

Trip to Australia – Sep/Oct 2022

Prologue

To begin with, this trip was perhaps the most unplanned (most impromptu if you will) among all our international travels thus far. During one of our casual weekend conversations in the family in mid-August, it suddenly dawned on us that both our daughters had an aligned two-week vacation for [Dasara](#) (a rarity in the last several years) and that too, after their mid-term exams concluded. This was also just the perfect timing for a holiday break at work (my company being a US retailer, the peak holiday season starts in November). With no vacations - domestic or international, since Covid started in March 2020, we were eager to explore the possibility of a quick international vacation.

Our daughters were fully enamored with a trip to Japan, with all the influences of anime at play. We checked with my friend who had visited Japan a few years ago and set about to create the detailed itinerary in full earnest over the next two days. After the entire itinerary was built out, it struck us that the prerequisite to any international trip was obtaining the visa. Japanese tourism websites had confusing messages about tourist visas to Japan. Japan had recently opened their country to tourism after being hit hard by Covid. A few travel agents that we spoke to did not help to clear the confusion either. Finally, our elder daughter Mridula spoke to the Japanese consulate that cleared the air stating that Indians were still not being given the tourist visa and we would need to wait for an indefinite time to know whether tourism would be opened for Indians. Option 1 gone down the drain!

By this time, we had engaged with three different travel agents – “Pick your trail”, “Make my trip” and “Air One travels” to enquire about Japan. Air One travels was the local travel agent in Bangalore who had planned our entire previous trip to Dubai in 2018, so we had a prior delightful experience for us to go back to them. With Japan ruled out, we asked them for options. It was then we realized we were decent globetrotters with many of their suggested destinations already traveled to. We did not want to pursue Turkey and South Africa. One of the must-see places in my bucket list was the Northern Lights and Scandinavian countries. Only “Pick your trail” offered a glimmer of hope for this destination but that was also ruled out in the next couple of days when Norway opened their tourist visa applications and our position in the queue went into November. This ruled out France as well since they need the same Schengen visa. Option 2 and 3 shot down!

Next, we explored the possibility of going to the UK...Option 4 was immediately shot down since there were no visa slots until November. We were quickly running out of options and enthusiasm. We almost resigned to using the two weeks for a trip in India. One last chance was to see if Australia and New Zealand were viable. All three travel agents said we could shoot for only Australia since New Zealand had not opened their tourism visa yet. Australia only needed an online visa application and the expected time to get the visa was a month. Even before we decided to apply for the visa, we had to finalize the itinerary and the travel agent. Mridula and even our younger daughter Shridula eagerly participated in the evaluation and decision making.

'Pick your trail' was the most professional among the three travel agents and offered an end-to-end package with everything taken care of. But they were also the most expensive. We engaged deeply with the travel agent from 'Make my trip' who said he had visited Australia in the recent past. He could relate to our needs on Indian food and seemed to offer very reasonable rates as well. However, peeling the onion on his proposal revealed that there were a lot of costs such as domestic air fares that were not included in his proposal. When we summed up all the other costs based on internet research, the total package from 'Make my trip' came out to be even more expensive than Pick your trail. We dropped 'Make my trip'. Now, we were down to two choices. The agent from 'Pick your trail' was extremely responsive, configuring and reconfiguring our itinerary many times even over a Sunday evening. For some strange reason, our local travel agent from Air One travels went into hibernation. With not much choice left, we had to accommodate a long layover of 7 hours in Malaysia on our way to Australia and reconcile to flying back into Chennai since the Bangalore flight was not available on the day we wanted. Pick your trail also convinced us that they had very good contacts in the Australian embassy and thereby assured us of the tourist visa. They also demanded we cough up 50% of the total package even before they started the visa application. Again, with no other credible alternative, I was ready to click the pay link when another twist in the tale happened! Just on the day I was to make the payment, Pick your trail increased the cost of the package by another Rs 30000 citing an overnight air fare increase. That really frustrated us, and it seemed very unprofessional on their part. I held off the payment and decided to push Air One travels one last time. I gave Air One travels 24 hours to give me a better end-to-end package that beat the proposal from Pick your trail. After many rounds of negotiations, Air One finally gave us a better price for the same itinerary. They also offered a direct round-trip flight to Sydney from Bangalore on Qantas (Qantas started the direct Bangalore-Sydney route just about that time), saving us several hours of wasted layover time in the airports en-route to Australia. Based on our past engagement, they also offered to start our visa processing without any advance payment. This was the

deal clincher. Without further deliberation, we finalized Air One and dropped 'Pick your trail' like a hot potato. The agent from 'Pick your trail' was very unhappy but we managed to give her a convincing reason for not pursuing the trip. If only they were not unprofessional at the last minute, they could have clinched the entire deal...too bad for them.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of office work and deadlines, we somehow managed to collect all the necessary documents for the visa application (Getting a bona fide certificate from the school and college for my daughters proved to be swifter and easier than what we imagined...surprising but we got their letters within half a day) and applied online for our visa on 24th August. Our trip out of Bangalore was planned on the 25th September...so we knew we were cutting it close but since we had not made any payments, we were moving ahead with this risk.

As the days rolled by into weeks, the visa status remained a black box. Air One blocked our flight tickets without taking any payment from us but they were forced to take half the payment as we got into the second week of September. All along, our travel agent Rajesh had reassuring words for us but as we got into the second week of September, even he became skeptical of getting our visa on time. We could not pack our bags and get ready for the trip without knowing whether the trip would materialize. We were on tenterhooks now and started working on our Plan B. We engaged with Air One to get proposals for Ladakh. Just as we were getting the itinerary for Ladakh, lady luck smiled on us. On 16th September, Rajesh called us about our visa approval. And now we were fully charged up for the trip to the land down under!

We decided to travel light and finalized the plan for each of us to carry only one cabin luggage and one check-in luggage. It was also uncertain whether Australia permitted carrying in ready-to-eat food like MTR and rice/millet. After a lot of flip-flops in making this decision, (we got different and sometimes conflicting information from several sources including my cousin who lives in Sydney, my friends who had lived in Australia and the border control website of Australia) we decided to bravely carry a lot of packaged ready-to-eat foods and 1 kg of millet. We were saved from carrying woolen since it was springtime in Australia. Shridula had a last-minute ear block causing her much anxiety about many upcoming flights that were part of our itinerary. A quick visit to our ENT doctor gave her a nasal spray solution for her worries. We only carried 1000 Australian Dollars in currency, given that our credit cards were internationally accepted. After evaluating the cost, we decided against enabling international roaming on our Airtel phone and went for the well-known Matrix SIM card for the duration in Australia.

For context on the entire trip to be detailed below, we had firmed up on 3 nights each in Melbourne, Cairns, Gold Coast and Sydney. We had a direct Qantas flight to and from Sydney and then domestic flights between each of these cities either on Qantas or Jetstar. The package included all flight charges, land transfers between the airport and hotel, SIC tours (SIC means Seat in Coach where the traveler shares a seat in a coach that carries other travelers also to a specific destination), private customized tour of Sydney, all hotel reservations, entry to attractions and the occasional breakfast/dinner outside of the hotel package. We insisted on an end-end package based on our Dubai trip experience. Our daughters carried sketch books – they were going to sketch out the important parts of the trip. This travelogue is going to be a “sketchologue” – credits to Mridula and Shridula’s sketches in various places of this narration below.

