Football teams have them and so do surfers, returned servicemen (RSL), the Catholic Church and many other large organisations that can raise enough money and get a liquor licence. Most welcome visitors.

I belong to a surf club. They are one of Australia's great institutions. Many have bars and restaurants. That's one of the ways they make money for their main activity, which is lifesaving.

Those bronzed young people patrolling our beaches are volunteers. They joined their clubs at an early age and received instruction from older members. It is no coincidence that many lifesavers on Asian beaches are Australian trained.

So, if you want an introduction to the Aussie way of life and you are a surfer, you could hardly do better than join a surf club. Age is not a consideration. There's no shortage of grey-haired surfers on our beaches and plenty of teenagers. The sport is almost as popular amongst women as it is with men.

If you are not a surfer that is not a barrier. Go along and have a meal. You'll be asked to sign the visitor's book to comply with the licensing authorities but no more is involved. In many clubs, most of the staff are volunteers. You will be served by lifesavers and surfers.

My part of Australia, which is the Gold Coast, is home to some of the world's top ranking competitors. Go to the south of the strip for the best action. Despite its name, Surfers Paradise is not the main hot spot. That honour goes to Coolangatta where the incoming waves run along the beach.

On a good day at Coolangatta, you can stand on the shore and get a clear view of the surfers as they travel down the tubes created by the breaking waves. It's a great place for photographs. Major international surfing competitions are held there and news teams gather from all around the globe.

8 Colonial Australia



In the 220 odd years since the arrival of the first European settlers, Australia has developed a distinctive architecture of its own.

My father-in-law was a keen photographer and took hundreds of photographs of old buildings when he visited us from England. As he said, Australia is a very young country compared with Britain but that doesn't mean it has no historical buildings.

The old colonial buildings were designed to suit the needs of a pioneering society. They are very different from the buildings of Europe and they are very different from those going up in Australia today.

Pubs are an institution in Australia, just as they are in Britain and Ireland. Grog arrived with the First Fleet and it did a lot to shape the nation's character. Back in the early colonial days, hotels weren't just drinking houses. They were places to stay and the licensing laws made it clear that landlords had an obligation towards travellers. The old laws have lapsed but the old hotels remain.

Some fine examples survive in our capital cities but most have been swept away by recent development. Heritage listing has saved some but hasn't prevented others from falling victim to mysterious fires. You'll find a few old pubs that still provide accommodation. Some have become backpacker hostels. Others provide motel accommodation in adjacent modern buildings.

If you are travelling round Australia and have an interest in beer and architecture, check out the old hotels. They are a fine reminder of the colonial days. You'll find them right across the country. Those in the old mining towns are particularly impressive. Australian miners prided themselves on being amongst the best paid in the world. They expected style and comfort in their leisure hours and their drinking houses testify to that.

The picture above is of Buchanan's Hotel in Townsville. It was taken by my father-in-law and was later destroyed in a mysterious fire. Buchanan's was used by General Douglas Macarthur during the War in the Pacific.

Colonial architecture is not confined to drinking houses. Domestic architecture soon took on a distinctive Australian look. In the temperate regions of the south, the need for innovation was not strongly felt. But, further north, in the demanding climate of the tropics and sub-tropics, it was irresistible.

When the British arrived on Australian shores they were not strangers to tropical living. The Indian experience influenced architectural thought and continued to do so during the early years of settlement. It can be seen in military barracks and domestic buildings.



One of my favourite examples is the type of house often referred to as a Queenslander. They are found across northern Australia and are well suited to hot climates. The typical Queenslander is of wooden construction and perched on stumps. It has a corrugated iron roof and extensive verandas. Rooves are often curved and ornamented with ventilators and decorative ironwork. Louvered blinds hang above veranda rails to provide shade and decorative panels fill the space below. High ceilings and ornate mouldings help to create pleasing interiors.

A friend of mine researched the origins of the Queenslander as part of a postgraduate degree. He started off with the idea that the design was inspired by the wooden-framed buildings of California and received an American grant to go there and further his inquiries. The idea proved to be mistaken but he enjoyed the trip.

The Californian house is superficially similar to the Queenslander but quite different in its basic construction. After further inquiries, my friend discovered that the Essex house is a more likely contender.

The wooden buildings of that part of England look very different from their Australian counterparts but the basic construction is the same. Terms such a base plate, top plate, strut and noggin testify to a common origin. As my friend points out, the ultimate origin can probably be found in Scandinavia. The Essex house appeared when the English ran out of oak for their half-timbered dwellings and started to import softwoods from the Baltic.

9 Backpacker Hostels



The modern backpacker hostel came into existence about twenty-five years ago. My involvement began when I was working as a divemaster on boats taking tourists to the Great Barrier Reef. I have friends who got into the business through mountaineering and others through sailing. We saw a need for cheap basic accommodation and set out to provide it.

Since those early days, the industry has evolved into something quite different from what many envisaged. Looking at the advertisements on the net I am sometimes disappointed to see how commercialised everything has become.

My wife and I sold our hostel ten years ago. I have no financial interest in backpacking and will do my best to give independent advice.

Q. Why stay in a backpacker hostel?

- A.** a) It's relatively inexpensive;
b) a good hostel has a communal atmosphere;
c) you can meet people and share experiences.

Hostels come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some are huge resorts that cater for the travelling party animal. Others are small and laid back. Some provide accommodation for fruit pickers. Others are more like eco-resorts. Many have private rooms with en-suite as well as dormitories. Laundries and kitchens are always provided. Internet access is the norm.

Many hostels belong to organisations: notably VIP, YHA and Nomads. They are meant to ensure high standards but do not always succeed. Surf the net and see what they have to offer.

Get personal advice from people who have been on the backpacker trail. Talk to friends and use social networking sites like twitter and facebook. Different people have different tastes. Try to learn from people like yourself.

Most backpackers are under thirty but many are older. Backpacking is a state of mind. I had prosperous middle-aged guys leave the Sheraton and stay with me. They had been out on dive boats and had met their younger diving buddies in town. When they learnt that my place had private rooms they booked into my hostel so they could be with their friends.

My oldest backpacker was an eighty-five-year-old lady from Canada. She was taking her fifty-five-year-old daughter on a hiking trip round Australia. The younger woman didn't seem enthusiastic about the enterprise but mum was in her element.

Finally, a note on backpacker buses. Some people love them. Others have nothing but scorn for the drivers and their passengers. I suggest you ask around and get advice before buying a ticket. One young lady told me she was using the buses because she was travelling alone. She figured there is safety in numbers. I wouldn't argue with that.

10 Other Accommodation



In some countries I've had difficulty finding a place to stay for the night. The fault has been mine. I've been too casual, expecting to turn up at a new location and find a motel or campsite without difficulty.

In Australia you can often do that. In many places there's a lot to choose from and you can shop around for the best deals. There are, of course, exceptions to this general rule.

Hotels and motels: Except in major cities, the term hotel usually refers to a pub. Historically, hotels were obliged to provide accommodation. Outside major centres, few do today. In country areas, look for motels. You will find them on the main roads leading into towns and scattered along highways. Many motels are attached to old hotels. Go to the tourism web sites to get an idea of what is available.

Camping resorts are plentiful and standards are high compared with many countries. Individual caravan sites usually have power outlets and some have their own shower/toilet annexes. Many resorts have cabins for rent on an overnight basis. Camp kitchens (pictured above) and barbecues are generally provided. Laundry, shower and toilet facilities are required by law. Many resorts belong to organisations. Their web pages are easily found. Some are geared towards families, some to older people and others to young adults. As a general rule, avoid campsites that are primarily residential. You could hit unlucky and find yourself entangled with the neighbourhood's social problems.

