

PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA - OCTOBER 2005

Perth in Western Australia is a seven and a half hour flight from Auckland and is actually nearer to Singapore than Sydney (or Auckland), but it is still Australia and Australia and New Zealand are considered 'domestic' destinations by Air New Zealand in its air-points system. We had accrued some points and were able to travel there for the same number of points as it we would have had to expend to just go as far as, say, Auckland - no contest! All this may, in part, answer the question we have been asked more frequently regarding this trip than is usually the case when we take off on our travels: " Why there?".

Of course, getting the most for our air-points was not the only reason for choosing Perth as there is lots to see and do there or thereabouts. Remember, though, that 'thereabouts' in Oz can mean 300 or 400kms distance from the city! So, here's what we did:

We arrived on the Friday night at about 8.30 (our bodies thought it 1.30 am as Perth is 5 hours behind NZ time), and were taken by the airport shuttle bus to our 3 star hotel with bar and restaurant, etc, etc. Well, it was an hotel once and no doubt in a month or two it will be again, but just now it is a building site. Having negotiated our way through the knocked out hole in the brick wall and through a doorway in yet another knocked out hole, we found ourselves in the reception, where we were greeted by a charming receptionist who was horrified that we had not been told about the renovations, as she assured us that the booking agent knew all about it. We were promised, however, that the rooms had all been refurbished and we had a deluxe room ready for us. We were tired and strangers to the city so decided to stay as it was not going to be easy to do anything else that night (apart from having paid for the accommodation and tours up-front).

The room was large and had all the 'usual offices', as well as a concrete bed. Martin said it wasn't that hard and he found it quite comfortable, but it was certainly the 'firmest' bed I've ever encountered! Having settled in we decided to go down for a bite of supper and a drink, only to be told that the restaurant and bar were not in operation during refurbishment but that there was a cafe somewhere up the road. We were not happy bunnies, a restaurant having been a firm part of our requirement, as we knew we would be arriving late and also had several long days out planned after which we would not want to go out again to find dinner. Apparently the booking agent knew about this, too, so we are at a loss to understand why they recommended and booked us in there at all. Needless to say, stiff letters have been written and we await their response!

Next morning we flung open the curtains to admire the view - of a brick wall, 5 metres from the window, embellished with next door's air-conditioning units - it just keeps on getting better, doesn't it! But, it was mercifully quiet and we were just grateful that the building noise didn't penetrate to our room (yet - we hadn't taken account of the weekend lull!). Being a Saturday, the booking agent wasn't open and so we decided to stick it out, as we wouldn't be able to do anything until Monday at the earliest, and by then we'd only have a week to go and didn't want to spend the time moving hotels and generally putting up with unpleasantness - and who wants to be known as a 'Whingeing Pom' anyway?! In the end, we survived perfectly well, with excellent breakfasts each morning and the friendliness and professionalism of the staff making up for many of the other shortcomings. It's the last time we pay for anything in advance though!

We spent our first day exploring the city and Kings Park, which is a beautiful area on the cliff tops above the city and Swan River, and which includes the excellent

Botanical Gardens. Perth is certainly a fine and vibrant place and, for us 'country bumpkins', a great place to people-watch. Just about every colour, shape and form of human being paraded by as we had lunch at a pavement cafe, and we must have seen every type of fashion in clothes and hair from the last 50 years (and some so weird they may be from the next 50 as far as we know); all quite fascinating and a real education. It is also a terrific place to shop and we certainly did the stores justice during our visit - many had sales on so it would have been rude not to! We have to drive for several hours to find 'proper' stores or any variety, so although we are not dedicated shop-aholics, this was a rare pleasure.

Our first day trip was to Pinnacle Desert and was to include a tour of the much-advertised wildflowers of the area. Sadly, they had not had the huge swathes of flowers for a few years, due to the dry winters and such flowers as there were this year had nearly all gone by the end of September. However we still saw many pockets of beautiful specimens, including some delicate little orchids, kangaroo paw and what we know as 'everlasting flowers', in vibrant shades of yellow, blue, pink and red. The many varieties of Banksias, bottle brushes and also the funny pompom-like grass trees added exotic and attractive colour to the bush, too. I rather fancied some grass trees for the garden here at home, until I learned that they only grow about 1cm a year ... I'm not that keen on 'planting for posterity' and do like to actually see my garden grow!