Now, we were all set for the next two weeks! Happy journey...

25th Sep 2022

We woke up early with all the enthusiasm that precedes a vacation, packed our bags for the final time by noon and had an early lunch. Qantas let us do the online check-in **and** print our boarding passes at home, so we were good to arrive at the airport at around 3.30pm - three hours before our scheduled departure at 6.35pm. Our regular car driver would drop us off at Kempegowda international airport – so we managed to squeeze in all our bags in our Hexa. Mridula and my wife Vidya had to take turns to host Shridula on their lap all the way to the airport, because the bags consumed the entire back seat row.

The airport was crowded at the domestic counters, but the international section was very light, given the odd hour. Contrary to what Rajesh told us, the airline staff checked in our bags only till Sydney and said we had to pick our bags, clear immigration and border control before we boarded our connecting flight to Melbourne. We barely had 2 hours between our landing at Sydney and departing for Melbourne. It was becoming obvious that this was going to be a challenge, almost certainly missing our connecting flight. We talked to Rajesh but there was very little he could do at the last minute. We decided to see how things would unfold the next morning and then decide the next course of action. Fingers crossed!

We breezed through immigration and security clearance. Only Vidya could use the airport lounge and the rest of us had some packed dinner and food/coffee at the airport restaurants before we boarded the flight to Sydney. In the two hours until boarding started, Mridula and Shridula started their sketching journey. See below for some sketches of Kempegowda International Airport. Qantas promptly left Bangalore at 6.35pm and we were on our way!



Shridula's sketch of a book store in Kempegowda International Airport



Shridula's sketch of an area inside Kempegowda International Airport



Shridula's sketch of a creative seating area inside Kempegowda International Airport

Since the direct flight service from Bangalore to Sydney started recently, the plane was full. Many passengers were badly cramming their oversized cabin luggage in the overhead lockers – often mercilessly squeezing in their large bags over the other smaller ones.

Qantas had a very interesting and engaging safety video – talking about the history of Qantas and Australian aviation alongside the safety instructions interspersed with a tinge of humor - a welcome change from the typical dry and boring safety instructions. The announcement also said masks were no longer compulsory in Australian flights. While it was a relief, it was also concerning that there were many passengers in the flight who had constant bouts of cough that sounded dangerous. We masked on for our own safety but there was hardly any sense in wearing a mask in the plane when we had to remove it while eating.



Shridula's sketch of her view sitting in her Qantas flight seat

The plane had very little leg room, the seats were very cramped, and the service was lousy to say the least. It felt fiendishly satisfying that Australia's flagship carrier was poorer than our own infamous Air India. The crew took forever to serve us food and when it came, my vegan food was not fully vegan – they had cookies and bread that had milk in them. We managed to get some food for the rest of the 11-hour journey and retired to watch movies, read books and then sleep. The in-flight entertainment is not something to write home about. For my part, I could barely read a few pages of a book on the Kindle and dozed off soon after. The temperature inside the plane was freezing, much colder than what we typically see on a long-distance flight. We regretted not carrying woolen and made do with the blankets and our hooded jackets for the remainder of the night.

26th Sep 2022

We woke up to bright sunlight and breakfast. The estimated arrival time was flashing a 30-minute delay at 10.45am, causing us to worry even more since our connecting flight to Melbourne was at 12 noon. It was a bad idea to book a connecting flight so close to landing into a country. I chatted with the air hostess who assured me that there were nearly 40 passengers on the same connecting flight – so the connecting flight would wait, or they would put us on the next flight. She also said Sydney to Melbourne was the busiest sector – so they fly every 15 minutes. That was reassuring and we waited with bated breath for our plane to land. Prior to landing, the crew came to collect “rubbish” – the Australian term for trash/garbage. They said “rubbish” in a UK accent – so much that we ended up using this word many times during our trip, most often with a tone of sarcasm.

The flight could not make up for lost time and landed at 10.45am. It was clear that we would not make the connecting flight. But first things first. We had to clear the immigration and border control. Immigration was a breeze though the line was long. Heeding the warnings on the border control form (Declaring prohibited/restricted items was welcomed rather than not declaring those and attracting huge penalties) we declared we were carrying ready-to-eat packaged food items and millet. We picked our bags from the conveyor belt and waited in another long line for border control. The border control officers were very polite and courteous, gently telling us that millet was not allowed because of potential pests but they were happy to let us take in all our ready-to-eat packets.

By the time we got out of border control we had already missed our connecting flight to Melbourne. Our Matrix phone connection was now active, and we wasted no time in calling Pratik, our local travel agent in Australia. It was now clear that our itinerary for Melbourne needed to be readjusted. We went to the domestic counter to determine the next course of action. The lady at the counter gently told us that we had missed our connection and she would book us on the next available connection. Based on what we had heard earlier, we assumed we would get a connection in the next 15 minutes, but that was not to be. She told us but the next available flight was at 4:00 PM, a good three hours from that time. She also said she could not get us adjacent seats on the plane since the flight was full. When I started complaining that we missed the connection because of a flight delay from their side, she softened her tone and offered to give us some vouchers as compensation. She gave us four gift cards worth AUD 60 that we could use at Sydney airport. Though we were unhappy with the delay, the voucher gave us a little bit of a relief. We proceeded through domestic security clearance before getting to the boarding

gate. Three of us sailed through security clearance except for Shridula. The lady security officer scanned Shridula twice but was still not convinced enough to clear her. She whispered to me that the girl potentially had explosives. All of us were freaked out while we patiently waited for the security to thoroughly ascertain that she was clear of all potentially dangerous substances. Shridula got double scanned before she was cleared. Phew! We spent the next two hours finding some decent vegan / vegetarian food at Sydney airport (I had a soft taco with bean filling after a really long time) and then using up the gift cards to buy nuts, a small fashion pendant for Shridula and then some chocolates. These gift cards were very cumbersome to utilize, with no way to check the balance and had to be used all at once in increments of AUD 15. It was still worth a lot and we did not complain. As with Great Britain, the coins were very heavy and added substantial weight to my person ☹️Coins of higher denomination are generally smaller than coins of lower denomination. While waiting for a water fountain, we bumped into a courteous but talkative Australian who extolled the virtues of Hinduism, how timeless its wisdom was and the multitude of Gods that our great religion offered. Not knowing the true intent of the Australian, we gently thanked him and wriggled out of the discussion. We got separated in the flight and Mridula sat alone at the emergency exit after due diligence on her age by the air stewardess. As luck would have it, our flight to Melbourne got delayed by an hour because of aircraft issues. We finally left Sydney at 5pm and arrived in Melbourne at 6.20pm. Cold windy weather welcomed us on the tarmac as we descended the ladder to run into the airport terminal. We regretted our decision to carry minimal warm clothing. We deliberated multiple times if we really had any energy left for a city tour but given the tight schedule, Pratik recommended we stretch ourselves a wee bit and complete the city tour, albeit at night. Our driver Vinay picked us up from the baggage claim area in a sprawling Mercedes Benz van – it looked more like a minibus. We instructed him to take us on the city tour and then drop us off at the hotel. Though tired from the really long day, we soaked in the night views of the city as the van sped on the highway towards the central business district. Mridula and Shridula commented that the highways looked very much like Indian highways with the left side driving and speed of 100kmph. As we progressed in our trip, we realized this similarity ended with this observation and Australia was much different than India in many aspects.

