Journey Around the World

October 2000 – April 2001

AUSTRALIA, FIJI AND USA

Part 22: Australian Cities
Part 23: More Bloody Australia
Part 24: Fiji
Part 25: USA

22: Australian Cities

Australian cities sparkle. The clear light from sweeping skies, sunshine and breeze, green open spaces, imaginative use of waterfront, good public transport, and an atmosphere of relaxed toleration: the state capitals of Australia all have these qualities in common.

CBD is an Australian acronym for the Central Business District, which is a clearly defined area where the tall buildings are. In Perth the CBD is only a few blocks square and centred on a pedestrian-only shopping precinct. Two linked bus circuits loop around it; the service is free and frequent. There are 1.76 million people in the vast state of Western Australia and 1.3 million of them live in the Perth metropolitan area, yet the broad roads are largely empty of traffic. As survivors of Hanoi and Saigon street crossings we felt we could amble across anywhere, though, as throughout Australia, pedestrians waited patiently on the corners of vacant roads for the walking green man to appear on the traffic signal. I assumed that the sparse traffic was due to the efficiency of the free inner city bus services, but a taxi driver put me right, as taxi-drivers do. Everybody stays in the suburbs, he told me; they live, work, shop and entertain themselves there. The only people who venture into the CBD are "office johnnies".

A modernistic free-standing bell-tower chimes the hours in the green parkland at the edge of the wide Swan river, where ferries depart upstream to the hinterland and down river to the seaport of Fremantle. Swift catamarans skim the 25 kilometres to the coast in ninety minutes. Along this route lie thirteen luxurious marinas where thousands of big white craft, mostly powerboats, sparkle on their moorings. Both green river banks are lined with palatial homes, in modern or imitation Mediterranean idioms. There are no Federation-style hipped tin roofs and homely verandahs here. The display of so much conspicuous consumption stirred the ferry steward to switch on the public address system. He proudly told us how many millions the most spectacular palaces cost, the names of the Australian robber barons, such as Alan Bond, who had recently built, sold or acquired them, and whether they were still in, just released from, or just about to enter prison.

Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, has an even smaller CBD, where the skyscrapers fill up less than half of the square grid, a kilometre each side, formed by the North, East, South and West Terraces. The "office johnnies" here can walk to work if they live in any of the charming little Federation-style artisans' cottages which still populate the inner city. Rush hour traffic is confined to a few major arteries and lasts about twenty minutes. Elsewhere, tranquillity reigns.

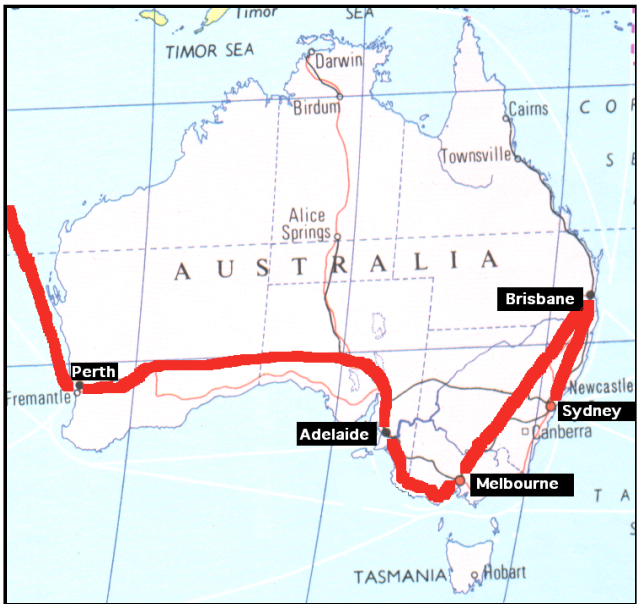
A small river, the Torrance, ambles through Adelaide and where it grazes the CBD there is a green parkland where people relentlessly jog, roller skate or row. Boathouses, cafés and restaurants are dotted along the south bank, and behind them, like the magic city of Oz, rise the modern towers of the cultural centre: the museum, art gallery, theatre, concert hall, library and university.

There is a big sky overhead and the city has an outdoor feel. It takes only minutes to drive from the CBD to the beaches fringing the wild southern ocean, or into the green Adelaide hills up to the famous vineyards of the Barossa Valley, or down to those of the Maclaren Vale. A leisurely two-hour car journey brought us to Carrickalinga on the coast, where we walked for miles along empty beaches on a wild shore. Judith bounced over hill and dale in a six-wheeled 'Polaris' off-road vehicle and fed a semi-wild kangaroo with the remains of our breakfast Muesli and just a small portion of her finger.

The cultural heart of Melbourne, at the head of a huge bay, also clusters around a river, the Yarra. But it's a big city approached through kilometres of suburban sprawl which include Moonee Ponds, nominal hometown of Dame Edna Everage. Skyscrapers thrusting up at the edge of

the river dwarf the pink colonial elegance of Flinders railway station. On the opposite bank is a glittering cliff of cafes, restaurants and shops on several levels linked by walkways.

