



In the Land “Down Under”

By Don Mankin

I woke up in my private villa with the first glow of dawn, climbed out of bed and walked across the floor to open the drapes. Just 15 yards away was a large kangaroo standing motionless, as if posing for a picture.



After a few seconds he bounded silently away. I spent the next hour sipping espresso on the porch, futilely waiting for his return and listening to the sounds of the Australian bush waking up.

I was in Australia for 11 days as a guest of the tourism boards of Western Australia, New South Wales and South Australia to showcase the wonders of this vast and varied land. This is the perfect destination for mature adventurers – a beautiful, wild, uncrowded place with extraordinary wildlife, luxurious accommodations, excellent cuisine and wine, and friendly, unpretentious people.

My trip began in Western Australia (WA). From the air WA looks vast and empty, like a wrinkled sheet of brown butcher paper, crisscrossed by thousands of miles of lonely roads. On the ground, it's endless sea, beach and low lying brush. It is an intense, sensual place – hot air, bright sun, soft breezes, blue sky, white sand, cool, aquamarine water and colorful birds with songs that ring crisply in the dry air.

For two nights I stayed at Sal Salis (www.salsalis.com.au), a remote, low impact, luxury safari camp in the

sand dunes behind the beach in Cape Range National Park. Every tent is roomy, tastefully decorated and contains big, comfortable beds and private baths.

But the main attraction is the Ningaloo Reef which begins a few yards offshore. This means that great snorkeling is just a few waddles and kicks away. Other activities include fishing, whale watching, walking along the beach, hiking in a nearby gorge, swimming with whale sharks in the Spring and serious relaxing.

Kangaroos often wandered through camp, especially at dawn or dusk, wallabies scrambled on rocks in the gorge and colorful, unfamiliar birds flew from the bushes. Often the only sounds I heard were the surf, the birds and my tent flaps slapping in the breeze.

From there I headed to the Blue Mountains, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a 2-3 hour drive west of Sydney. This sandstone plateau is chiseled by deep gorges, the deepest at almost 2,500 feet and 20 miles across at its widest point. Over 700 major falls tumble over the white, yellow and red escarpments and a thick forest fills the valley floor. The area also has a rich aboriginal history with sites and artifacts dating back almost 22,000 years.

I spent the night at the Emirates Wolgan Valley Resort and Spa

in the heart of the Blue Mountains (www.wolganvalley.com). This natural, outdoorsy but posh resort is the only significant development in the valley so the 180 degree views of the valley from the individual guest villas (with private swimming pools!) are pristine.

In addition to my dawn encounter with the ephemeral kangaroo, I also saw wallabees, wombats and other kangaroos, including a rare albino with her joey (offspring).

A spectacular 50 minute helicopter flight over the Blue Mountains, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House whisked me to the airport for my flight to Adelaide in South Australia for the next leg of my adventure.

After one night in the Barossa Valley, Australia's foremost wine growing region, where I had the best meal of the trip and one of the best of my life at Jacobs Creek Retreat at Moorooroo Park (www.jacobscreekretreat.com.au), it was off to Kangaroo Island, my final stop.

I saw kangaroos plus koala, echidnas (porcupine like critters with long snouts), sea lions and seals plus some of the most interesting birds I have seen outside of Africa.

Kangaroo Island more than lived up to its name with kangaroos on the roads, in the fields and up close on a walk through a forest at dusk. One third of the island is devoted to national parks and conservation areas so wallabies and kangaroos greatly outnumber people – 800,000, 200,000 and 4,300 respectively. I saw plenty plus koala, echidnas (porcupine like critters with long snouts), sea lions and seals plus some of the most interesting birds I have seen outside of Africa.

I spent my last night at the Southern Ocean Lodge (www.southernoceanlodge.com.au) on the rugged southern coast of the island. In a trip filled with highlights and superlatives, SOL blew the needle off the scale -- a low slung structure on the cliffs overlooking the wild Southern Ocean-- next stop Antarctica, 8,500 miles away.

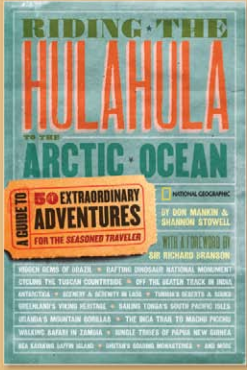


Don Mankin modeling the latest in snorkeling attire off the coast of Western Australia.

The view and the lodge were so spectacular that when it was time to turn in for the night, I just lay in bed looking at the stars through the wall of sliding glass doors. Eventually the sound of the waves crashing below gently lulled me to sleep.

For more information on this trip, see my blog at www.adventuretransformations.com.

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