Serviced apartments have a day room, bedroom(s) en-suite and kitchen. The larger accommodate six or more people. The cost per person can be less than dormitory accommodation in a backpacker hostel and you can save money by doing your own cooking. When my wife and I visit a major city, we prefer to stay in a serviced apartment rather than a hotel. Advance booking is recommended but not always essential.

Cottages are available in many rural areas that have experienced a decline in population. They are usually rented for a number of days (rather than overnight) and are one of my wife's favourites. Advance booking is recommended.

Outside school holidays you can generally find overnight accommodation in the larger centres without forward booking. This means you can turn up and look for a good deal but don't leave it too late (after 5pm, say). If you are travelling in a busy period or visiting a remote location, secure accommodation at least a day in advance.

11 Vehicle Rental



Hiring a car, caravan or campervan is relatively easy. Major international rental companies operate here and there is no shortage of local companies, some offering very low rates.

Many national driving licences (including Canada, UK, USA) are accepted but, if they are not in the English language, a certified translation is required. For details visit www.austroads.com.au/overseas.html.

If your licence is in a language other than English I recommend that you obtain an international driving licence before leaving home. You will need to show your national driving licence so don't forget to bring it with you.

Driving in the more settled parts of Australia is little different from other developed countries. The same can't be said for outback driving - (see Outback, above).

If you come from a country that drives on the right, remain acutely aware that we drive on the left. One of my hostel guests died in a head-on collision when he strayed onto the wrong side of the road just north of Townsville. Another was killed when he looked the wrong way when stepping off the pavement (sidewalk). Be particularly careful when approaching roundabouts. Go round in a clockwise direction. It's appallingly easy to get it wrong as I know from driving in Europe.

Passengers and drivers must wear seatbelts and small children must be secured in safety seats appropriate to their size. It is an offence to leave small children unattended in a vehicle.

Most intersections are regulated by Stop and Yield signs. Where there are no signs, the driver on your right has right of way except at T-intersections. At these, the driver who is proceeding straight on has right of way.

When you leave the bitumen (tarmac) and drive on dirt roads, you won't see many road signs so bear these rules in mind. In country areas you may come across railway crossings without gates. Make sure you stop when the warning lights show red or you may add to an alarming list of casualties.

Finally, don't forget to lookout for wildlife. Kangaroos and other jumping creatures are most at risk (together with any vehicle that hits them). You are most likely to encounter them at dusk and night time.

Many country people fit their vehicles with bull bars (also known as roo bars). I fitted them to mine after I hit a feral pig. The porker rolled over a few times and ran off. My radiator was wrecked and I had to be towed. The accident happened in town. It would have been very expensive if it had occurred in a remote area.

12 Travel Hazards



You get used to where you live and know how to cope with familiar problems. You become "street wise". When you move to another environment, you meet different hazards. It's best not to learn by experience. I'll confine my remarks to hazards that are peculiar to Australia and similar countries.

Heat Exhaustion: The technical term is hyperthermia, which is often confused with hypothermia. The first refers to the body having too much heat. The other is the exact opposite. Here, I'm talking about **too much heat**. The problem comes on quickly and

can have serious consequences. The symptoms are extreme weakness and lack of coordination. Avoid hyperthermia by drinking plenty of water and staying cool. Treat it by cooling the patient and giving drinks. Recovery is usually rapid. If it is not, seek medical advice. Children have died of hyperthermia when left in cars. It is a serious offence in Australia to leave a small child in a parked car.

Land animals (big): Local authorities don't put up warning signs for fun. Signs cost money and are there for a purpose. I had a guest who thought a sign showing a swimmer being chased by a crocodile was a tourism gimmick. It wasn't. A few weeks earlier a family lost their dog to a croc while picnicking at that very spot.

Land animals (medium): Australia is home to some of the world's most venomous snakes yet most Australians rarely encounter one. I've never seen a snake in my garden. I see them occasionally when bushwalking and I see a lot when I go trout fishing. The Australian bush is full of snakes. Trout fishermen see them because they creep around and don't make their presence felt. I thump around when I go bushwalking. That way snakes are likely to hear me and get out of my way. The danger times are when the snakes are inactive. That happens in early spring when they are coming out of hibernation, in the cool of the day and when they are casting off a skin. I take a snakebite kit with me when I go walking. You can make one up from instructions at www.radoa.com/ or buy one. They are not expensive.

Land animals (small): Our scorpions have a nasty sting and some of our spiders are deadly. When camping, I'm careful to shake out my shoes before putting them on and I wear gloves when gardening.

Sea animals: Australian beaches harbour more perils than those in the colder parts of the world. Added to the danger of drowning we have a variety of marine animals that can cause injury and death. These include sharks, jellyfish, stonefish and the blue ringed octopus. That doesn't mean that you can't swim in safety. Our main beaches are protected by shark nets and patrolled by lifeguards. I recommend that you do not swim elsewhere without expert local advice. I've had some close encounters with sharks (of the white pointer variety) and have a lot of respect for them. Remember that the box jellyfish (pictured above) is common on tropical beaches during the summer months. It causes death within minutes and claims victims most years. The treatment in CPR followed my medical evacuation. Of all the risks, it is potentially the most serious. Don't swim in tropical coastal waters in the summer without full-body protection.

Wild fires: Australia is a land of extremes. Flood is followed by drought. Vegetation grows abundantly and dries out. Native trees are packed with combustible oils. Fire danger goes through the roof periodically. Fire bombs are created in the mist of oils that collects above trees, particularly gum trees. Fires can flash across immense distances at unbelievable speeds. National Parks authorities shut parks when the danger of fire is high. They are not there to warn you in other areas and you must exercise your own discretion on bush walks and picnics.

13 Awesome jobs



When we had our backpacker hostel in Townsville, North Queensland, we got to hear about lots of different ways to earn money on holiday. Most were ordinary but others were extraordinary. There are some unusual and exciting jobs for those who are prepared to find them. The pay is not always the greatest but they can lead to some interesting experiences and take you to places you wouldn't otherwise see.

Geologist's assistant: Over the years, we had a dozen or so guests who managed to land this one. They stayed at our hostel when they were on leave. I don't know what they were paid but they always booked into private rooms. Some had qualifications in geology. Most didn't. All were physically fit, outward-going and (with one memorable exception) male. They were flown all over northern Australia. A typical assignment would be a helicopter-drop in a creek bed. There, they collected samples and waited to be picked up. Jobs like this come and go. My contacts tell me they still exist. If you think you can find one, devote the time and energy to hunt around. Explore the web pages of Australian exploration and mining companies. Think about what you have to offer and present yourself clearly when you contact them. Don't lie: the mining and exploration people have an eagle eye for crap artists.

Marine scientist's dive buddy: Divers need buddies for safety reasons. Marine scientists are no exception and volunteers sometimes provide that service. I know nothing about pay. I do know that a dedicated diver will have opportunities that money can't buy. There was a time when all you needed was an Open Water Diving Licence. Those days have long since gone in Australia and you will require far higher qualifications now.

Biologist's assistant: Biologists go on field trips and need company for various reasons. One is security. It's not always safe to wander around the Australian bush by yourself, particularly if you are female. There is safety in numbers. We had frequent requests from universities for suitable people to accompany research staff on expeditions. Students usually perform that function but are not available during term time. That provides opportunities for those of you who live in the Northern Hemisphere. Your academic year is out of phase with ours. If you want to be a biologist's assistant (or archaeologist's, geologist's etc) during your long vacation, do a bit of research. Find out which universities and research institutes are engaged in your field of study. Contact the relevant department and be prepared to follow up with a testimonial from your uni/college. It's unlikely that you will be paid but you should be able to save money through free tucker (Aussie for grub) and accommodation.