Twenty-five years ago the Brisbane riverfront was an industrial slum. Today the skyscrapers of the CBD on the north bank, set behind a botanical park, face the modern architecture of the cultural centre and luxurious balconied apartment buildings on the south bank. Bicycle paths and walkways, on gently curving pavements and timber decks, passing between greensward and mangroves, parallel the south bank of the river for several kilometres. We spent the best part of three days in the South Park riverside area - wandering, cycling, lunching in cafes, visiting the art gallery and bathing in a large artificial outdoor pool with a sandy beach and a view of the towers of the CBD across the river. The success of the 2000 Olympiad seems to have pushed Australians into a fitness frenzy; people whizzed by on racing bikes, roller blades and skate boards, or rushed past jogging or power walking, or hung above our heads on ropes scaling the granite cliffs which once were a quarry. When the two graceful arches now reaching from South Park and the Botanical Park finally meet, an elegant foot and cycle bridge will create a delightful traffic-free circuit linking both sides of the river. The public amenities are imaginative, well cared for and well-used, including coin operated 'barbies'. The river is an important transport conduit: small ferries and large catamarans bustle along and across it, ferrying commuters, shoppers, school children and tourists everywhere.



The hinterland of Brisbane is glorious, too. To the north is the Sunshine Coast and to the south is the Gold Coast, where there is a stunning resort development called Sanctuary Harbour and a large town called Surfers Paradise. That just about says it all, but not quite. Because inland from both are ranges of mountains - the strange geometric shapes of the Glasshouse mountains to the north, so named by Captain Cook when he saw them glinting from out at sea, and the humped hills around Mount Tambourine to the south. Picturesque tourist-oriented villages nestle in both of these - but there are also natural trails winding down cliff sides through jungle vegetation and past rushing cascades. Beyond is a

view of green hills - you would have to drive through pastures, irrigated fields, orchards and forests for ten hours before you came to the western end of green Queensland and the start of the dry red heart of the continent.

Sydney is a much bigger city, with even more spectacular natural resources surrounding the CBD, but the same thoughtful environmental approach is in evidence here. The focus of public transport is the Circular Quay, where the rapid rail system touches the ferry docks against the magnificent scenic backdrop of the Harbour Bridge on the left and the Opera House on the right. Craft of all sizes, shapes and speeds ply the crisp blue waters. You can reach the Pacific surf at Manly beach in half an hour. Or half an hour the other way, past the exhibition centre at Darling Harbour, you can travel to the suburbs for a mundane dental appointment. We did both. Wherever you go, the air is fresh, the people are vigorous and the views are magnificent. To the visitor from the neurotic hub of an old, gloomy, rainswept, constricted and plague-ridden island in the North Sea, Australian cities are Paradise Regained.

23: More Bloody Australia

Australian cities are widely separated and one is always aware that at the back of them, in the direction away from the coast, the setting of these glittering jewels is a vast, silent, largely unpopulated continent. And so the only way to experience the context of Australia is to cross it on the ground, by train or motor transport.

The Indian Pacific train travels between Perth on the west coast and Sydney on the east coast twice a week on the tracks of the Trans-Australian Railway. This was conceived at the time of Federation in 1901 but as the various states had different gauge tracks it was not until 1911 that construction actually began. The route crosses the Nullarbor Desert (not an aboriginal name but from the Latin, *null arbor*). Aborigines lived where there is no shade and no running surface water for 1,000 miles. It is a limestone plateau which emerged from the sea and is riddled with underground caverns. One hundred kilometres from the coast there are blowholes where you can sniff salt air. Scattered wells tap some water, but the mineral salts wreaked havoc with steam engines. (These would not yield to diesel-electric until 1951). To construct the railway everything - food, water and coal - had to be ferried in on the backs of plodding camels. Yet the line was completed in

five years. It includes the world's longest stretch of perfectly straight track - 478 kilometres without a curve, cutting or incline. Even today the train makes lengthy stops at remote outposts to take on water - for the use of passengers - which has to be transported to these depots in tank cars.

We travelled 2,666 kilometres from Perth to Adelaide - somewhat more than halfway to Sydney - and the journey took two days and nights. The long chain of neat Perth suburbs finally yielded to a coastal range of rolling hills, through which we trundled along a stream threading through gum trees with red and silver bark and dense green cushions of shrub. This was in turn displaced by huge wheat fields in stubble extending to the horizon, then sheep pastures. These faded into flat scrubland relieved from time to time by a dried out salt pan, or a green patch around a shimmering billabong. There were occasional isolated farms, the more occasional chequerboard street pattern of a small town, and finally, through the windows of our 'twinette' compartment we saw only that flat expanse known as MMBA. (Miles and Miles of Bloody Australia). Yet it is strangely captivating. The unchanging colours are mesmerising: olive green-grey bushes, peachy red earth and eggshell blue sky. There are constant subtle changes in the scrub. For kilometre after kilometre it will be merely ankle high, then suddenly the bushes are all knee-high, or the next time you look are as tall as small trees. A sudden roll to the land captures the eye, as does the glint of a silvery mirage just above the horizon, or a distant kangaroo perched placidly on its tail before bounding away through the bush. There is the occasional station halt. At the settlement of Cook we strolled around vacant buildings and abandoned vehicles shimmering in the desert heat. The empty classroom was littered with discarded school projects; a wall poster listed 1997 television programmes. Cook now has a population of two.

