

AMAZING QUEENSLAND **from reef to outback**

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

Aerial view of Brisbane



OUTBACK, Australia---We actually had to slow to a stop while a python ambled across the road.

But that's getting a little ahead of the story, although I swear it was as big around as a fire hose and taking its own sweet time.

«We give way to animals out here,» said my driver, Katie, a Nicole Kidman look-a-like. «All animals.»

The journey actually began a few days earlier when we left the western coast of Queensland on the Indian Ocean and headed into the legendary Australian Outback, or «The Bush» as the locals call it.

Author at Great Barrier Reef



And if that wasn't exotic enough, our drive would be practically astride the Tropic of Capricorn.

Now, the Tropic of Capricorn is an imaginary line just below the Equator that passes through Australia, Chile, Brazil and South Africa. Likewise, the Outback has no set boundaries, no beginnings and no end.

«There are no welcome signs,» said Katie, «but you know when you're here.»

Author Dominick Merle holding koala





Lounging kangaroo

There is also no agreement as to the size of the Outback, but it occupies practically the entire interior of the country, and Australia is almost as big as the U.S. or Canada. When's the last time you had to yield to a python in Chicago or Montreal?

After arriving in Brisbane, the smart, modern capital of Queensland, we «prepped» for our Outback adventure at nearby Lone Pine, the world's first koala sanctuary. There we were able to hold the cuddly koalas in our arms

and feed kangaroos, emus and wild lorikeets.

The next day, we stepped up the pace with a 75-minute boat ride to Tangalooma Island Resort where our itinerary included tobogganing down sand hills at speeds of 25 mph on thin masonite boards, and the showstopper---hand feeding wild dolphins at dusk.

Each evening a group of dolphins head to the beach and are fed fresh fish by the staff and guests. After wading hip-deep into the

water, a fish in each hand, the dolphins arrived on schedule and gently took the fish from our hands underwater, sometimes brushing their huge bodies against us as they swam off.

At sunrise, we drove up the coast to the Town of 1770 (Seventeen Seventy), a resort area named after the year explorer Capt. Cook first landed in Queensland. Seventeen Seventy and its

companion town, Agnes Water, are also the southernmost gateways to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, and we took a one-day cruise to the Reef the following morning.

The skies were cloudy and the waters a little choppy, but once we began snorkeling the dazzling colors of the corals and sea creatures below the surface burst into view, as though we suddenly

Downtown Brisbane



Exotic birds



left a black and white world and entered 3D. Glass bottom boat rides and a walking tour of a nearby island rounded out our day.

We drove, further up the Queensland coast to Rockhampton, Australia's beef capital, where we would «ride» the Tropic of Capricorn into the

Central Highlands and Outback. Our road was named the Capricorn Highway, but it was a misnomer. Not the Capricorn part because it actually traced that imaginary line on the map. Highway was a bit of a stretch because it was two-lane paved at best, often turning to gravel or dirt in the blink of an eye.

The longest trucks in the world, aptly called «road trains», use Capricorn Highway and when they blazed by hauling their three tractor trailers the wind rocked our four-wheel-drive vehicle like a cradle. We tended to give the road trains plenty of room, moving as far to the shoulder of the road as possible.

Now, without any fanfare, we were in the Outback, home to some of the strangest creatures on the planet. One can drive four or five hours here and see absolutely nothing in all directions. It's part desert, part greenery, flat as a griddle and about as hot in summer, and as remote as you're likely to ever be.

Feeding wild dolphins





Hitching oxen

You plan your fuel and food stops; pass one and it'll be four hours to the next. We were headed for Rubyvale, Australia's gem capital, particularly its sapphire mines. We stopped at the only gas station/restaurant en route. The specialties included a dingo trap sandwich (meat, cheese, eggs, salad, bacon) and spaghetti on toast (canned pasta of any kind heated and poured over plain toast), an Aussie breakfast favorite.

After our Rubyvale overnight we took another day drive to the

colorful, tiny town of Longreach. This seemed like stepping back into the old Wild West with saloons, cowboys and even a bonafide stagecoach which we boarded for a ride on a bonafide stagecoach route.

The six-horse coach reached speeds of 35 mph over bumpy terrain. A bit rattled, we headed for a more gentle candlelight dinner cruise on the nearby Thompson River. I had heard that the skies would be chock full of stars, and it was no exaggeration.

Outback farm



**Cowboy
horsing around**



Night and day shots of Brisbane skyline



Now deep into the Outback, driving over gravel and dirt roads with road trains whizzing by, we headed for Winton, another tiny town but known throughout Australia as the birthplace of its unofficial national anthem, Waltzing Matilda. There is an entire museum devoted to the song, and it is well worth a visit.

The python crossing occurred after we left Winton for an overnight at a sheep farm tucked away in the central Outback. The farm, known as Carisbrooke Station,

seemed like it was the last place on earth. This could be the boondocks of the Outback.

The original owner of the 50,000-acre sheep farm, Charles Phillot Sr., 70-something, drove us around the property. A farm this size is about average in the Outback, with some even 10 times larger.

At one time, Charles had more than 10,000 sheep along with other livestock. But dingos have been mating with wild dogs and

other animals and the offspring have become bloodthirsty, no longer killing only for food but as a matter of routine. Sheep and kangaroos are their favorite targets, but they will attack anything, from snakes to humans.

So, many farmers, like Charles, have given up sheep farming and turned to tourism, setting up cabins in the bush to give guests the feel of life in the Outback. Which includes the «School of the Air» where pupils phone their teachers each morning for assignments and

then mail them in (delivery is twice a week), and where the nearest hospital is often a six-hour drive.

We backtracked to Longreach the next day for our short flight back to Brisbane and the long flight home, slowing for kangaroos, emus, cows, wallabies and even a few termite mounds smack in the middle of the dirt roads.

«Beats road trains,» Katie said. «So what do you think of the Outback now?»

Night and day shots of Brisbane skyline



Stagecoach in Longreach



(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Food & Travel Writers Assn. and is based in Montreal).

IF YOU GO:

A passport and short term visa are necessary for entry into Australia. Short term visas can be obtained online at www.eta.immi.gov.au for

about \$20 or through your travel agent or airline.

We flew Qantas Airlines nonstop from Los Angeles to Brisbane (www.qantas.com)

For further information on the Outback, try www.outbackway.org.au. For Queensland try www.tq.com.au