As part of the city tour from 6.45pm to 8.30pm, we first parked at the well-lit colorful St Kilda Road, which hosted the National Gallery of Victoria (art gallery). The art gallery, though closed, was beautiful from the outside with colorful fountains and a nicely lit wall. The soothing blue streetlights with fancy LED boards on the pavements that showed animated cranes and ducks added to the beauty of the art

gallery and the entire surroundings. We took a lot of pictures while still shivering in the windy cold Melbourne weather. The warmth of our van was a welcome break between our hops from one attraction to another on the city tour.



National Gallery of Victoria, St Kilda Road



Shridula's sketch of St Kilda Road

Next up was a stop in front of the imposing St Paul's Cathedral, an extremely tall structure with an edifice that reminded us of Notre Dame in Paris.



St Paul's Cathedral



Shridula's sketch of St Paul's Cathedral

While at these attractions, we saw an endless stream of trams. Vinay told us that Melbourne had the busiest tram service in the world – understandable given the frequency of trams we saw in the limited

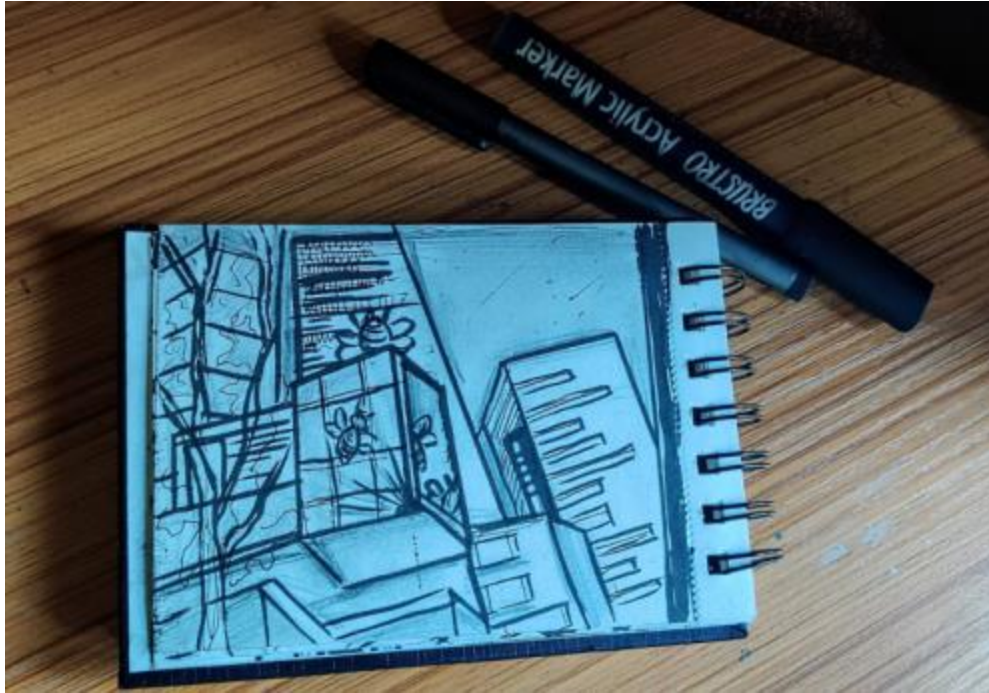
time out on the road. Apparently, trams in the central business district were free for all commuters. We made a mental note to experience the tram on one of the days in Melbourne. We passed over the Yarra river that seemed to go all around the city and drove past Federation Square, the treasury, the Melbourne parliament and a sprawling green park (looked green even at night) that hosted several memorials including one for William Lamb, a UK gentleman credited with the founding of Melbourne city. Vinay pointed out that several skyscrapers had gold etched on the outer surface of the top floors to serve as a reminder of the gold miners who gave up their lives mining and bringing gold to build Melbourne city during the gold rush between 1851 and late 1860s. We stopped at a narrow street filled with graffiti / art on both walls. Vinay told us there were several such streets that hosted art of local artists and many evenings would host live music and art on these streets. Tonight, wasn't one of those evenings obviously. The street only had some tourists like us.



Shridula's sketch of the graffiti street

When we were at St Paul's Cathedral, Vinay figured out our need for Indian dinner and was kind enough to order food using his phone at Saravanaa Bhavan (we never give up our need for South Indian food, do we?) We now went inside to pick up our food as a takeaway and proceeded to our hotel. Near our hotel, we stopped to marvel at a tall building called the Observation Skydeck / Eureka Tower that interestingly

had differently sized sculptures of bees all over the building. We later came to know that the bees symbolized the busy and frenetic activity in busy cities such as Melbourne.



Shridula's sketch of Eureka Tower with bee sculptures

We finally reached Holiday Inn Express on Southbank. Thanking Vinay for the city tour, we dragged our bags, completed a quick check-in and moved into our adjacent rooms 1607 and 1608. The hotel rooms were large and luxurious but had very poorly designed toilets. We refreshed with hot showers after a long day, unpacked our bags and set up our rooms for the next two days. The packed dinner from Saravanaa Bhavan was a let-down – the dosa did not have any sambar or chutney and was extremely oily. Before we hit the bed, I coordinated with Pratik and Rajesh – our travel agents in Australia and India, for the next day's plan and finally hit the bed close to midnight.

27th Sep 2022

We started early since we wanted to buy rice and some essential groceries for the remainder of the Australian trip. Vidya, Shridula and I explored the continental breakfast on the 7th floor. It was nice to

see some vegan options suiting my diet – I had muesli cereal with soy milk and whole bread with baked beans. Mridula preferred the extra sleep over exploring grocery stores in the vicinity .

The weather was a little cooler than it was pleasant, but the walk was enjoyable. Using Google maps, we walked about a kilometer to an Indian convenience store and then another half a kilometer to a Woolworths store. Woolworths is perhaps the largest grocery chain in Australia. We managed to buy jasmine rice, Khakras, Ghee and some barely spicy curry leaves powder. During our morning walk, we saw the central business district in daylight. Each building looked architecturally unique and aesthetic. All roads had pedestrian crossings and we could see a lot of pedestrians carrying large umbrellas (ominous weather forecast for the next two days threatened our itinerary but we decided to take it one day at a time and see what unfolded) Cute fluffy dogs of varying colors accompanied many pedestrians, some of them nicely dressed in woollens.