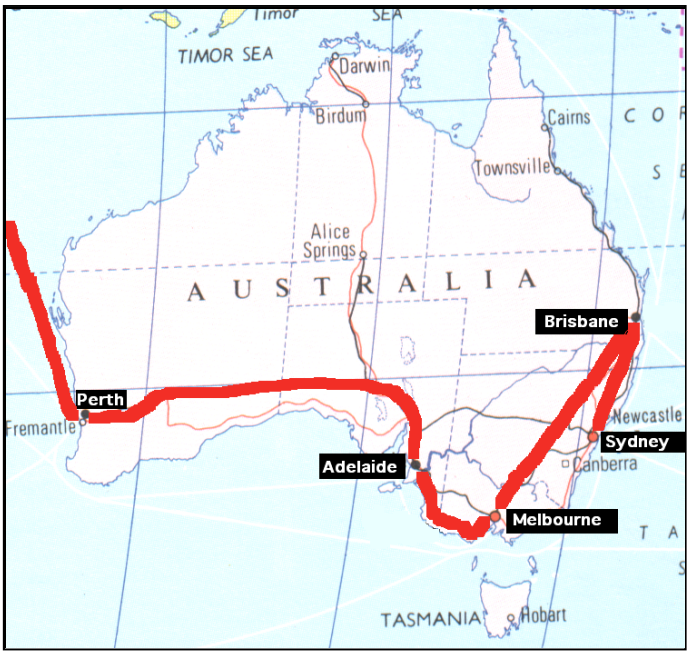
The promotional literature, of course, advertises this journey in the style of the 1930s Orient Express: elegant ladies in cloche hats, dashing young men in tweeds, and silver service dinners. Some of this lifestyle may have been savoured in the first class carriages but our 'holiday' class, while perfectly comfortable, was peopled by OAPs and a few young female Japanese backpackers, and the dead hand of mass catering was dishing out the grub. The lunch menu in our buffet car offered a choice of railway-style hamburgers, hot dogs or potato wedges with sour cream dip. Yet half a dozen filet steaks were sizzling on the steward's grill. "Those are for the staff", he explained, without embarrassment.

A worse example of Australian bonhomie awaited us in Kalgoorlie. This is a large town in the middle of nowhere which was created by the late 19th century gold rush. Gold is mined there still; the only other economic

activity is the "hospitality" industry, as mass catering is known in Oz – and its furthest edge, prostitution. This is legalised and conducted with some wit: one of the brothels features a bedstead mounted on the chassis of a Holden motor car, which honks and flashes lights as its occupants bump and grind.

The train halts at Kalgoorlie for three hours, and we reckoned a local restaurant would offer a more attractive dinner menu. We marched past the dining room of the 'Railway Motel' and the neon lights of 'Hungry Jack's' drive-in, into broad streets lined by colonnaded wooden and stuccoed buildings. Some had iron lacework first-floor balconies and inscriptions of the date of erection. The earliest was 1898, five years after gold was discovered here. On the street level of these quaint structures we found pizza, burger and kebab eateries and some were 'hotels', Australian for pubs. As it was Friday evening these were pulsating with live music.

The institutional dining room of the 'Railway Motel' suddenly seemed appealing. It was ten to nine when we arrived back there. The scowling waitress pursed her lips: "The kitchen closes at nine". "Then we're just in time," I said. "What can we order?" She disappeared into the kitchen for a few minutes and then came out to say we could order anything on the menu. We made our choices, she returned to the kitchen, then reappeared to say we could have lamb shanks. Nothing more. "This is Kalgoorlie", she explained. So we ate the warmed-over dregs of the evening special - huge, overcooked chunks of meat in a glutinous gravy with boiled spuds and a salad largely composed of pickles.



There are far quicker ways to get from Adelaide to Melbourne than to drive over 1,000 kilometres along the Coastal Highway. But none is more scenic. The lonely highways stretching through pastures and forests and winding along the littoral salt marshes and the fantastic eroded sea cliffs restore the thrill of driving a car. Our journey took a leisurely three days. We stayed one night in Coonawarra, where the red terra rosa soil produces such fabulous wines from the Cabernet Sauvignon grape that you can build a prosperous business on

two acres of vineyard. Our second overnight stop was Port Fairy (named for the penguins, not the visitors), a snug harbour for pleasure boats protected by a low island which is a reserve for lumbering, ground-dwelling mutton birds. The third night we spent in Lorne, a sedate and expensive beach resort popular with Melbournites. One scenic wonder led to another. The deep, blue crater lake surreally appearing on the other side of a suburban street in Mount Gambier. The spectacular limestone cliffs pounded by the rollers sweeping up from Antarctica, enlarging the underground caverns with thundering foam. The lonely stacks of the Twelve Apostles and the Bay of Islands, rising like sentinels from the sea, slim-waisted where the white horses ceaselessly nibble. The formation known as London Bridge, no longer a span but a stump since its arch collapsed ten years ago, marooning two tourists who had to be recovered by helicopter. We clambered down into one sandy cove at Lochard Gorge where 150 years ago a young lad had been tossed ashore after a shipwreck, then swam out to rescue a young girl, the only other survivor. Astonishingly, when he climbed up the slope he encountered a couple of stockmen from one of the few scattered habitations along this coast. Had the waves swept him into the entrance of the neighbouring cove, fifty metres further along, he would never have been able to scale the cliff face.