Working on a dive boat: Quite a lot of my guests got jobs on dive boats taking tourists to the Great Barrier Reef. Some were instructors, others were divemasters, many had no diving qualifications beyond the basic open water certificate. Dive boats

need auxiliary staff. Someone has to fill scuba tanks, cook and clean while qualified staff supervise diving and skipper the boat. Qualified staff are paid. Auxiliaries usually work for a chance to go diving between shifts. You won't make much money (if any) as a volunteer crew member but you should save money and have a lot of fun. One way to get a job is to front up at a dive shop. If you've already had crewing experience, that's a plus. Many get their first job by going out as paying passengers. They talk to senior staff and make themselves known. Personality counts a lot. A friendly, helpful crew is essential to a good dive operation. Make sure you come over as that sort of person.

Working on a cruise boat: Cruise boats, like dive boats, need staff to serve in their restaurants, wash dishes and so on. They even have work for hosts and hostesses. These latter jobs are particularly appealing and preference is given to people with skills such as marine science or a knowledge of the local area and its people. As with most job hunting, luck comes into it when securing a position. One memorable young lady failed to get a hostess job despite my recommendation. She had a pleasant manner and was of Polynesian ancestry. I found a frangipani flower for her hair and she went for an interview only to be turned down. The problem was her accent, which was the sort that can only be obtained by attending an expensive English boarding school. In short, she looked the part but didn't sound right. An older guest was more successful. He knew nothing of marine science or the local area but was an interesting character with a store of jokes and a manner that brought people together. He secured a job as "master of ceremonies".

Entertainer: There's money to be made and all sorts of ways to do it. I had street entertainers staying with me and some did very well. A licence from the local authority was needed and they had to front up for an audition. Buskers, pavement artists, jugglers and acrobats were amongst my guests. We even had an out-of-work Shakespearian actor who used to smear himself with chalk and dress up as Hamlet's father. From time to time, young ladies from a well-known Australian dance group stayed at the hostel. They worked at the casino and entertained patrons with displays of modern theatrical dancing, performing with their clothes on. Other young ladies danced in nightclubs and ended the performance with their clothes off.

Dinosaur research: You won't get paid and you won't save money but it could be a great experience. So many dinosaur bones are being found near Winton, in outback Queensland, that help is needed to get them ready for expert examination. Training is provided. Further information: www.australianageofdinosaurs.com/

Outback farm: The correct name is property. Americans would call them ranches. They are so big that the English name farm doesn't apply. While we ran our hostel we were able to provide a steady stream of people for properties out west. Some did domestic work, caring for children and the like. Others worked with the animals (cattle and sheep). It was a mutually beneficial arrangement and I never heard anything but praise from both sides. If you are thinking of taking such a job, bear in mind that you will be living in an isolated location. In some of the remoter areas, your nearest neighbours could be fifty or more kilometres away. If you are thinking of working with animals it's as well to have prior experience. Being able to ride a horse helps. Most of all, you must be prepared to work hard and put up with tough conditions. The farming industry's web page provides detailed information: www.aussiefarmjobs.com.au

Environment: If you want to care for the environment or be a willing helper on an organic farm visit the web pages of the Australian Conservation Volunteers or WWOOF.

14 Ordinary Jobs



Australia has a significantly lower unemployment rate than most developed countries and many businesses are happy to employ travellers from overseas. A work visa is needed for paid employment and you can apply for it through government channels www.ecom.immi.gov.au/visas. Or you may pay an agency to make the application for you. There is no shortage of them advertising their services on the net.

Fruit Picking: Whether it's apples in Tasmania or bananas in Queensland, backpackers and other travellers play a vital role at harvest time. Information on jobs is available at the fruit growers web site www.fruitpicking.org.australia.

Restaurants, hotels and bars are places where many Backpackers find work. Big cities have recruitment agencies specialising in this sort of employment. You can use them but it is not essential. The manager of one agency recently told me that a good way for a traveller to find work is to go door knocking. A few simple rules apply. Don't turn up at a busy time. Ask to speak to the manager. Don't dress in holiday clothes. White shirt/black bottoms and closed shoes are generally acceptable. Hair neat and tidy, including facial hair (guys). Nail varnish either on or off and not broken (girls). Remove facial piercings. Be prepared to offer a free shift to prove yourself. First impressions are crucial. Decisions are usually made in the first thirty seconds.

Other casual employment: Many businesses use casual labour. Large firms, such as cleaning contractors, employ lots of people. Smaller outfits take one or two. Opportunities vary from time to time and place to place. I now live on the Gold Coast and see backpackers carrying advertising boards. Others are knocking on my door trying to sell me thermal lagging or solar hot water systems. Talk to other travellers to get ideas. Big employers can be approached directly or through an agency. That doesn't mean you can't front up in person. Always remember the golden rule: look and act the part. If you want to work as a builders labourer, wear heavy boots and the rest of the gear when you arrive on site. Ask to speak to the boss and be prepared to join the builders labourers' union if that is required of you.

Skilled employment:

- * www.mycareer.com.au
- * www.jobsjobsjobs.com.au
- * www.seek.com.au

15 Aussie English

In the 200 odd years since settlement, Australian English and British English have drifted apart. Words that met an untimely death in the old country have remained alive in Oz. New words have been invented. I'll stick to words and phrases that are so deeply entrenched that I have to remind myself that my British and North American friends might not understand what I'm saying. I hasten to add that I was born in the UK and retain some memory of how English was spoken in that country.

Ocker: vulgar speech: sometimes faked by middle-class Australians pretending to come from working-class backgrounds: developed to perfection by former Australian Prime Minister, Bob Hawke. Based on Oscar, a vulgar little larrikin in a 1960s TV series.

Larrikin: boisterous, often badly behaved young man. 19th century English dialect.

Galah: Stupid person. After the rosy cockatoo, famed for hanging upside down in the rain.

Tucker: food. From early 19th century British slang.

Mate: Used by people trying to be friendly and people with a bad memory for names.

Thongs: sandals, flip-flops. Not to be confused with the North American "G-string".

Wowser: censorious person. Used of killjoys trying to stop you having a good time.

Dunny: toilet. From Scottish dialect.

Thunder box: toilet.

Poor bastard: term of affection.

Clever bastard: term of abuse.

Bloody: very.

Mob: crowd. Used for both animals and people.

Wog: minor infection.

Hoon: lout, especially one who drives dangerously.

Dinkum: genuine, true, honest.

Sheila: girl or woman. From Irish form of Celia.

Crook: unwell.

Shonky: unreliable, dishonest.

Spiel: story. From German.

Wag: play truant.

True blue: worthy, genuine.

Bitumen: tarmac. Refers to sealed roads as opposed to dirt roads.

Creek: intermittent watercourse, usually steep-sided. Differs from American and British usage.

Billabong: water hole, particularly in a dry riverbed. Aboriginal.

Property/station: large farm or ranch. The British term "farm" didn't seem appropriate for the huge holdings allotted to early settlers.

Grazier: Someone who farms sheep or cattle.

She'll be right: Don't worry.

Good on yer: thanks.

Avag'day: goodbye.

Goodbye: God be with you. No longer used in that sense.

Gorblimey: struth. From "God blind me." Not much used anymore.

Wotcha: hullo. From "What hails you?" Not much used anymore.

Exercise: Translate the following:-

A mate of mine (whose name I can't remember) had this spiel about a young larrikin who stole the school bus and went hooning with a mob of young sheilas. They wagged off down to the creek where he tried to impress the girls by burning rubber. The stupid galah was wearing thongs and got one stuck under the pedal. He lost control. The bus left the bitumen. He swerved to avoid a mob of cattle and ended up in a billabong. The grazier, who was droving the beasts, jumped in to rescue the kids. The poor bastard got a wog from the dirty water and he's now so crook he's confined to the station and spends half his time in the dunny.