Pedestrians, Cutely dressed dogs on Melbourne roads

Our plan for the day was a 9-hour tour to Phillip Island and we were warned of cold, wet weather. We tried cooking rice in our electric rice cooker, but it was a failed experiment. We decided to eat along the way. At 11am, we dressed up with thermals and whatever little woolen we had packed and walked

fifteen minutes for about a kilometer through riverside quay to the Immigration Museum, much before the scheduled pickup time of 11.30am. Google maps helped us reach the Immigration Museum from our hotel without any issues. The morning view of the Queen's bridge over the Yarra river with the backdrop of towering skyscrapers and the trams and trains hovering over completed a pretty landscape.



Melbourne cityscape



Shridula's sketch of Melbourne's cityscape in the daytime

Sharp at 11.25am, a lady approached us and verified our names for the tour and requested us to board the bus parked on the side road. Her name was Mij, and she was the tour guide and driver. The bus bore the name Autopia Tours – it was quite small, and the bus filled up in ten minutes. We were on our way to Philip Island at 11.45am. Mij welcomed us, told us the ground rules and basic instructions for the day's tour and deftly drove the bus consistently around 100kmph while still narrating a lot of stories along the way. In general, Australians seemed very reverent of their elders and natives and used every occasion to thank them and acknowledge that the natives owned the land. I'm not sure if this respect for natives (Aboriginals) translates to honorable status in society for them or it is mere lip service. A tourist would never know this for sure. Mij had a cute koala and penguin soft toy at the front of the bus (named Pete and Dave) to symbolize the unique aspects of this tour.



Pete and Dave – Mij's pet toys on the bus

As the bus sped through the lush green countryside dotted with colorful cows, sheep and camels (we were not sure if these were camels or llamas), I was the only one awake. Vidya, Mridula and Shridula were deep asleep in different postures captured on my phone camera for proof



Autopia Tour Bus to Philip Island



Blissfully asleep on the bus

After an hour, we stopped at a tranquil fishing village called Tooradin. It was a very scenic place with a large lake, several fishing boats, small nice houses and a row of grocery stores and eateries.



Mridula sketching at the Tooradin Lake

Mij told us that the bakery was very famous. After taking pictures, we went to the Tooradin Bakery. A very courteous Australian lady at the bakery helped us get the best eatables for our dietary needs and requirements. I had a vegan quiche with curry cauliflower and chickpea filling that tasted like our vegetable puffs when heated. Mridula had pecan tart, fruit cheese tart etc. Shridula had a hazelnut bar and a large Choco chip cookie while Vidya had a quiche with a different filling. We had to rush through our mid-morning snack at the bakery but the food was so satisfying that we also packed some more for the remainder of the day. We were the last to board the bus after a call from Mij and promised to ourselves not to be late again.



Shridula's collage sketch of Tooradin

We then crossed the bridge into Philip Island. Mij narrated stories of how Philip Island was a haven for biodiversity and how it got threatened by a lot of settlers along the beach. Apparently the Australian Government was so passionate about protecting the rich flora and fauna on this island that they bought out all the beach side homes and destroyed them. When the famous penguins on this island were attacked by foxes, this bridge that we crossed over was used by the rangers as a strategic vantage point to spot any foxes and shoot them before they encroached into the island. Mij also told us a lot of facts about Koalas and the famous little blue penguins that we would see later in the evening. She said a lot of Koalas died in the bushfire that raged in Australia in the recent past and we could sense her anguish when she stated this. She said the island hosted many different species of eucalyptus but koalas fed on only a handful of species. They slept for most of the day in order to get enough energy to digest the heavy eucalyptus leaves. Koala babies cannot digest the leaves and hence koala mothers feed the babies (A koala baby is called a Joey similar to a kangaroo baby) with their own poop that contains semi digested leaves. This would help the babies develop their digestive system eventually to be able to feed on the leaves themselves when they grew up.

We arrived at the Koala conservation reserve around 3pm, welcomed by colder windy weather. We had two separate boardwalks to see the 4 and 5 koalas that were bred at this reserve. We could only see 8 koalas out of the 9 but all of them were huddled high up in the eucalyptus tree top, nonchalantly

swaying in the wind on a thin branch. They just appeared like gray lumps of cloth stuffed in between the branches. We could not see their faces even when we zoomed in with our camera phones.



An interesting signboard at the Koala Conservation Reserve

Though disappointed at not seeing a Koala up close, (one of the rangers in the reserve told us that a few koalas had climbed down just a few hours back and the tourists at that time had a rare close-up view) we were happy that we could at least spot several in their natural habitat. Mij asked all of us to see this cute video of how a baby koala throws tantrums just like a human baby. (see this adorable [video](#)) After the boardwalks, we bought a souvenir of a koala fur toy. **All places in Phillip Island only accept cards, no cash.**

We proceeded next to Pyramid Rock, a volcanic rock jutting out of the ocean. This place is famous for the panoramic ocean side views of the entire Phillip Island. Mij warned us of upcoming bad roads when we took a detour off the main road to get to Pyramid Rock but we observed that this road was better than many of the main roads in India. The boardwalk leading up to see the Pyramid Rock was extremely windy and cold - we had to hold our caps and hoods tight to prevent them flying away. We saw scenic marine blue waters relentlessly splashing against the black volcanic rock, reminding us of the scenes at Uluwatu, Bali. We took some good pictures and hurried back to escape the chill weather. On our way back to the bus, we spotted a short beaked Echidna crossing the path into a bush. The small animal resembled a porcupine but was harmless. After we spotted it, many of our fellow tourists stopped to

peer into the bush at close quarters. Mij was surprised we saw an Echidna, so I guess we were lucky to see the full view of the Echidna as it crossed our path.



Pyramid Rock



Shridula's collage sketch of Koala conservation reserve and Pyramid Rock

Before we went to the ultimate destination of the penguin parade, Mij drove us uphill to the Nobbies, the western tip of Phillip Island. Mij told us that the visitor center was closed for maintenance but it was still a good place to check out the penguin nesting holes under the cliffs. It was already becoming

uncomfortably chilly and windy, so we didn't walk down the boardwalk to see the penguin nesting holes. But we saw thousands of fat seagulls which had nesting holes on a small hillock near the visitor center. We had read on the internet that seagull flocks could attack humans, so we didn't venture too close. On our way downhill to the penguin parade, we saw several geese of varying sizes including baby geese on either side of the road. We also chanced a glance at a few wallabies at the far side of the road. Not a bad day for wildlife sightseeing!

At around 5.45pm, we finally drove down to the famous penguin parade visitor center at Summerlands Beach. We were warned of extreme cold weather and thunderstorms and braced ourselves for the evening ahead. In the visitor center, there was a board announcing the penguin arrival time at 6.30pm, similar to a railway station announcing the arrival time of the next train 😊 it also mentioned that the previous day had 1934 penguins walking from the ocean to the shore.