After six months' abstinence we enjoyed western cultural activities again. In Melbourne a performance of Noel Coward's 'Design for Living', though in my view flawed by poor casting and sloppy direction, was extremely powerful. Written as a thinly veiled defence of homosexuality, it skims archly over the surface of some deeply uncomfortable philosophical issues and, seventy years on, its amoral message retains the power to shock. The Adelaide art gallery showed some interesting Australian painters in generous space; the Brisbane gallery was memorable less for its new exhibition of the curiously second-rate collection of M. Guillaume (the gallery owner who sponsored Renoir, Soutaine, Rousseau and others) than for its striking architecture. This included running water flowing down the outside and through open spaces underfoot. My initial impression was that these were covered by glass, a misapprehension which I fortunately discovered just in time. In Sydney our good luck held and, after squatting in a queue which lengthened behind us for an hour and a half, we secured the last two standing room tickets for the Australian National Ballet company's performance of 'Giselle' – a stunning presentation, though the much put upon fall guy Hilarion, I thought, gets a rum deal.

In places like Kalgoorlie, Australian food remains diabolical. In the cities and sophisticated resorts both wine and food are marvellous, though some of the more adventurous Asian-influenced concoctions, such as octopus

and mango, simply don't work. More typical was the fare in Costas, a restaurant in Lorne which had been recommended by an Australian we met in New Delhi months before. In this simple place the fresh grilled snapper and whiting, lightly spiced, with a plum and cardamom cake for afters, were superb. Usually, however, I succumbed to oysters, which were plentiful and cheap. I had oysters natural, oysters with salsa, oysters with ginger and lime, oysters Kilpatrick (wrapped in bacon), oyster fried in bread crumbs, and oysters dotted with sharkfin and jellyfish. I have decided to name this continent Oysteralia.

The best thing about Australia, however, is its people. They are open and friendly, and, unlike the institutionalised American attitude, genuinely so. Moreover, this is no longer a remote outpost in the Antipodes; the lifestyle is enviable and the rest of the world is near at hand.

In Adelaide, our friends Claire and Phil have a modern high-ceilinged flat near the city centre and facing a large park; weekends are spent in a ranch house on the beach in Carrickalinga with a view that extends to the Antarctic. Their son, Alex, had just arrived home from Amsterdam. In Brisbane, Darrell and Jill have a flat in a luxury building where you can sit on the balcony and watch the skyscrapers across the river change colour as the day progresses and twinkle at nightfall. Their weekends are spent at Palm Beach on the Gold Coast in a similar flat in a tower with a breath-taking view on the beach front. Their household was in a tizzy because daughter Rebecca had just flown in from Edinburgh and was fretting about her boyfriend who remained behind, marooned by the Australian Immigration Office, whilst daughter Khayt, newly returned to Edinburgh, awaited the imminent arrival of her boy friend, Aaron, whose 'bon voyage' party we attended, naturally, in a pub, but one serving superb Aussie food. In Sydney, Andrew and Hennie live in a charming Victorian house, extensively remodelled to include a huge, sunlit kitchen. Their fifteen-year-old son, Sam, was about to depart with a huge packing case containing his double-bass, on a school concert tour of the cities of Northern Italy and Britain, and his parents were to follow.

Australia is patently striving to find the right balance between economic progress and maintaining the quality of life. Though he's on the other side of the fence, Darrell, who deals in commercial property in Queensland, would probably agree with Andrew, who is Minister for Planning for the Labour Government of New South Wales. His policy is to preserve the character of Sydney harbour by ensuring that high-rise development is stepped back from the precious waterfront sites in favour of low-rise traditional commercial activities, such as boat-building, even if these must be encouraged through subsidy. The life-enhancing Australian

approach towards the environment, in contrast to the controlling American attitude, is summarised by the sign in the Sydney Botanical Gardens, next to that soaring achievement, the Opera House. It reads, "Please step on the grass".

24: Fiji

Depending upon the state of global warming, there are about 350 islands belonging to the nation of Fiji, of which some 130 are inhabited. Like most tourists, we confined ourselves to the largest, Viti Levu. Having only five days, we sought the convenience of one of the more modest resort hotels on the south coast. As we stepped out of the aircraft the air was as warm and moist as the face towels the stewards had recently distributed to us. We drove through lush green hills past fields of sugar cane and straggling hamlets of fibreboard huts. The "Hideaway" was aptly named - a collection of bungalows built in the form of traditional bures hidden beneath palm trees in a beautifully landscaped garden of flowers fronting a lagoon. You could snorkel almost from your threshold, but only at high water; at low tide the sea retreated all the way to the barrier reef.

We had negotiated a ten per cent discount at the "Hideaway" by phone from Australia. Because of the continuing political unrest since the failed coup a year ago tourists are scarce in Fiji. New Zealand insurance companies will not extend protection to their nationals who visit the islands. Unemployment has risen to 25 per cent, and many of the tourist guides have

lost permanent jobs and work as casuals, generally earning no more than ten Fiji dollars per day (about £3.00).