16 FAQ (army grub)



Questions are frequently asked about the food served to soldiers serving in the Australian armed forces:

- Q.** Is it true the Australian army serves white ants to its soldiers?
A. No. The boys are expected to catch them for themselves.
- Q.** Do the soldiers really eat ants?
A. Only when they're hungry.
- Q.** Is it true they cook the ants on top of their tanks?
A. No. They cook eggs on their tanks. The metal gets so hot in the sun that you can fry things on it. That saves fuel and is good for the environment.
- Q.** Why doesn't the army provide proper ration packs for its soldiers then they wouldn't have to eat ants?
A. The correct name is termite and they're good tucker.
- Q.** What is tucker?
A. Grub.
- Q.** Why are termites good tucker?
A. The pupae are packed full of protein and that's what you eat.
- Q.** When do the soldiers eat termites?
A. When they are living off the land.
- Q.** What's wrong with kangaroos?
A. Nothing ... if you can catch one.
- Q.** But termites are small ...
A. See below.

Individual termites are small but the colonies are big. When you look out over the Australian bush and see gigantic termite mounds, think of each mound as representing a cow or bull. That's about the quantity of protein they contain.

When I lived in Townsville, many of my diving mates were in the army. Some were in Special Forces units. They told me about bush tucker and the packs of cards they carried on manoeuvres. They were about the size of playing cards and provided information needed to live off the land. One side had a picture of a plant or animal. The other told you about its nutritional properties and where to find it.

If you want to find out more, search the net for Les Hiddins. He was Capt. Hiddins when I knew him. He has since left the army and is well known for his books and TV-series on bush tucker.

17 Bulldust



My friend Luke has a cattle ranch in Queensland's northern gulf country. We first visited him about thirty years ago and made the trip in the family station wagon. It goes without saying that cars were different in those days.

As a young guy, I owned a BSA 350 motor cycle. When my financial situation improved I bought my first car, a Hillman Minx, built to wartime specification. It was a robust vehicle that could be got going with a hand crank when the battery lacked power to turn the starter motor.

I could get the station wagon going by jacking up the front wheels and turning them by hand. If the battery was totally flat and the generator was no longer operating, I could substitute flashlight batteries, linking them in series to achieve 12 volts. They could provide a good enough spark to keep the cylinders firing for a few hours.

I was recently on a bush walk with friends and we came upon a family whose vehicle had broken down. We offered to give them a push and were told that the car was an "automatic". There was no way to engage gears and get the engine to turn over.

The model is being promoted on TV. You've probably seen the adverts. Proud father is out in his new off-road vehicle with his adoring family. He splashes through rivers and climbs impossible mountains. Everyone is delighted and no one gives thought to what would happen if anything went wrong. The guy we met had a flat battery. His problem wasn't serious but he had no way of getting started. In a remote situation that could be catastrophic.

Modern cars are more fuel-efficient than their predecessors and have many other advantages. The improvement has been achieved through enormous technical sophistication. There was a time when mechanics did running repairs on the side of the road. Automobile associations employed people who went around in vans. Quite often they could get a vehicle going again. Now, if you need much more than a jump-start or a new fan belt, you'll probably be told to wait for a tow truck.

Our station wagon was very different from the car I drive today. It had front-wheel-drive and low clearance. When I opened the bonnet, I saw things I recognised from

my motorcycle days. The engine was uncluttered and it was easy to understand how it worked. When it didn't, it was not difficult to figure out what was wrong. Most of the time, I could do something to get the vehicle going again. That was important because the drive to Luke's place took us through some very difficult country. I'll tell you about the trip because we had a few problems. If you're going bush they could happen to you.

The five of us left Townsville on the first day of the school holidays and drove 900 km (550 miles) to the mining city of Mount Isa, where we camped for the night. Burketown on the eastern side of the Gulf of Carpentaria was our next stop. Up to that point we had been driving on bitumen (tarmac).

There weren't many bitumen-sealed roads in the outback and there aren't many now. While you are on them you are fairly safe. Most are transcontinental highways and carry a continuous stream of long-distance traffic. If you break down you probably won't have to wait long before someone arrives. On a dirt road you can wait weeks.

We left the bitumen at Burketown and took the dirt road to Doomadgee, which is a small Aboriginal township at the edge of an extensive reserve of land belonging to the local people who are its *traditional owners*. We filled the car with petrol and pressed on westwards. At first the road ran over hard ground. Then it descended into a flat plain and everything suddenly changed. The trees were smaller and the ground beneath our tyres was no longer brown. A vast expanse of light coloured soil lay before us, churned up by the wheels of passing vehicles.

Bulldust!

I'd been warned about it. The stuff gets into everything. The grains have the same feel as talcum powder and are of similar composition. In the wet it turns to slush. In the dry it breaks up and blows everywhere. The road had disappeared and a fan of trails spread out. As one route became impassable, drivers made another. Judging from the ruts, most of the vehicles were far larger than ours. I stopped the car and got out.

I wasn't going anywhere unless I was sure I could get through. That meant finding a route where the ground was sufficiently firm to support the car. After half-an-hour of bush bashing I marked out a track. We drove along it and rejoined the road on higher ground.

The going was easy for a while. Then we met another patch of bulldust and got bogged down. The kids knew the routine. They gathered brushwood while my wife and I jacked up one of the front wheels. The brushwood was forced under it and more laid out to form a track. It was now the turn of the other wheel. I reached for my spanner.

Where the hell had it gone?

Luke had warned me about bulldust. It swallows things up. He said that when his kids were small he used to tie them to a tree in a situation like this. I thought he was joking. Now I realised he was serious. A toddler could vanish in seconds. I looked around and decided my children were safe. The youngest was ten and too big to be at risk.

We found the spanner and soon had the other wheel raised. Brushwood was placed beneath it and we drove off. The road was firm for a while then we hit sand. I was used to that. It's important to keep up momentum. Get up speed on the firm bits and coast along on the soft. Avoid breaking sharply. Don't oversteer. Let the vehicle find its natural path.

We were going along nicely when a cloud of dust told me another vehicle was coming along behind. It was much bigger than ours and travelling fast. The light was

failing and so was my judgement. I moved to the side to let it pass and got stuck. To my relief they stopped to pull us out. We said we were going to stay with Luke and they said they were going to see him too.

We reached Luke's place and our new friends were invited to stay the night. Their original plan had been to drive on but they had a problem. Earlier in the day they had picked up a hitchhiker and he was giving them bad vibes. Luke checked the guy out and decided they weren't imagining things. There was something sinister about the pale-faced man in badly fitting clothes and I'll tell you about him in another story.

I gave the car a thorough check before we left Luke's place. Bulldust can give endless trouble. Imagine tipping a bag of talc on your engine. Think of all the places it might end up. I cleaned filters and blew down every accessible orifice with a pressure hose. Everything had to be got right. The next part of our journey would take us to the far side of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The route was sparsely inhabited and we'd be travelling for two days.

We filled our spare fuel tanks. In those days, there weren't many petrol stations in the outback (same as now) and you could not make our sort of journey, in our sort of vehicle, unless you had friends who would top up your tanks. Luke's petrol was delivered in forty-four gallon drums and we tapped into them.

We said goodbye and headed westward. The road was in poor shape but adequate where it wasn't cut by flooding. Heavy rains had fallen the previous night and once-dry creek beds were raging torrents. We camped beside one and waited for the waters to subside.

The next day, I reconnoitred a route and fixed a spare radiator hose to the exhaust pipe, securing the open end well above any water level that we might encounter. That is important because water can be sucked into cylinders.

I put the car into low gear and drove slowly across, keeping the revs up and taking care not to stall. Going slow is important. Taking it at a rush can throw water up over the engine and short out the ignition.