Penguin Parade information board

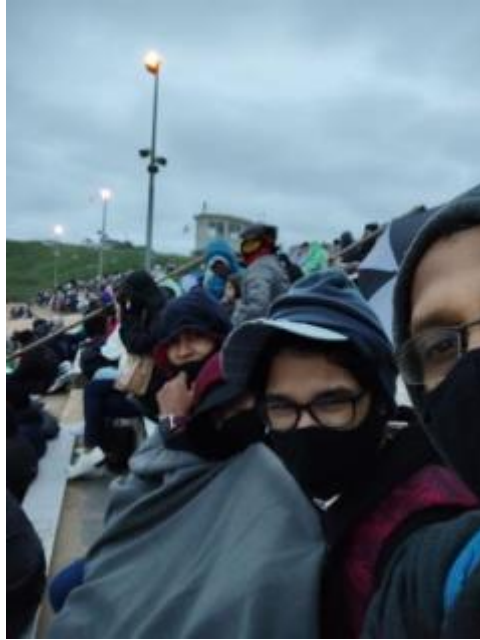
Mij had mentioned that there was a place above the visitor center where the returning penguins would step on a weighing scale before they went to their nesting holes. This was how they counted the penguins each evening. The visitor center was nice and warm in sharp contrast to the biting cold winds outside. Mij made a very good recommendation to buy a flannel blanket as a souvenir so that it could also double up as a nice warm cover for the cold evening ahead. We followed her advice and were we thankful to her for it! We also bought a nice blue penguin fur toy dressed up in a woolen sweater. We realized later that the actual penguins were about the same height as our souvenir.



Penguin dolls at the visitor center (Similar to our Penguin souvenir)

Reluctantly but excitedly, we stepped out into the harsh weather at about 6.10pm towards the penguin viewing gallery. Every minute became colder and windier than the previous. It also started raining and our small umbrellas weren't of much use. With our dresses becoming wet, we settled down in the viewing gallery. A visitor center employee in a yellow rain jacket continuously narrated facts about the penguins on a public address system...he didn't seem fluttered by the cold winds and rain. As dusk descended, he reminded all of us not to photograph the little penguins lest it scares them away. We hurriedly took some photos in the failing light struggling to hold our phone cameras in the freezing weather.

The little penguins were awaited at 6.30pm but it took them another fifteen minutes before we started spotting a series of white blobs on the surface of the waves. With rain covering our spectacles, we could barely see the penguins at a distance and had to wait for them to march closer to us before we could comprehend their small size. In the darkness of the night that had accelerated because of the clouds and rains, we could not make out their blue color even at close quarters. As the penguins started marching towards the shore, we hurried to follow them along the walkway. We were glad to start moving away from the beach – it was perhaps the coldest weather I had ever faced in my life and my teeth started chattering. We resisted the temptation to click photographs of the marching little penguins covered with an oily fur, though many fellow tourists did so.



Brrr...Shivering in the biting cold weather



Shridula's sketch of the Penguin Parade

We did not have much time to return to our pickup point, but we managed to grab a hot chocolate, cappuccino and chai latte. However, in the hurry to head back to the bus, we forgot to add sugar to the

coffee and tea and therefore the expected relief from the cold weather was never to be. On our two-hour drive back to Melbourne, we requested Mij for an unscheduled bathroom break which she gladly and immediately obliged at the next McDonald's and we finally arrived at 9.30pm. Contrary to my expectation that at least one of us would fall sick because of the exposure to extremely cold weather, we managed to briskly walk back to our hotel and regain our energy for the next day's adventure on the Great Ocean road trip.

28th Sep 2022

This day was to be a 12-hour trip, so we had to have an early breakfast at 6.30am and walked to the Immigration Museum on the now-familiar route for our pickup at 7.30am. As we walked, Mridula had an observation on the Australian accent, having observed them for the last three days. The Australian pronunciation was somewhere between the American and the British. They were mostly British-like but I was surprised as how they pronounced the word 'often' with a hard 't' which is unlike how British pronounced the word. Mridula had also noticed that the Australians typically ended a word or sentence with a high intonation rather than the typical lower intonation towards the end of an utterance.

At 7.20am, a gentleman called Jonathan approached us, verified our tickets and escorted us around the Immigration Museum to a much larger and newer bus from the same Autopia tours. The driver was a gentleman called Pete. The bus was very comfortable. We were told that this was the first trip for the bus and for Pete and Jonathan as well. While Jonathan ushered in other tourists, Pete familiarized himself with the controls on the bus. For the entire trip, Pete and Jonathan swapped driving but Pete was the only narrator / tour guide for the entire journey. They continuously chatted and laughed over jokes (really laughed out loud – LOL!) through the entire day. We observed Pete coaching Jonathan on becoming a tour guide and how to tell stories to keep the guests engaged. It was a live coaching session on the job 😊

After sleeping for an hour with no commentary, we were woken up with an announcement that we were entering the Great Ocean road. Pete proudly stated that this road was one of the most scenic routes in the world and that it was built by returned soldiers between 1919 and 1932 and dedicated to soldiers killed during World War I. He also stated the entire road was built with practically no road building tools or machinery at that time – pretty impressive considering this road is 240 kms long.

Soon after this announcement, we made our first stop at the famous Great Ocean Road Chocolatery and Ice Creamery. This store was piled up with a plethora of chocolates (including a meter long chocolate bar) that we were spoilt for choice and we had to rush to make a purchase (Pete and Jonathan were unwilling to give us any recommendations), since it was only a 30 minute stopover...we felt that the stop over should have been longer but we realized later in the day that there were so many places to visit. Because of some cough and cold, we deliberated a long time before finally getting a delicious honeycomb ice-cream that melted in our mouths (I could only taste a spoon of ice-cream because of my diet restriction[®] Shridula and Vidya also bought a hot chocolate drink where they served us hot frothy milk and a cup of melted chocolate for us to add to the milk – very unusual but yummy! We bought a box of roasted almond white chocolates, a packet of ready-to-drink hot chocolate mix and a bar of gourmet chocolate with a wrapper of a painting. (Many chocolates on sale at this store had paintings on the packaging) The gourmet chocolate bar of strawberries and vanilla bean was extremely tasty. Despite rushing through our ice-cream, hot chocolate and purchases, we were the last to the bus.



[Meter long chocolate and all other chocolates @the chocolatery](#)

We started the awesome journey alongside the ocean mostly on the left of the bus. Pete and Jonathan deftly maneuvered the bus at 80 kmph around the multitude of twists and turns. As Jonathan drove, Pete gulped down several large chocolates in twenty minutes – what a sweet tooth he had! In between his chocolates, Pete grabbed the mic and pointed to the very wavy blue ocean below with froth splashing on the rocks. In the early part of the 20th century, this coastline was apparently an extremely dangerous coastline for ships, therefore earning it the moniker of “shipwreck coastline”. We saw beautiful modern homes built on top of the steep cliffs on the right, overlooking the ocean. Pete told us these were very expensive homes – reminding me of the expensive seaside homes near Malibu beach in Los Angeles. There was one particular house called the “One Pole House” that was erected on one giant steel pillar on a mountain overlooking the beach below.

We briefly stopped at the war memorial built on the road. Pete insisted we take pictures here with the war memorial in the background as “proof” that we have been on the Great Ocean road. I stole a quick walk to the windy beach near the memorial, before our fellow tourists huddled into the bus. As we moved on, Pete narrated the story of his first time surfing adventure on one of these beaches ending abruptly because of shark spotting – and he never picked up his surf board again.