Maurice and Kayley, diving instructors from British Columbia, have seized the moment to buy the assets of a bankrupt scuba diving company. Maurice has a vague, drawling manner and a thousand-fathom stare. He has spent most of his life underwater mainlining on nitrogen and, to borrow a ripe simile from Australia, is as mad as a cut snake. Fortunately it was his partner, Kayley, as sound and solid as the hard rubber ball she resembles, who guided us beneath the surf crashing over the barrier reef. They have no dive shop, but operate from the beach at Korolevu out of a van which looks like it has been crumpled in a garlic press. There is a tiny control tower by the road here, and a sign proclaiming an airport, but the flat area between the hills is overgrown with scrub. The jungle has also encroached on the ruins of a luxury beach hotel wiped out by a cyclone in 1984. Another violent storm hit this shore just last month, sweeping away some houses and shovelling cartloads of sand into the swimming pool of the "Hideaway".

We powered out through the waves sweeping through a narrow gap in the reef. Once a rogue crest twice as high as any of the others crashed over the bow; had we not taken it head on it would have swamped us. Down below, on each of our four dives, visibility was limited because of the run-off from a nearby river. Still we saw a great variety of brightly coloured underwater life, including Moorish idols, butterfly fish, the resplendent parrot fish, feathery crinoids, a large sea turtle and one fish that looked like it had wrapped itself in the American flag. Drifting along the steep reef wall at a shallow depth of just twelve metres or so we were swept helplessly to and fro in the relentless surge, just like the schools of fish we were eyeballing. Unlike them we were seriously underpowered. Our cheap hired fins flopped like fly-swatters and twice Kayley had to haul us by the scruff of our inflated vests away from the tow of the surf breaking over the reef.

The diving team also owned a larger dive boat, but it was operating as a hearse to transport the corpse of a chief and a party of mourners from an outlying island to a funeral ceremony. Last November it had been pressed into service on a rescue mission. A heavily overloaded small boat returning shoppers from Viti Levu to another island had failed to arrive. The next day the dive boat rescued thirteen people clinging to a couple of large boat cushions, and later another six.. A man who had tried to swim ashore was found dead, and on the second day a final survivor was discovered clinging to an offshore rock. There is no formal air-sea rescue service in Fiji.

We had only two encounters with traditional Fiji life. One night a lively troupe of local men and women from a neighbouring village performed local dances; their smiles and laughter showed they enjoyed the fun as much as we did. And one day we journeyed in a long punt with a powerful outboard motor from Pacific Harbour, a listless and almost deserted collection of expensive villas clustered around a golf course, up the Navua River into the highlands. Pristine jungle closed in around us immediately; the hills grew steeper and waterfalls tumbled through the greenery. After an hour or so we arrived at Namuamua village, a listless and almost deserted collection of shacks with roofs of straw or tin.

A range of hills divides eastern Viti Levu, which is generally sunny, from the west, which can be seriously moist, and the Navua River is on the wrong side of the divide. We reached the sanctuary of the village hall just as the gloomy skies released a tropical downpour. We were greeted by the turaga-ni-koro or hereditary chief, a portly and genial thirty-something, and his more ascetic and frowning deputy, for the traditional welcoming ceremony. They wore the traditional sarong or sevusevu, topped and tailed with T- shirts and trainers. Custom required that we, too, don our sevusevu, in modesty, over our shorts. Our hosts sat cross-legged in the centre of the bare room before a large wooden bowl, the tanoa, with our small tourist group plus a local guide in a semi-circle facing them, cross-legged too, again as custom requires. Because this ritual has spiritual as well as social significance there are certain protocols to be observed. One must never turn one's back on the tanoa, nor walk across the circle of participants, nor step over the cord leading from the tanoa to a white cowrie shell, which symbolises a link to the afterworld. The chief and his aide prepared yaqona, a drink made from the roots of kava, a plant belonging to the pepper family, in the tanoa, by soaking a cloth parcel containing the dried and powdered roots in water. The chief dipped a bilo (half of a coconut shell) into the mixture and offered it around, first to the men.

As instructed by our guide, I clapped my hands together once, said "bula" (meaning

“hello”, “cheers”, or - literally - “life”), then accepted the bilo from the chief. It contained what looked like muddy water. Custom demands that one bolt it down in one long swig. This seems a good idea in any case; it tasted like musty wood. I clapped three times to indicate my gratification and received a nod and a smile from the chief. The locals insist that yaqona is not alcoholic, but it is a mild narcotic. It is used for pharmaceutical purposes as a diuretic and for relief of tension. The only effect we noticed was a slight numbness of the lips. Excessive indulgence, it is said, can lead to drowsiness, scaly skin, and impotence. There seemed no need for further gratification, and we were not pressed.

The chief made a short speech of welcome which was translated - or perhaps invented - by the guide. He then unexpectedly asked me to reply to the chief on behalf of the party. My first thought was to tell the tale of my first encounter with his countrymen, when I was run over by three of them in rapid succession on a rugby pitch in Germany. However, I thought the anecdote might be misinterpreted in translation, and simply replied that we had fulfilled the dream of every European to visit Fiji. That seemed to go down well. According to the guide book, visitors are expected to bestow a bundle of kava roots on the chief; however our new chums amiably accepted a substitute gift of a few Fiji dollars. I thought I had managed the protocol pretty well until I got up to leave and clapped my hat on my head, drawing a swift rebuke from our guide.

When the rain stopped Judith and I paddled back downstream in an inflatable raft with another guide. Soon the clouds blackened and we were caught in a deluge. We were drenched and the waterfalls began to run pure caramel, spreading great stains into the rain-roughened river. Back on the main road, when the tourist bus picked us up its air-conditioning was going full blast, chilling us to the bone. Not for the first time in our travels we had to ask for the a/c to be turned off and open the windows to warm up.