Our next problem was bulldust. Despite my efforts, small amounts remained. Minute particles had penetrated the vitals of my engine. I could wax lyrically on their malign character. Sufficient to say that they'd stuffed my alternator. They had incapacitated the generator that charged the battery that started the engine and sparked the plugs.

I realised something was wrong when the warning light came on. We drove for several hours and the engine began to misfire. I stopped at the top of a hill figuring the battery would regain some of its strength if we let it rest. That worked the first time but not the second and I had to resort to my flashlight batteries, combining them in series to provide 12 volts. Mercifully, the kids had brought along a radio. It had a 9-volt battery and I used that when the first batteries were exhausted.

We limped into Borroloola and went straight to the filling station. A mechanic was on duty and he stripped down the alternator. To my dismay the bearings were crammed full of bulldust and totally wrecked.

"Can a replacement be fitted?"

"It'll take a week to get one sent up from Sydney," he replied. "Your best bet is to go out into the yard and see if you can find one there."

A hundred or so wrecked vehicles littered the dusty space outside. I went from one to the next. The bonnets were open and the engines stripped. There wasn't a single alternator that would fit my car. I gave up and was making my way back to the workshop, feeling despondent, when an image flashed before my eyes. For a moment, I thought I was imagining things. An alternator, just like mine, was poking out

of the soil in a chicken pen. I went inside and dug it up. Most was missing but the bit with the bearings was still intact.

It was an amazing piece of luck. The casing was corroded and had to be cracked open before we could get to the bearings. They were taken out, soaked in kerosene and packed with grease. I installed them and they performed flawlessly on the 2000 kilometre drive back to Townsville. Later, when replacing them, in the comfort of my home, I broke one of the brushes that transmit current to the commutator. My car was out of action and I had to ask friends to give me a lift to work.

In retrospect, I feel foolish for taking children on such a trip. My bush skills got us out of a lot of trouble but things could have worked out differently.

18 Crocodile farming



When I was a boy the thought of farming crocs never occurred to me. My grandparents had a farm in Lincolnshire (England) and I stayed with them. Cows and chickens were the main livestock. There wasn't a crocodile to be seen.

I might have remained blissfully ignorant of the big reptile if I'd not got hooked on astronomy at school. My fascination with the heavens led to a degree in astrophysics and a precarious career as a stargazer. The demand for astronomers isn't high and I was soon racking my brain for an alternative way to support my family.

A job as a Canberra bureaucrat provided stable employment but was boring. I resigned and made my way north to the Australian tropics where I joined the staff of James Cook University in Townsville as its press officer. I was soon writing articles on subjects as varied as oral history, wind engineering and croc farming.

Now, it's one thing to write about exciting subjects. Getting involved is entirely different. So, when my wife heard me talking about the soaring demand for crocodile hides, she became alarmed. We were staying with my friend Luke on his property in Queensland's northern gulf country.

I should explain that the term property is used to describe a stretch of land that would be called a ranch in America. Luke's property was a quarter the size of Belgium but don't think of him as fabulously rich. The huge area was worth no more than a few moderately priced housing blocks in suburban Sydney.

The land was in Australia's savannah belt. In the monsoon season it floods. During the remaining nine months of the year it goes from green to brown to black. The last being when bush fires go through.

Luke was a grazier. He kept cattle and that was becoming increasingly difficult. There was a time when he mustered on horseback and drove his animals to the nearest railhead. Those days were gone. The government had embarked on a

campaign to eradicate the twin scourges of brucellosis and tuberculosis from the northern herds. Droving spread diseases and cattle had to be trucked. That meant catching them.

One day Luke invited me to go out with his workforce and watch them round up some bullocks. In my naivety I expected a bunch of leathery-skinned men with wide-brimmed hats and elastic-sided boots. In the event, the only leathery-skinned man was Luke. His entire party consisted of himself, his ten-year-old son, Angus, and a nineteen-year-old Maori lad on a work-experience program. I later learnt that the young man's father was a vet and wanted his son to gain experience of real animal husbandry before going to uni and learning about it there.

Luke directed me to a jeep that had seen service during the Second World War. I got in on the driver's side and was looking for the ignition key when a voice brought me to order.

"Shove over, mate!"

Angus appeared by my side. The kid had been raised in adult company and didn't know how to behave like a child. I moved over and he took my place at the steering wheel. There were blocks on the pedals to accommodate his short legs and a cushion to get the rest of him high enough to see over the dashboard. I sat in the passenger seat and the nineteen-year-old crouched on the bonnet. Luke followed in an old cattle truck.



We were going after the bullocks that had been expelled from the herd by their dads and uncles. The young animals were hanging around in creek beds where the grass was still green and there was water for them to drink. They watched with puzzled expressions as we approached. We could have come from another planet. They'd never seen anything like us before. Big, doleful eyes registered bewilderment then alarm.

One turned and the others followed. Angus hit the accelerator and the jeep shot forward. The front was padded with old tires. The aim was to exhaust a fleeing animal and bowl it over. In this sort of contest, everything depends on stamina. A two-year-old bullock has a finite amount. A ten-year-old boy behind the wheel of a jeep has as much as his fuel tank holds.

Angus singled out a bullock and stayed a few paces behind. The terrain was flat and studded with parched grass and small trees. An experienced animal would have escaped down a water channel and left the jeep behind but the youngster kept to the flat.

The outcome was never in doubt. The bullock's pace slackened. Angus delivered a glancing blow with the tyres. The exhausted animal rolled over and the Maori lad grabbed it by the testicles. Moments later, Luke appeared and placed a halter round the animal's neck.

That night, as we were having dinner, Luke admitted he was practising a very primitive form of animal husbandry but had no other options. In a year things would change. He'd shoot his entire heard and the government would compensate him.

When the area had been declared disease free, he would restock with certified animals. That got me to thinking about crocodile farming.

A few weeks earlier, I'd interviewed a group of scientists who were working on research programs aimed at introducing new industries to the Pacific region. Crocodile farming was one of them.

In those days, a top hide from a three-year-old crocodile was fetching about \$200 on the international market. That compared favourably with what Luke was getting for his cattle. Processing was straightforward. There was no need to truck the crocs to an abattoir. You were allowed to shoot them. Hides stacked flat so transport wasn't a problem. Luke would have to shoot his herd as part of the disease eradication program. Instead of leaving them for crows and eagles, he could feed them to crocs.

The sums worked out a treat. Crocodiles are cold blooded. That means they don't expend energy keeping warm. In fact, they don't expend much energy at all. Most of the time they lounge around in muddy pools waiting for their next meal to come along. As a consequence, much of what they eat goes into bodybuilding. Shoot a bullock, put it in a freezer and feed it, bit by bit, to a crocodile hatchling. Within three years, the last of the bullock will be eaten and you'll have a crocodile with a hide big enough to sell to the French fashion industry.

Luke asked if the hatchlings were prone to disease. I said they were extremely hardy. Baby crocs are accustomed to swimming around in one another's excrement. You could keep hundreds in a small pool and they'd remain in good health. And there would be no trouble finding dainty morsels for their tiny palates. All you had to do was hang up lights above their pools at night and moths would crash in under their own wing power.

On the other side of the table, our wives watched apprehensively as we sketched out plans for a joint business venture. Luke's wife was the first to speak.

"Won't it be dangerous?"

That was rich. Didn't the woman have any idea of the perils her family faced as bull wrestlers? I opened my mouth to speak and got a warning glance from Luke.

"Where are you going to get the eggs from?"

I said the government issued permits that allowed you to collect eggs from crocodile nests.

"What about the big bulls that guard the nests?"