En route to the desert we saw some wild kangaroos and we also stopped at a wildlife reserve to see some in captivity, as well as koalas, a wombat (aaah!) and various colourful gallahs (which we had thought were parrots and parakeets) and many other bird species, many of which we subsequently spotted in the wild.

Pinnacle desert itself is a place of almost sinister beauty, with the golden yellow limestone pinnacles, in many places, almost looking like petrified humans and old buildings. Indeed, early explorers seeing it from the ocean reported that it appeared to be a ruined city. The pinnacles, some as high as 4 metres, were formed over hundreds of years, by rain causing lime to leach from the sand dunes, cementing the lower level of the dune into a new, soft limestone. Vegetation then forms an acidic layer of soil and humus, which in turn means a hard cap of calcrete develops above this soft layer of limestone. Cracks in the calcrete are exploited by plant roots, causing the limestone to erode, leaving channels which then fill with quartz sand trickling in from the dunes. The vegetation eventually dies and, without roots holding it in place, the sand covering the now-eroded limestone is blown away, and thus the pinnacles are revealed. The desert is part of a 17,491ha National Park about 245 km north of Perth and although it is a long drive, it was definitely worth the 12-hour day to make the visit.

Our booking agents had included an introductory city tour (only three days into our trip!) around Perth and its suburbs, and we found this an excellent and informative half day. We were able to get our bearings and we also spotted several interesting restaurants etc. for lunches and dinners! Talking of which, the food was superb and we didn't have a duff meal the whole time we were away; even the snack lunches at the various 'food courts' were good. We had Indonesian, Nonya, Indian, Belgian, Swedish meals and also some excellent Aussie seafood so although we did a lot of walking, our waistbands didn't benefit, I'm afraid. Needless to say, we enjoyed our fair share of the local vintages, too, except when at the Belgian cafe where the Hoegstraaten wheat beer brought back memories of the many weekends we spent in Bruges back when we lived in Eastbourne (how long ago that all seems now!).

We had decided that, because the excursions we had planned would all be long trips, that we would have a day off between each, and we were glad we had

since, although we didn't have to drive and the coaches were very comfortable, we did find them quite tiring.

Another excursion into the bush, this time 300-odd km to the east of the city, was to Wave Rock. This is an extraordinary rock which has been eroded over thousands of years to resemble exactly, in shape and size, the huge waves one sees in pictures of surfers at Hawaii, for example. It is at an Aboriginal sacred site and one of the local tribe was our guide. He was very informative about the geology of the area, at the same time as telling us the legends about the rock which have been passed down through the generations. He also sang some of the traditional songs relating these tales, but if the truth be told, they all sounded pretty similar to us! Nearby, there is an extraordinary cave called the Hippo's Yawn, which describes it perfectly, and which was also fascinating to see; it is marvelous what can be done by wind and really very little rain. Another cave which contains some ancient paintings, proved to be a disappointment as the paintings were really not very clear and so we have to take the guide's word for it that they were, indeed, anything special. Perhaps we have been spoilt by those we have seen at Ayers Rock and Lascaux in France?

To make a change from desert and long bus rides, our next excursion was a boat and train trip. As there was only one other person booked for this tour, the company sent a comfortable private car and driver to look after us for the duration, which was a great treat, especially as the other member of the party was a very congenial Australian woman and the driver another one! We drove for about an hour to the dock at Mandurah, where we caught the boat which took us along the Murray River into the Peel Inlet. En route, we enjoyed tranquil riverine scenery, quaint houseboats and riverside cottages as well as some extremely flashy and expensive monuments to bad taste which had been built along a canalised section of the river, supposedly reminiscent of Venice ... the designers had obviously never visited that beautiful city! We were fortunate to see numerous water fowl and seabirds, including several large colonies of pelicans, which are so comical and ungainly on land but so graceful in flight or on the water - and we caught a few lucky glimpses of dolphins, too.