We saw little of the culture of the Indians who were brought in as indentured labour for the plantations of cane, cotton and copra. Today they comprise 45 per cent of the population and because they are resented by many indigenous Fijians for their growing commercial and political power, ethnic discrimination lie at the heart of the recent upheavals.

Though we spent several hours immersed or submerged, metaphorically we have barely dipped our toes in Fijian waters. Up to 129 islands remain on our list.

25: USA

I arrived in California carrying a cauldron of well-marinated prejudices against American values. Gratifyingly, these were promptly confirmed. In Los Angeles airport an immensely obese woman gulped down a giant container of Diet Coke. In San Francisco I mistook a man wheeling a set of matched luggage down the pavement for a business class traveller until he stopped to delve into a wastebin. And in this fabled American city, for the first time, I had difficulty cashing US dollar travellers' cheques. None of the banks seemed to have heard of this form of negotiable instrument.

But American lifestyle is irresistibly seductive.

Gerard is an English molecular biologist working on oncogenes who used to toil in London. He would drive to the railway station, jostle for a seat on a crowded train, and an hour or so later, depending on Richard Branson's mood, would be disgorged into the underground for a twenty-minute journey to his lab. Where he would have to throw a tantrum to acquire more cupboard space. Now, like Dustin Hoffman in the opening scene of "The Graduate", Gerard wheels across the Golden Gate bridge every morning in a red Mercedes convertible with four speakers belting out Vivaldi, in preference

with the soft top down. Guided by a Global Positioning System Wayfinder, it takes him 25 minutes to get to his lab. Where resources are lavished upon him.

Instead of Stevenage New Town he and wife Jane and two kids now roost in a sprawling treetop eyrie clinging to the side of a ravine in Marin County. From here a network of paths meanders up the rugged Californian coast, past wild beaches and through forests of giant redwoods and sequoia all the way to Oregon. This is Mill Valley, the epicentre of that esoteric Lotus Land so exquisitely satirised in the 1970s book, *The Serial* by Cyra McFadden. Now there is café latte instead of cocktails, group gropes take place in cyberspace and feng shui has more cosmic significance than horoscopes. Yet Californian attitudes and anxieties remain the same: how to release the full potential of that unique individual within yourself without in any way standing out from the crowd, how to get your kids into the right school whilst retaining your egalitarian values and how to keep out of debt on a million a year (cf. Sherman McCoy in Thomas Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*).

We helped ourselves to generous portions of Californian excess. We wandered through exotic spring flowerings in the Golden Gate Botanical Park and blew our minds on windy Ocean Beach, where we dipped toes into the eastern waters of the Pacific, but found no sign of a bottle dropped from Fiji. We paced the steep hills to admire the wooden houses with their turrets, oriole windows and fantastic carpenter gothic traceries. We attended the Concert Hall to watch the tiny deaf Scots percussionist, Evelyn Glennie, prancing barefoot in sparkling black trousers and a long tunic through the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra from one set of instruments to another.

Are there slugs on the lotus leaves? A few. On a sparkling spring day we drank in the "Pelican", an English country pub perfect in every feature, but completely missing the point: you can't take your pint out into the garden. California law forbids it. The cocaine-snorting, sexually liberated worthies of this state seem to feel that drinking is somehow disreputable and best done in closets. At nearby Muir Beach we found the worst lavatory in all of our travels - India not excepted - a portaloo which had been devastated by a crowd of Sunday picnickers

Gerard and Jane drove us to Truckee at Lake Tahoe near the Nevada border where we stayed in a log cabin in the pines used by students at the University of California at San Francisco. The modern American log cabin, we discovered, comes equipped with washer and drier, three television sets and a video player, along with

homelier artefacts such as cuckoo clocks and pictures of stags at bay on the walls, a massive collection of stuffed animals and a small library of alternative therapies. A comprehensive supply of foodstuffs thoughtfully left behind in the fridge/freezer included such backwoods essentials as ice cream by the quart and a bottle of imitation banana essence.

We spent one marvellous day skiing in the Sugar Bowl and then the blizzard set in. On our retreat, just one week since lying on a Fiji beach I found myself putting chains on Gerard's snazzy red convertible at 2,000 metres in the Donner Pass. Fifteen decades ago a handful of pioneers survived a winter here only by eating each other. We had feasted instead on melt-in-the mouth rare steak, freshly caught grilled salmon, cajun crab, deep fried clams and oysters, duck risotto, perfectly grilled rare cheeseburgers, pancakes with maple syrup, Mexican eggs ranchero with fried beans, lavender creme brulee . . . and, I am ashamed to say, our unfinished plates sometimes made their contribution to the 200,000 tons of food which is thrown away every day in the US. of Affluence.

Jane and Gerard's bright and sociable kids now chew gum and wear baseball caps, all the family members call us "guys" and despite their love of England, I doubt they will ever call it home again.