She had a point there. Daddy crocs can be very attentive when it comes to guarding the next generation. I said we'd wait until dad had gone off for a bite to eat then I'd sneak in with a collecting basket and grab some eggs. Luke would stand by with a gun in case dad got back earlier than expected.

That did it. My wife announced, in no uncertain terms, that I was not going to get involved in crocodile farming. It was far too dangerous and she wasn't going to take the kids away from Townsville to live in the bush. I'm a very obedient husband and bowed to her superior authority.

In the weeks that followed, Luke did a careful investigation of the croc project and decided to stick with the industry he knew. That was probably wise. Years later, a symposium on crocodiles was held in Townsville and some of the participants stayed at my hostel. Crocodile farming was now a well-established industry in Australia and I asked about it.

They told me that most successful operations are run as subsidiaries of chicken farms. The reptile helps dispose of heads and other parts that supermarkets won't take. Easy access to waste from trawlers is also an advantage because crocs cannot live on chooks alone ... an occasional bite of fish is needed.

19 Angus

In my last story I told you about Angus who went bull chasing with his dad. You'll probably have guessed that he didn't grow into the sort of adult who wears a business suit and sits behind a desk. Angus grew into the tough, leathery sort of bushman that I describe in my novels. Some people accuse me of exaggerating. Let me assure you I do not.

In so far as Angus received an early childhood education, he got it from the School of the Air and private tuition from his mother. His younger brothers were scholastically inclined. Angus was not. So, when his maternal grandfather put up money for him to attend an expensive boarding school, Angus was not enthusiastic.

It was the prestigious sort of school that his mother had attended in England. She came from an upper-crust family and had taken off for Australia as a pioneer backpacker. Her parents were impressed when she told them that she had met a yachtsman called Luke who owned a colossal grazing property in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

She recalls their shocked expressions when they met her future husband. With his sun-beaten features Luke looked more like a labourer than a gentleman and he spoke with a heavy Australian accent they could hardly understand. In short, Luke wasn't the sort of chap they wanted as a son-in-law.

Grandfather was keen to claim Angus for the upper classes and the young fellow, now twelve, arrived at his new school suitably attired. Things went badly from the start. Angus regarded his new mates as toffy nosed. At least, that was the expression his mother used when describing her son's disdain for his peers. I suspect Angus used stronger language.

He was particularly miffed because the toffy-nosed kids wouldn't believe the stories he told about life back on the farm. They accused him of lying. Fists flew and the staff had to intervene. Angus didn't fight by the rules and invariably won.

He lasted a few years in his new environment before returning to the bush. By then he'd got all he wanted from school. His marks in English literature were abysmal but he excelled in a certain sort of mathematics. Put a dollar sign in front of the numbers and Angus would talk about interest rates, inflation, leverage, earnings and the other financial tools needed to run a business.

He's now in his forties but looks older. The dry air and harsh rays of the tropical sun have aged his skin. His cattle property is near Luke's and he runs it in conjunction with a tourist venture that he set up for fishermen visiting the region to catch barramundi.

20 Long Meadow



There was a time when Australia rode on the sheep's back or so the expression goes. A nation at the far ends of the Earth had to produce commodities that could be transported by sea and didn't need refrigeration. Gold was one and wool was another.

By the time my friend Dave was born the boom times for wool were over. The price had collapsed and the family farm was too small to yield a decent living.

In desperation, his father resorted to all sorts of means to supplement the family income. At one time he was shooting kangaroos and selling the hides to tanneries and the flesh as pet food. When the market for pet food dried up, he boiled the roos in forty-four gallon drums and fed the meat to pigs. The porkers enjoyed cooked roo and there was a steady demand for pork.

Life became more desperate. Twelve-year-old Dave found himself learning how to shear. He was already helping his father dock tails from woolly bums and castrate rams. The neighbours were having similar trouble and all members of the family were called upon to help.

On one farm, a fifteen-year-old spilt concentrated sheep dip over his lower body and died before he could receive medical treatment. The boy's father later committed suicide. Dave found that particularly depressing. It was bad enough for the wife and daughters to have lost one member of the family. Losing another was devastating.

Low wool prices and a worsening drought brought matters to a close. Dave's parents walked off their land. They were behind in their mortgage payments and the farm no longer belonged to them. Like others, they gathered up their remaining possessions and went into the "long meadow".

For me, the term had no more than historical interest. The early colonial governments created broad stock routes so that sheep and cattle could be droved to market. In time, sealed highways developed along many of them, which is why many Australian roads have wide grassy strips on either side.

For Dave, the term conjured up feelings of helplessness and despair. The long meadow was a place of last resort. It was where you went when there was no feed left on your land. When your flocks had consumed the last blade of grass, you took them onto the highway so they could eat the grass on the sides of the road. He and his father rode in front on their horses.

The rest of the family followed behind in the farm truck. After ten days, they reached Goondiwindi, on the New South Wales/Queensland border, and sold what remained of their animals. Dad used the money to buy a caravan and signed up with a firm of contractors as a combine harvester driver.

For the next few years they lived the life of nomads, moving as far north as Central Queensland then back down into New South Wales as the season advanced and harvesting began in the cooler parts of the continent. Being the son of a harvester had its problems but there were advantages. Dad no longer had financial worries and his health improved. Mother was more relaxed and Dave saw light at the end of the tunnel.

Schooling was under control. He admits to flunking School of the Air. Peer pressure put an end to that. The kids, in his travelling entourage, were determined to get a decent education. Everything was arranged when they arrived in a new town. The teachers were expecting them and there were friendships to be renewed amongst the locals. Dave left school at eighteen and joined Queensland Rail as an apprentice electrician. He stayed with the railways for a while then set himself up in private business. Like me, he was a keen scuba diver and worked on the dive boats in his spare time.

Farming is never easy but it's not as difficult as it once was. The tyranny of distance has been eased by better roads and advances in telecommunications. A lot of the smaller farms have gone and more economically viable holdings have emerged to take their place. There are fewer farmers and those that remain are more prosperous than those of a generation ago. Weatherboard homesteads with corrugated iron roofs are being replaced by prosperous dwellings that would not look out of place in a modern city. There are those who feel nostalgic about the vanishing past. Dave is not one of them.

21 Sex orgies



GRADUATE STUDENTS at James Cook University of North Queensland are engaged in pioneering studies of sex orgies ...

I wrote that in a press release thirty years ago and the story took wings. The university achieved instant fame and I received newspaper clippings from all round the world, testifying to its success.

When I say fame I mean fame not notoriety.

The students and their professors had good reason to be proud. For the first time ever, the amazing phenomenon of mass coral spawning had been identified and subject to scientific investigation.

Corals are sedentary creatures, confined to coralline structures, so getting together for sexual reproduction is out of the question. Instead of copulating, the small animals produce vast amounts of eggs and sperm and cast them to the currents. There's so much of the stuff that chance fertilisation is bound to occur. The slicks of coral spawn are so big they can be seen from space.

The slicks had been observed by fishermen but had not been subjected to scientific investigation. That was thirty years ago and the first marine science research centres had only recently been established in northern Australia. Very little tropical marine science had been done.

There was still an immense amount of basic information to be gathered. The general (and mistaken) view was that the slicks were algal blooms.

The students investigated the slicks and discovered the amazing phenomenon of mass coral spawning. What's more, it was the first time the phenomenon had been identified anywhere on Earth ... which tells you a lot about the state of tropical marine science in those days.

Why hadn't coral spawning been observed in the Caribbean? That was puzzling to say the least. The corals must spawn there. America has lots of marine scientists. Why hadn't they seen it?

The mystery was solved when the corals spawned the following year. It then became apparent that they synchronise their sexual activity using the phases of the moon as a clock. The tiny animals are so diligent in their timekeeping that they hit off

within a couple of days of one another ... and that goes for all species. It truly is one huge sex orgy.