Great Ocean Road board at the memorial with beach side mansions on the hill



Shridula's collage sketch of the Great Ocean Road memorial

Our third stop was at Koala café, a small roadside store and a narrow winding road leading up to the hills. This place reared Koalas in a natural setting. We spotted two koalas on the eucalyptus trees, one where we could see its face at relatively close quarters and the other lumped up high in the tree as usual with its back to us. We were again on time to the bus and we proceeded on to a lunch stop at Apollo Bay.

Though there were a lot of restaurants in Apollo Bay, the street smelt of sea food and we did not bother exploring any of them. We grudgingly satisfied our palate with our modest cold packed lunch that didn't taste all that good and had to be gulped down with water. After a late bathroom break, we were yet again last to the bus.

The bus now veered off the ocean and went into a thick hilly stretch and stopped in the middle of a rain forest. As we woke up from a quick nap, it took us some time to reconcile to the completely new and moist environment with mild rain. Jonathan encouraged all of us to get down and take a trek through the rain forest. He accompanied us on a 45-minute trek through a wet but nicely laid track that ended in an awesome waterfall called Anne's Cascade. This was a very impressive typical rain forest with huge tall trees covered with moss providing a thick canopy for the foliage under them, large plants with flowers that curled in a freakish manner reminding us of carnivorous plants that devoured insects (we didn't

venture near those plants – so we were not sure if these were indeed carnivorous) and many creeks flowing between the rocks with a gentle gurgle. The trail was free of the typical leeches despite the moist conditions, so Vidya in particular enjoyed the trek with no stress. The trail even had a well maintained toilet at the start. This was a thoroughly enjoyable experience.



Safely walking through the thick rainforest



[Shridula's sketch of a path through the rain forest](#)

As we moved on, Pete said we were going to the ultimate destination of the Great Ocean road tour – The Twelve Apostles. He told us the story of how the name came to be – apparently this place hosted a bunch of limestone rocks that were continuously eroded by the sea but it did not attract attention from the tourists until the Australian Government challenged the tourist department to come with a creative name that could capture the attention of tourists. Initially, there were 12 such limestone rocks and the department created the name based on the 12 Apostles at the last supper of Jesus Christ. As we alighted from the bus at this stop, Pete asked us to count the number of Apostles we could spot in the sea below. It was immediately obvious that there were far less than 12 even though the name remained. There were different walkways, each offering up a different angle to view the Apostles. An Apostle is defined as a unique lime structure that is broken off the mainland and standing on its own until the sea eroded it, it shrunk in size and eventually disappeared into the sea. We could only see 6 Apostles from the different view-points here. As the sun dipped on the horizon, the golden rays reflecting off the cliffs and the apostles gave us nostalgic memories of the Grand Canyon in USA. It was windy here but very warm in comparison to the Penguin parade of the previous evening.



[At the Twelve Apostles](#)

Our last stop was at Lock Ard Gorge. Pete narrated the history of Lock Ard Gorge. Quoting from the internet – “Back in 1878, a large ship engraved with the name Loch Ard beached on the nearby Mutton Bird Island after a tumultuous journey from England. It was said that the ship entered the waters of Port Campbell on a dark and misty 1st of June. Before they even realized it, the ship was in shallow waters, colliding with a rock reef and running aground near Mutton Bird Island. Unfortunately, only two of the fifty-four passengers survived, one of whom was a nineteen-year-old sailor apprentice named Tom Pearce, and the other a nineteen-year-old Irish girl called Eva Carmichael, who was travelling with her family. Tom was first to wash ashore at the sandy beach, hearing a woman’s cries for help nearby. He bravely headed up into the waters and rescued Eva from a cave, with the two calling for help from the locals. The two soon became famous amongst Victoria, with Tom being welcomed as a hero. After about three months, Eva decided to return back to Europe where she went on to marry an aristocrat. Tom remained a sailor and returned to England where he died at the age of 49, known as a hero of his time.”

There were 3 pathways here, two leading up to different view-points of the Gorge (A Gorge is a narrow valley between mountains or cliffs through which a water body runs) and 2 more Apostles which were hidden from view at The Twelve Apostles. The third pathway led down to the small beach and the cave where Tom and Eva met. This pathway had winding stairs that took us down and up rather very quickly

for the height it scaled. Despite our doubts, we explored all the 3 pathways in under 25 minutes and got back to our bus well on time.



Lock Ard Gorge with the cave



Shridula's sketch of the Lock Ard Gorge

As dusk settled in, we now passed through miles of grassland with colorful cattle and sheep still grazing or lazing. As was promised, the Great Ocean road presented varied landscape throughout the drive – the ocean, huge expanse of grassland, dry forest, green mountains and a rain forest...and we saw it all! We passed through a town called Colac, briefly stopped for a bathroom break where we bought Nachos and Gatorade and then headed back to Melbourne. On the way, we sighted an awesome **full** rainbow stretching on either side of the bus and wondered if there was indeed a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Pete and Jonathan continued to chat but much more softly, through the two hour journey back. They played Western classics from the 1970s/1980s through Spotify. One particular song that I initially detested but started liking almost immediately after, was what I called “the screaming song”. As we were on the verge of dozing off, I couldn't catch the lyrics or the name of the song. More on this as the travelogue progresses...

The bus dropped us off at the Immigration Museum at 8pm and we walked back to the hotel with very nice memories of the Great Ocean road. We had to leave Melbourne the next day, so we used the coin

laundry at the hotel to wash and dry some of the wet clothes from the previous day. Then, we packed our bags and finalized our schedule for the next day.

Because of the delay on the first day, we had missed the guided tour of the famed Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). I did not want to miss it and worked out with Pratik that we would get the guided tour at 10am the next morning, after which we would return to the hotel and proceed to the airport at 1pm for our next flight to Cairns.