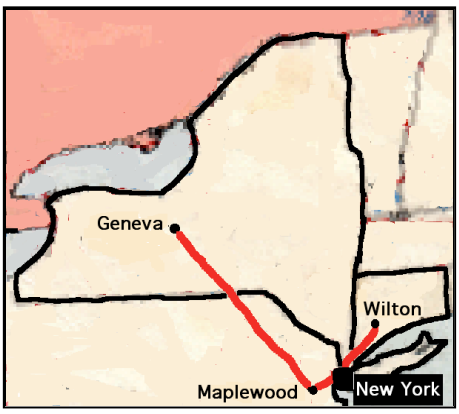
I arrived in New York resolved to resent the city I had been born in, and was completely charmed. Perhaps it was because the temperature at the end of April was in the 80s (Fahrenheit, for that is the measurement they use in this benighted country - along with feet, ounces, American Standard Engineering screw threads, and, for all I know, rods and pecks). Cherry and apple trees, magnolias, dogwoods, daffodils and tulips were in flower along the walkways linking the World Trade Center and the Battery. People strolled instead of scurrying, or sunbathed wearing thongs on the grass. The streets were cleaner, fresher and strangely quiet; owing to a new ordnance there was no horn-blowing and even the traffic was so light you could often cross in the middle of the street. There is, regrettably, a new fashion for renaming streets to celebrate popular causes, for example, "People with AIDS Plaza". When we occasionally paused to consult our guidebook people often approached, not to hold us up at gunpoint, but to ask if they could help. Manhattan has changed.

Fortunately my college chums have not, except in that least meaningful characteristic: outward appearance. Harold, a Federal district judge, now looks like Leonard Bernstein at his most flamboyant, and his chambers on the 22nd floor of the Federal Courthouse overlooking Foley Square have a view of most of lower Manhattan. But his leitmotif remains a youthful attitude of

bemused cynicism. We saw it on display in his courtroom as he chivvied a gaggle of lawyers into a swift selection of jurors for a money-laundering case. After disrobing he took us to Mott Street for a slap-up Chinese lunch. Harold will never retire. "I like all the bowing and scraping", he admitted.

Eliot, a key man with one of the major Wall Street financial institutions, was forced to retire because his younger colleagues thought he was a dinosaur. For example, he opposed the generous financing of dot.com start-ups. And so he left a few months before the crash of the technology stocks; he now proffers the same Jurassic investment advice two days a week from his own office.

Auk and his wife, Anna, generously gave us house room, a great many delicious muffins, lashings of corned beef hash and scrambled eggs for breakfast and more fillet steak for dinner. Auk has retired from the insurance business, but still visits the congresses of the Order of the Blue Goose, in which association he formerly held the exalted post of Grand Gander. At these meetings the chair will recognise speakers from the floor only if they rise and flap their arms; fortunately Auk has not yet imported this custom into his domestic arrangements. Which are very comfortable. The couple live in a hundred-year-old, three-storey detached wooden house shaded by large trees in the pleasant suburb of Maplewood, New Jersey. The big old homes in this community stand in landscaped yards rather than floral gardens and are tastefully painted in traditional drab shades. For contrast Auk drove us into Newark for an excellent meal in the thriving Portuguese quarter. We reached it through the black area where people took the air on front stoops, youths swaggered in baggy shorts, and girls rode pillion on massive motorbikes, wearing helmets and not much else.



We drove 400 kilometres north-west to New York State's Finger Lakes Region. Spring was unheralded here, and we sat in a freezing grandstand to watch one of my alma maters, Hobart College, being soundly thrashed in a lacrosse match by another, Syracuse University. It was all rather effete, since today's players are constantly running to and from the bench and waft lightweight aluminium sticks with floppy plastic nets instead of the stout hickory and unforgiving rawhide wielded in my day by 60-minute men of steel.

Next day the weather softened. Sitting in the sunshine outside of my former college digs we got into conversation with a scruffy figure that turned out to be the professor of political science. Since David's students do not seem to be interested in anything much, he teaches what interests him, which is revolution and protest. He advised us to lunch in the faculty dining room, where for about £4 we chose from a bountiful assortment of delicious food, served in a light and airy setting at tables with linen laid for four. Had I known about this as a student I should certainly have been interested in revolution and protest.

David had invited us to participate in his class and after lunch introduced us to a group of thunderstruck loungers in jeans, T-shirts and baseball caps. I explained that Auk and I had sat in this same classroom during the somnolent Eisenhower era, when there was neither revolution nor protest, just apathy. Though we lived through the historic McCarthy hearings, the broadcasts shown on the college's single black-and-white television in the student union attracted only a small coterie of the politically self-aware, who were regarded as whinging pseudo-intellectuals by the majority of the student body. Judith made a contribution about the role of celebrities such as Bob Geldof in raising the profile of political issues through events such as "Live Aid", but this had happened so long ago that our students knew neither the man nor his concert. This information overload seemed to provoke a state of severe shock, as David, to his evident embarrassment, found it difficult to extract any articulate comment. It was more like a high school class in which the lecturer is expected to perform, entertain and cajole a response from a slumped and mumbling audience. No one had done the reading for a forthcoming examination, and they were stunned when David wryly mentioned that in a British University they would be expected to take it orally.

Auk delivered himself of a confrontational speech about how the tuition fees in his day were one-quarter of what they are now, everyone had been addressed as Mister or Miss, the girls wore dresses (not true, they wore skirts and sweaters), and discourse was not punctuated with "like" and "you know". As we took our leave we received a hearty round of applause. This puzzled me until I worked out that had a couple of similar old duffers visited our class in our day, they would have represented the Class of 1907. The lads and lasses were probably astounded that we could still stand upright.