The orgies occur but once a year, towards midsummer, and are over within a few days. If you are not around to see what's going on, you miss out. In the Northern Hemisphere, coral spawning occurs during university term. The American marine scientists were in class teaching so they missed out.

By doing it at the same time, the corals produce such a vast quantity of spawn that predatory fish can't possibly devour the lot. Enough of their offspring survive to settle down and form new colonies.

22 Fish traps

When I ran our backpacker hostel in Townsville, I had an Aboriginal friend called Jack. He was a city dweller but maintained his Aboriginal roots.

Jack knew a lot about wildlife and had relatives living in remote parts of the Northern Territory. He often visited them and had a wealth of stories about traditional Aboriginal life.

Jack drove a big 4WD vehicle and took hostel guests on field trips into the surrounding bushland. One day I went with him to see some ancient Aboriginal fish traps in Cleveland Bay, south of the city.

The area is a rich habitat of mangrove swamp and mudflat, washed over by the tide. Fish venture into the shallows to feed at high tide and run the risk of being stranded when the tide goes out. As Jack said, it is an ideal area for fishing.

He was scathing of white Australians who claim his ancestors had no concept of ownership. Did they really think that a spot like this wouldn't be highly prized and fought over? It would be staked out. Markers would be put in place to identify which clan had rights to a given stretch of shore.

He pointed to a large rock on which a shield had been painted then took us to another. There were half a dozen or more, painted in natural pigments and still visible despite the passage of time. They were spaced out along the shoreline and bore a striking resemblance to European coats of arms.

Jack said he could recognise religious paintings and these were quite different. They were clan totems and they marked boundaries. They were there to say where one clan's rights ended and another's began.

We went down onto the mud flats to see what we could find. Jack said he used to go there when he was a boy. He and his mates would camp out and live off what they caught and what their mums had provided.

The old traps consisted of pools and channels lined with stones. Fish got lost in the channels and ended up stranded in the pools. You could take the fish or leave them to swim to freedom at the next high tide. If need be, you could block off channels with stones to stop fish escaping.

The Aboriginal people never took to farming. Having tried to grow things in Australia's harsh climate. I'm not surprised. Why farm when so much is freely available?

23 Climate change



I am not going to get involved in the reasons for climate change. That has become a highly politicised subject and is best avoided when you want to talk about outcomes. Suffice it to say that climate is changing all the time and sometimes with profound consequences for landforms and lifestyles.

The Great Barrier Reef owes its existence to climate change. The story of how this happened was being researched when I took a job at James Cook University in Townsville as its press officer. That was back in the 1980s and the university was one of the few scientific research establishments in northern Australia.

The university's geologists and marine scientists combined in a joint project to drill into the reef and take core samples. They proceeded in much the same way as archaeologists do when they dig to uncover the past. The project was condemned by green activists who claimed (quite erroneously) that the researchers were drilling for oil.

The scientists ignored the protests and went ahead with the full approval of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, which is responsible for the preservation of the Reef.

We now know that the Reef, in its present form, dates from the end of the last Ice Age, 18,000 years ago. At that time, vast amounts of water were locked away as ice in Antarctica and elsewhere. Sea levels were 120 metres (400 ft) lower than at present. When the ice melted, the sea rose and made its way inland.

In those not-so-far-off days, a string of low hills dotted the coast of what is now northern Queensland. They were the eroded remnants of an earlier barrier reef and were covered in vegetation. The rising water reached the hills and made islands of them.

Coral animals were washed in from the continental shelf and formed fringing reefs about the islands. The reefs grew upwards as the water continued to rise. Since coral needs light to grow and prosper, the growth was fastest in the shallows. Corals in low-lying areas got left behind and died. The result was a string of sharply defined reefs along the line of the former barrier reef. In a sense, the old reef system was reborn.

About 6000 years ago, the melting largely ceased and the sea reached something like its present level. This had a variety of consequences and one was the development of reef flats. Corals cannot live out of water for more than a few hours. The sea is flat and that sets a limit to growth in the upward direction.

If you dive on the Barrier Reef, you will come upon extensive areas of reef flat. The corals that grow there are robust ... built to withstand crashing waves. If you venture to the edge of the flats you will often encounter a cliff-like drop-off. The corals that live on the drop-off tend to protrude outwards to catch the light. Further down, in calmer waters, more delicate corals grow.

In geological terms, the Barrier Reef is very young. It is old by human standards but not so old as one might think. Aboriginal people were living in Australia when the Ice Age came to an end 18,000 years ago.

One of my friends is an archaeologist and he obtained carbon dates for that period from material in cave deposits on the nearby mainland. He concluded that the ancient coastal hills would have been tribal lands. People would have hunted and made their homes upon them. Did they know the sea was swallowing up their land?

It was an interesting question and we decided to speak to geologists.. They told us that the rise in sea level was neither continuous nor steady. Decades might pass and little would happen. Then a rapid change could cause the shoreline to advance by as much as 10 metres a year in some places.

We thought of the fish traps built by Aboriginal people and still in working order. An advance of 10 metres a year would engulf them within a decade. Whole tribal lands would be lost within a human lifetime. Then we thought of other parts of the world and recalled that the Indonesian islands had been joined to the Asian mainland during the Ice Age and the North Sea had once been dry land.

I pictured my northern European ancestors following bison over the vast expanse of tundra between Scandinavia and the western highlands that would one day become the island of Great Britain. New obstacles would arise. Lakes would form and get bigger. The sea would encroach and eventually the herds would cease their migrations. In time, the hunters would need more than a canoe to visit their relatives on the other side of the North Sea.

24 Neville Bonner



In Story 6, I talk about the Minjungbal Aboriginal Reserve where the Minjungbal people used to live. Ninety years ago, a remarkable man was born there on a blanket beneath a palm tree.

His name was Neville Bonner and he became the first Aboriginal Australian to be elected to the nation's parliament, where he served as a Liberal Party Senator for Queensland.

I first met Senator Bonner (as he became) when I was working in Parliament House, Canberra. He had his office across the corridor from my boss, who was Minister for Science.

I met Neville again when I moved to Townsville. He had lived on nearby Palm Island for seventeen years and made frequent trips back to visit old friends. Palm Island is an Aboriginal settlement that began life as a penal institution. People creating problems for the authorities were sent there.

They came from different clans with different languages and customs. Not surprisingly, the outcome was appalling. Alcoholism and violence were a problem from the start and persist today. Yet Palm Island has produced some totally remarkable people. Neville is one and Olympic champion Cathy Freeman is another.

Neville worked as an administrative officer on the island and developed his impressive political skills in that position. He also made an income as a diver collecting shells for the button industry. In those days, high-quality "pearl buttons" were manufactured from seashells, which fetched a good price on the international market. Neville recalls that his business was destroyed by the advent of plastics. One day, he had a pile of shells worth thousands of dollars. The next, his shells were worthless.

The collapse in the market for seashells meant he had to find another way to earn a living. The problem was he lacked a school certificate and all those other bits of paper employers expected to see. Neville decided that he had to find a job for which no qualifications were needed. He racked his brain and concluded he had no option but to become a politician. That is just one of Neville's many self-effacing and entertaining stories. He had others about the Aboriginal people and their way of life.

PS: If anyone has a better photograph of Neville for me to use, please let me have it.

25 Flying Foxes



Okay! They're not foxes. They're bats but not ordinary bats. They have a wingspan of more than 70cm (over 2ft) and their main food is fruit. There was a colony in the mangrove swamps near our hostel.

Their constant screeching formed a distant background noise and we got used to it. Then, one day, it was eerily quiet.

We investigated and found the bats had gone. They had relocated to a patch of eucalypts beside our favourite pub and were making a nuisance of themselves. The beer garden was once a place for a quiet chat. After the bats arrived, you had to yell to make yourself heard.