29th Sep 2022

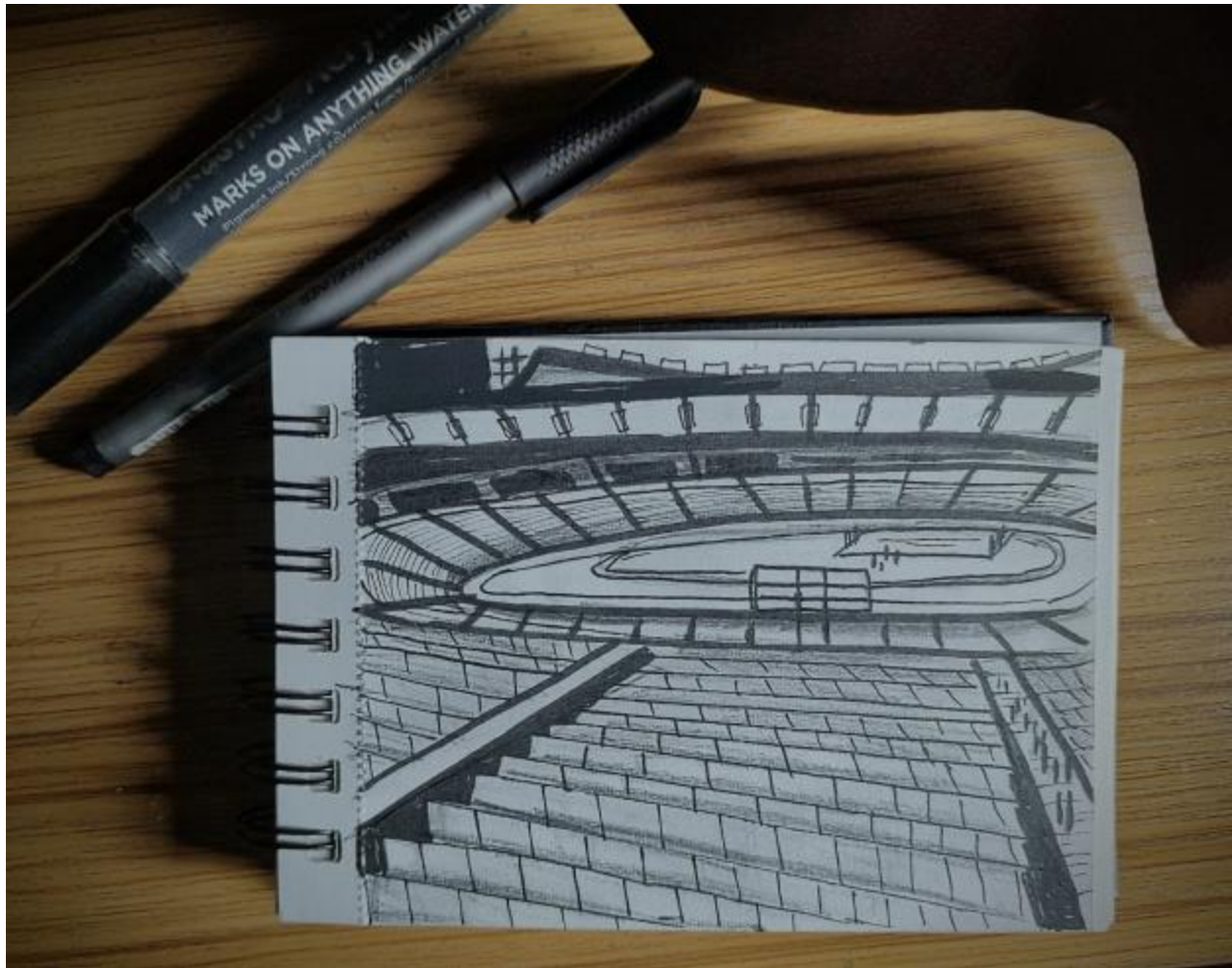
We had a scheduled guided tour of MCG at 10am, so had to complete the checkout from the hotel at 9.30am (this is the usual checkout time for all Australian hotels...quite early in comparison to the noon checkout time in India and the USA) It was a hectic morning – we quickly finished our Continental breakfast that had potato hash brown for the first time in three days, then packed our bags for the upcoming domestic flight and rushed the girls out at 9.40am. The girls were a little delayed because of a mild stomach ache for Mridula and the locks on their bags were not to be found despite a frantic search in both our rooms (We assumed the hotel housekeeping might have thrown the locks during the room cleaning but we discovered them in one of our bags two days later) With time for the MCG tour fast approaching, I was getting irritated and restless and nearly gave up on the tour. We left our bags at the friendly reception to be picked up later in the afternoon and boarded our Uber taxi to MCG. Thankfully, Uber worked worldwide! We rushed the taxi driver to take us to the Australian sports museum at MCG citing our guided tour was at 10am. As he tried hurrying out of the narrow lane leading out of the hotel, we were blocked by a large garbage truck and the operators who were unperturbed by our urgency and casually unloaded garbage bin after bin while we were anxiously waiting for a clearance. The driver gave up, reversed the car and still managed to drop us off at MCG a few minutes past 10am.

We scrambled to the start point of the guided tour and sheepishly acknowledged that we were late. An elderly well-groomed lady in MCG uniform calmed us and said we could take the next scheduled tour starting at 10.15am. An elderly gentleman named John was our tour guide and we were amazed at his energy as he sprinted up and down the stairs and briskly walked around the stadium. Most of our group struggled to catch up with him. John told us he was a voluntary member of MCG and that it takes 25 years to get a membership of MCG. He pointed to several new pitches (he called them as “wickets”)

being laid for the upcoming T20 World Cup. He took us to the common stands/gallery and pointed out stands in memory of several legends (notably Shane Warne and Bradman) and specifically a single beige colored seat amongst all blue seats that stood out at the far end. Apparently, this seat was colored in memory of the longest ever sixer measuring 122m, hit by Simon O'Donnell in a Sheffield Shield match against New South Wales. This record still stays after 25 years and this seat was the place where the ball landed after the record-breaking sixer. We sat in the seats of the common stand briefly before John took us to the dressing room, coach room, medical room (John said an ambulance arrives at the medical room as needed in 2 minutes or less), team huddle and analysis/strategy room, media/press room for post-match interviews and an entire wall of complex electronics that drives the scorecards, advertisements and other digital activities on the ground during events.



In the MCG stands



Shridula's sketch of MCG

We took the lift to see the plush corporate viewing areas and the “Long Room” – both highly privileged areas for corporate and influential members. We felt the view from the corporate viewing area was much better than that from the Long Room. The corporate viewing area had a breathtaking panoramic view of the entire stadium from top to bottom – no action could be missed from here! As we went up and down the stadium, John pointed to several boards at different points in the stadium that hosted important records and milestones – and as assumed, a lot of Indian cricketers figured on these boards including recent players. John had built up a climax that he was going to show a special section featuring Sachin Tendulkar and we were waiting for that. Towards the end of the tour, he took us to a specially cricket photo gallery of legends with a rare photograph of Tendulkar with Bradman being the central highlight. He went on to say that there were only 4 of these photographs in the world – the one here, one with Bradman, one with Tendulkar and one with the photographer. Sachin was really being treated like God here and it was pleasant to see and hear all that adulation.



Posing with the famous Bradman-Tendulkar photo

There were similar such galleries of football legends but I couldn't relate to this. We finally saw a long tapestry depicting the grand 150 year history of MCG through important people and events hand woven on the tapestry by 150 women. John concluded the tour by saying something is always happening at MCG – it is always busy hosting some event or another - cricket, football, concerts, political events etc.