After lunch at a riverside inn, we were taken by car to the pretty township of Dwellingup. Here we caught an historic train and rode in its very rickety open air carriage, hauled by a 19thC diesel engine, along a route through the Jarrah tree forests to Etmilyn, one of the oldest rail tracks in Australia. It was originally built to transport timber, and foresters, between the settlement at Etmilyn, which was the centre of the logging industry and Dwellingup, which was where the logs went to be processed at the sawmills. Although there is still some logging activity and a working sawmill, the industry has largely died out in the area due to a catastrophic fire which wiped out not only most of the forest, but the settlements which had developed in the forest to house and cater for the loggers. The jarrah (a type of eucalyptus, with a long, straight trunk) is now growing there again but the ubiquitous radiata pine has overtaken it as the 'tree of choice' in the milling and building industries, so although the wood is fashionable for kitchens and furniture, it is unlikely that jarrah will ever again be exploited to the extent it was 100 years ago.

The train upon which we travelled is part of the Hotham Valley Tourist Railway 'stable' and we were much impressed by the work of this very lively preservation society. In addition to diesel engines, there are a number of steam engines and so we decided to take another trip with the same outfit, this time from Perth to Dwellingup, via Pinjarra. On this journey we were hauled by diesel as far as Pinjarra, where two steam engines took over, to double-head us to Dwellingup, negotiating the steepest incline in Western Australia, with possibly the most tortuous track. As you might imagine, there were lots of opportunities to take photos of the engines 'coming back on themselves', and all the 'anoraks' on board had a terrific time. We had not had time to explore Dwellingup when we had been before as we were on a tight

schedule, but this day was more relaxed and we enjoyed lunch and a walk round before the journey back to Perth.

The other major excursion we took was to Rottnest Island, about 45 minutes fast sailing west of Fremantle. We went to Fremantle from Perth down the Swan River by river ferry and then transferred to the large, fast Rottnest Ferry for the very lumpy ride to the island - we were glad we had taken our Marzine and not had too big a breakfast! The island is a nature reserve and ecologically friendly holiday resort, although as it started out as an aboriginal penal colony, the earliest sojourners probably didn't find it that relaxing! In fact, they built the magnificent lighthouse which dominates the island, first quarrying the stone and then lugging it the several hundred metres to the site before then actually erecting it... a tough life, indeed. The buildings on the island are all either from these early times (the actual jail is now an hotel with the cells the rooms - and we complain about our hotel!) or else built in keeping with them, from similar materials.

We took a two hour bus tour of the island and enjoyed some spectacularly rugged coastal scenery, with sapphire, turquoise and emerald breakers the height of a house breaking against the rocky off-shore reefs. It was a great surprise to see whales spouting and diving just beyond these reefs, as the 'whale watching' season is really early September and we had not expected such luck. We also saw some quokkas, the small, endangered marsupial (resembling a very large guinea pig but with a pouch, of course) which is now only to be found on this small island. One, at least, had a 'joey' with her, so presumably the breeding programme is going according to plan! After an excellent lunch of quantities of huge, luscious fresh prawns, and a very imaginative salad, we took the fast ferry back to Fremantle; luckily the sea was calm and so we didn't regret our gluttony.

Fremantle itself was something of a disappointment as it seemed to us to be 'just another town' instead of the atmospheric, evocative old harbour town it presents itself as being. None the less, we had a pleasant stroll through the traffic-free streets, and also a trip around the city on the free bus. These are a great idea and we used them extensively within Perth, too. All transport in the city centre is free, which encourages people to leave their cars at home, or at one of the large, free, carparks which are also served by the buses, so pedestrians do not go in fear of their lives and there is no pollution or traffic jams. If the rest of the world was serious about reducing the amount of traffic in its cities, this is the obvious solution.

We were incredibly lucky with the weather the whole time we were away, with the only wetting coming at the airport as the taxi dropped us off for our homeward flight - I wonder if the designers of this modern facility thought it funny to bring the canopy out over only half the pavement, so not only does one get wet getting the luggage out of the car, but the drips from the edge of said canopy complete the drenching as one passes under it into the terminal building! It took the entire duration of the (very bumpy) flight back for our clothes to dry off.

Never mind, it was an easy journey and we arrived back safely having enjoyed a very interesting, if not very relaxing holiday. Western Australia is a long way from anywhere, but it rewards a visit and, although we have no plans to return, should we ever find ourselves in a position to do so, we would certainly like to explore some of the places we didn't reach - especially Kalgoorlie, where we hear the goldmines are giving out free samples ... or maybe that's just a rumour?!