My book on native animals describes bats as nocturnal. That means they are meant to sleep during the day and most do. They wrap their wings about their bodies and hang upside down like seedpods. But there are exceptions to this simple rule.

As in all societies, it's the delinquents that cause problems. They are forever flying off and picking fights. Just look at that vicious character in the photograph. He's trying to dislodge an innocent sleeper from her perch.

And it's not just the noise that's disturbing. The creature's toilet habits are a major cause for concern. It's not their fault that they're overcome by an uncontrollable urge to defecate upon take-off but it does cause serious problems for a pub with a car park below their flight path.

Bat poo contains all the essential ingredients of paint stripper. The slimy green ooze not only smells foul, it cuts into the paintwork of your car. People stopped using the pub's car park and that affected business.

Fortunately, it was not all bad news for the pub's owners. They lost a few regulars but gained others. The tour buses started coming. The best time was late evening when the bats were preparing to fly off for a bite to eat.

Thousands circled overhead before leaving. The buses disgorged their passengers. Eyes turned skywards to observe the amazing phenomenon. The bats left and the people headed for the pub's bistro.

26 Tree Frog



In most countries, frogs are regarded as interesting but few people think of them as beautiful. In Australia we adore frogs. We photograph them, paint them and write poems about them. That tells you a lot about our frogs.

Australia is home to many species and some are highly colourful. The green tree frog stands out as one of the best loved and most appealing. It lives in the warmer and wetter parts of the continent and, like most amphibians, its numbers are dwindling.

When we arrived in tropical North Queensland from chilly Canberra, thirty years ago, green tree frogs were plentiful. They lived in our garden and their tadpoles developed in the pools of water that collected in the broad leaves of ornamental plants.

In the dry season, they survived by shrinking into compact forms. When I first saw them in this state, I thought they were dead. Attached to my garden wall, like desiccated corpses, they reminded me of the scarabs of ancient Egypt.

When the rainy season came, an extraordinary transformation took place. The first downpour soaked their skins and their colour returned. They stirred. Long agile limbs reached out, suckered feet fastened onto wet surfaces and, within hours, they were back in the trees hunting for insects. Soon they were going about the business of being responsible adults concerned with the survival of their species.

The tree frog is still with us but not in such spectacular numbers. They have fallen victim to a malaise that is threatening amphibians worldwide. There is some evidence that the threat is receding. On a recent camping holiday in the rainforest I spoke to biologists monitoring frog numbers. They were optimistic that a turning point had been reached with some species.

I have done my best to create suitable habitats for frogs in my garden. I've put in shallow pools with trickle irrigation and I kill cane toads and other introduced species that are threatening native species.

27 Cane Toad



I first came upon them in a campsite in Central Queensland. That was about forty years ago, soon after we arrived in Australia from England. I got up in the middle of the night and found that the sprinklers had come on and the grass beneath my bare feet was comfortably wet.

I took a step forward and something brushed against me. I jumped back fearing a snake and the thing hopped away. The movements were froglike but the thumps were far too heavy for a frog.

I returned to the tent, put on a pair of shoes and armed myself with a torch. The lawn outside was covered in toads with bodies the size of saucers. The huge amphibians were luxuriating in the wet grass, grunting contentedly as the torch flicked over them.

I skirted the sprinklers, reached the toilet block and was confronted by an even more impressive sight. The lights came on automatically and the floor was suddenly alive. Toads were everywhere, fleeing into cubicles and piling up in corners as they tried to escape. Mounds formed and collapsed as squirming bodies fed themselves down outlet pipes.

We were living in Canberra at the time and the cane toad had not yet reached that far south. Years earlier, it had been introduced into northern Australia to eat beetles threatening the sugarcane crops. Like many attempts to solve ecological problems, the solution was far from ideal. The toad found habitats outside the cane fields and was soon competing with native amphibians for food and territory.

Many native species are now threatened. The toad has reached South Australia and stringent measures are in place to prevent it from crossing into West Australia. The conclusion of many experts is that the measures will ultimately fail and the most we can do is delay the creature's march across the continent.

Like many householders, I do my bit. I kill the toads whenever I see them and create habitats in my garden for native frogs. The toad has poisonous glands and care must be taken when handling it. A neighbour lost a dog that bit one. Other people have lost cats.

Our customs officers are as strict about plants and animals as they are about drugs. Please cooperate. You could be carrying an environmental time bomb in your luggage. The smallest things can multiply with appalling consequences.

28 Strangler Fig



When it comes to a fight, the leafy jungle is just as competitive as the concrete jungle. No holds are barred in the race to the top. In the concrete jungle the ultimate prize is money and power. In the rainforest it is sunlight and power.

Plants need sunlight to prosper and some need a lot. That poses problems if you start life on the forest floor. As a lowly seed you won't make it to the top unless a gale blows down mummy and her friends ... a bit like waiting for the boss to die.

This gloomy scenario applies to most rainforest trees but not the strangler fig. In corporate terms, its strategy is takeover followed by asset stripping. It issues an attractive share offer (figs). The birds (punters) act as intermediaries. They take the figs, digest the bits they want and discharge the rest ... otherwise known as *toxic assets*.

The toxic assets (seeds) are deposited in the upper branches of a potential victim (tree) and sprout. The seedlings have a place in the sun and prosper at their host's expense. They plant roots in their host's bark and sap its strength.

Their next trick is to send down aerial roots. These reach the forest floor and dig themselves in. The fig's life as a strangler has now begun. Shoots spring up and envelop the host. In time it dies and the triumphant fig takes its place.

If you take a walk in the rainforests of Queensland and northern New South Wales, you will see strangler figs and their hosts in various stages of takeover.



Every army has them and they are usually called camp followers. The ladies of the night perform a vital function that is often overlooked in history books, which tells you a lot about the people who write the books because there's no shortage of information.

It's not hard to find, as I discovered when I agreed to help with an oral history project to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Oral history is what you learn by talking to old people about what they did when they were young. It is important because it records things that don't get written down when they happen ... sometimes for good reasons. The oral historians who recruited me to their team were professionals with academic reputations to defend. I had nothing to defend and didn't share their inhibitions about delving in murky corners.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was fought in 1942 from bases in northern Australia. Tens of thousands of virile, young American troops flooded into a region from which most women and children had been evacuated. Not surprisingly, they found themselves desperately short of female company.

The academics lacked my sort of contacts. While they were interviewing former mayors and church leaders I got talking to the father of one of my diving mates. He was a police officer in 1942, aged twenty-four and based in Townsville, which was the main garrison city at the time.

He told me about the Curtin Express. I'd heard the name before and thought it was some sort of coffee shop. The truth was far more interesting. The name referred to a train authorised by Prime Minister John Curtin, in 1942, to solve the problem of loneliness amongst the troops. The Mob (Aussie for organised crime) lent a hand and passed round the word that the train would leave Melbourne on a certain day and travel north to Townsville. Any female person could travel free of charge.

The train became known as the Curtin Express and the ladies who travelled upon it were called Curtin girls. I interviewed some and was told about others. One was a formidable woman who used the proceeds of her wartime endeavours to found a business empire.

That was explosive stuff. I'd unearthed information about the murky past of people who had carved out highly respected places for themselves in the post-war years. The academics didn't want any part in it.

They weren't interested in the ladies but I couldn't stop thinking about them. Their remarkable story had to be told in some way, even if that meant casting it as a work of fiction. That's how my novel Curtin Express was born.

Mike's Blog and Author Web Site

For more about Mike and his books

<http://mikejkdixon.com>

If you enjoyed reading my book please send me a quick message via the Feedback link on my obooko.com [download page](#). I will be delighted to hear from you.