At the college bookstore I bought a book authored by another college chum, Ben, who went on to write speeches for President Lyndon Johnson and Senator Hubert Humphrey. He now writes a column syndicated in 200 newspapers and hosts a weekly discussion programme on public television,

which I watched and admired for his reasoned, yet non-confrontational mediation. We were unable to meet on this trip, but judging from his book, Values Matter Most, while I have been drifting from apolitical and apathetic to liberal (a pejorative word in today's USA), Ben has been marching steadily from left to right. Our paths must have crossed metaphorically in about 1975.

My final visit down Memory Lane was the Sigma Chi fraternity house, a large Victorian building backing on to Seneca Lake. I have often described to Judith a moment of epiphany when I entered this fine house on a spring morning to see the lake sparkling through the open French doors while a balmy breeze ruffled the curtains. Classical music played on a phonograph and a student was reclining on the sofa with his eyes closed. He refused to speak until the music concluded, and then informed me he had been studying. Music Appreciation 101. At that moment I resolved to transfer from the intense engineering college I was attending in a grim industrial town to Hobart in leafy Geneva. Fortunately I still remembered the secret fraternity handshake and so one of my young "brothers" showed us around. The house was just as I remembered it. Until the lad showed us a photograph of the former fraternity house, "which fell into the lake a long time ago." A hundred metres or so down the road an unfamiliar open view of the lake presented itself, and that is where we discovered its foundations, overgrown like a faded memory.

In my college days I was oblivious to how remarkably attractive the architecture of the Finger Lakes region is (and to much else besides). Towns like Geneva, Watkins Glen and Hammondsport are picture postcard pretty with their quiet tree-shaded streets dotted with white-spired churches and lined with homes in the Federal style, often refurbished in the early nineteenth century with the imposing pillars and pediments of the Greek revival period. Harsh central New York winters are moderated by the long, deep lakes, and in recent decades extensive vineyards have appeared on the rolling hillsides. Old farmhouses have been immaculately restored to serve as wineries and bed-and-breakfasts. New York is the second most important wine-producing American state and the Finger Lakes produces ninety per cent of its output. Consumers' palates are only gradually being educated away from an adolescent preference for sweet and blush wines, but there are some excellent Rieslings as well as Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc to be tasted. Which we did.

Back in Manhattan we strolled through the glories of a warm and blossoming Central Park, where people were playing softball, to a matinee concert at Lincoln Centre. This was British, too: the LSO performed a rousing Czech repertoire. We also lunched with Sue and Crawford, whom we'd met

on the ill-starred Earthwatch wolf project near Bhuj. They had stayed on another week in Gujarat. While they were observing lions in the wildlife park in Sasan Gir at dawn, their guide remarked that the animals were behaving oddly: they were pacing about restlessly. Returning to the hotel they found large cracks in its walls, the result of the earthquake centred at Bhuj, 200 kilometres to the north-east.

One of the great tourist attractions in New York City is an informative and emotionally moving exhibition at Ellis Island, where immigrants were decanted from 1892-1924. Over the decades the source of immigration shifted from Northern Europe to the Mediterranean and after a long hiatus between 1930 and 1960 when newcomers were actively discouraged, to Southeast Asia and Latin America. Depressingly, but honestly, graphic posters and documents showed the extreme prejudice with which each successful wave then tried to bar the entry of the next. Like most other visitors I searched the computer records for my grandparents. One of them may have been the Carl Anderson who had arrived from Sweden in 1892. (Unlikely. Back at my computer in Britain I discovered 970 immigrants of this name.) The Irish side of the family came over earlier and would have been processed at what was then Fort Clinton in Battery Park. They would have been astonished at the abundance enjoyed by their descendants at the final highlight of our American visit, a boisterous and warm-hearted three-generation family gathering hosted by cousin Ann and her husband Joe in their delightful home in the village of Wilton, Connecticut: the insalata tricolore, the filet mignon, the Californian Cabernet Sauvignon, the bakery delicacies - to say nothing of the inside toilets, five of them.

London, of course, was cold and grey, and because there had been an anti-capitalist protest on May Day, traffic was paralysed. But, whilst crawling down the M4, believe it or not, we saw four brightly coloured tropical parakeets lurching overhead. Honestly!

After more than six months of travelling round the world we have discovered these Seven Pillars of Wisdom.

1. Britain is the most expensive country in the world. (Granted, we did not visit Japan or Sweden).

2. People all over the world are extremely agreeable. (Except for about five or six).

3. International tourism is an overwhelmingly powerful economic force which is reshaping political institutions in many countries. (Given point 2, if

the young backpackers could only be persuaded to unplug their Walkmans and lift their eyes from their trashy novels it could also be a great force for international understanding).

4. Most travel agents are surplus to requirement. (Except in Vietnam).

5. Internet cafes have tucked the world into your knapsack. (Remember hunting through piles of dog-eared letters in a dusty post restante or trying to phone home from India?)

6. The travelling life, however uncertain, is relaxing because problems, however dire, are always simple. (It's the complexity of life at rest that creates anxiety).

7. To travel happily one must relish the present, dwelling neither in the past nor future, and certainly not the subjunctive. (Home is a great place to visit, but now we feel perched here rather than rooted).