We barely had a couple of hours to get back to the hotel. We spent a lot of time deliberating our lunch options and how we could ride the free tram that we had seen on the first evening. Before we headed to the nearest tram station, we took several photos with statues of legends all around the MCG, the notable one being that of Shane Warne. Vidya, Mridula and Shridula were mostly listening in and perhaps even smirking at my excitement of being at the MCG and posing with the statues, since they are rarely interested in cricket. A shame considering cricket is a religion in India ☺



Shridula's sketch of the statue of Shane Warne outside MCG stadium

Our confusion on the route to the tram station must have been too apparent to the locals around us – a very friendly Australian lady accompanied us to the tram station and also voluntarily checked with the tram driver whether we could ride the tram by buying a ticket on the tram. The driver said the ticket had to be purchased elsewhere and not right there in the tram. Also, the tram ride was free only inside the central business district. Bummer!!! We were disappointed but had no other choice. We rented another Uber taxi to Saravanaa Bhavan yet again despite ridicule by Mridula and Shridula who asked if South Indian cuisine was the only food we could think of. We were seriously running out of time, so rushed the waiter to give us whatever was on the menu that could be served quickly – We quickly grabbed a masala dosa and masala tea in 10 mins and hailed another Uber taxi back to our hotel, just in time for the waiting taxi driver to take us to Melbourne airport. This taxi driver was very knowledgeable about cricket, India and Australian tourism and engaged us in friendly chatter all the way to the airport.

At the airport, we were surprised that there were absolutely no check-in counters. The extremely modern self-check-in and baggage drop kiosks for our Jetstar flight to Cairns amazed us to no end. We

later came to know that most of Australia had a huge shortage of labor after Covid; hence many activities like check-in were fully automated. We happily chilled out at Krispy Kreme and then realized that we were quite far from the departure gate when the gate number was announced. A slightly rushed sprint to the gate was in order now, completing our daily exercise.

We were welcomed into a very modern and new aircraft Airbus 321 Neo to Cairns that promptly took off on schedule at 3.10pm. As the air hostess started serving food, one of them came up to me and said that we had 60 AUD of free meal vouchers that were included in our tickets. We weren't aware of this and were pleasantly surprised. Looking at the menu card, we managed to use up all of the available meal vouchers with some food on the plane and some packed away for later consumption. Particularly tasty were the caramel cookies and the soft chocolate cake (as indicated by the other three – remember I was still on my diet☺) Trust Indians to get the maximum juice from any squeeze 😊

We arrived at Cairns at 6.30pm on schedule. The airport looked very nice and welcomed us to the world's oldest tropical rainforest. There were a lot of sign boards at the airport (also at other places in Cairns as well) in Japanese, Chinese and occasionally even in Korean language. Mridula obsessed reading the Japanese sign boards, fresh out of her two language level certifications in Japanese that she had aced recently.



The welcoming Cairns Airport

Kavi, our Indian driver, was waiting for us at the baggage claim. He was from a travel agency run by a gentleman called Ray. As promised by Pratik, Kavi drove us directly from the airport to an Indian grocery store where Vidya and I bought a lot of Indian groceries to stock up and cook in our room that had a kitchen. He also showed us briefly around Cairns downtown, the place where we had to come the next day for the cruise to the Great Barrier Reef and then briefly stopped over at the huge Coles grocery store to buy milk and yoghurt. After driving through the pitch black empty roads for what seemed like eternity, we finally arrived at Sebel Palm Cove Coral coast resort. Even though it felt like a long time, Kavi told us that Cairns was a small less-busy town (in comparison to Melbourne, Sydney and other big bustling cities) with a total radius of about 30 miles and Palm Cove was only 25 miles from downtown.

As we unloaded the bags at the reception, we realized there was no receptionist (Reception only ran from 9am to 4pm) and we had to do a self-check-in yet again to get into our room. This was a rather unusual experience – I dialed a number on the telephone at the reception area and was greeted by a lady operator who told me to get to the first floor and open a key safe using a code that she gave me. Once I went there and opened the key safe, I found an envelope with my name that contained the welcome kit to our room number 3 on the ground floor. I locked up the key safe and then towed our bags into our room. What a treasure hunt it was! Shridula thoroughly enjoyed the experience and suspense.

An awesome house (and not a room) welcomed us with soothing music playing on the TV. This house was complete with an aesthetic living area, fully furnished/equipped kitchen, a patio that overlooked the swimming pool, washer/dryer, a large bed, bathtub and a standing shower. We proceeded to cook the just purchased ready-to-eat Dal with ready-to-eat Chapathi and rice with spicy powder. Another day drew to an end – we realized the bed didn't have enough space for all of us and I slept on the comfortable sofa in the living room.



The kitchen and dining area in our room at Sebel Palm Cove Coral Resort

30th Sep 2022

Ray's travel agency sent a driver to our resort at 8am for our breakfast at Cairns downtown. On our 25 km drive to the downtown, we soaked in the typical coastal scenery replete with palm trees lining up the highway on both sides. In broad daylight, we could also see large expanses of grassland leading up to fairly tall mountains at the background and interestingly, plenty of sugarcane fields too. This explained why it was pitch dark the previous night when we drove from the airport. We also noticed several sign boards that said "Don't spread electric ants!" A later search on the internet told us that electric ants, infamous for its extremely painful, long-lasting and venomous sting, were one of the most dangerous pests attacking crops in the Cairns/Queensland region.

We arrived at the Pacific Cairns hotel for our breakfast. Our resort at Palm Cove had no restaurants and hence we had to come here for breakfast. We did not complain, since Pacific Cairns had a large spread of exotic fruits, nuts and a variety of items on the buffet menu. One good thing in Australia is that all restaurants have many vegan options for cow milk –Lactose-free milk, Nut milk and Plant milk. Soy milk here is pretty good and doesn't have the strong taste and smell that we get in India. Only after the heavy breakfast did we realize that it was not perhaps a great idea to have stuffed ourselves, knowing that we had an hour long cruise ahead followed by a glass bottom boat tour. Luckily, we did not have any sea sickness and did not have to regret our heavy breakfast.

It was only a five minute walk across to the Reef Terminal. Since we had the vouchers already, we proceeded straight on to Marlin Marina where our cruise ship bearing the name "Big Cat Green Island" was docked. We always wondered why it was called Big Cat...Later we enquired with one of the marine biologists on the ship who clarified that Big Cat referred to the Big Catamarans that were used in the earlier days before motorboats and ships started from Cairns.



Shridula's sketch of Marlin Marina

Our cruise boat started at 8.45am and we hurried to grab seats on the upper deck. After announcing the mandatory safety instructions, we headed towards Green Island. Though it was sunny with barely a cloud in the sky, the continuous wind on our faces provided respite. Now, we understood why folks in Melbourne warned us that we were headed into hot weather when we told them our next destination was Cairns. Of course, the definition of "hot" is subjective and for tourists from India, the weather was just about warm. We applied sunscreen since we had read and heard that Australia was known for extreme sun burns. In the 1.5 hour voyage to Green Island, we could see the color of the sea metamorphosing from green to bluish green to greenish blue to blue to cyan to aquamarine blue to ultra-marine blue. I had endless arguments with Shridula whether the water started off with greenish blue or bluish green. That argument has still not been resolved but the point is that the brilliant transforming color of the sea was a sight to behold. The boat swayed in the waters but not enough to cause our stomachs any turbulence. As we neared Green Island, the waters became multi-colored, almost like nature oil-painted a canvas with layers of brilliant colors. We realized that the coral reef underneath the waters was one of the main reasons for this variety of colors at one place. We had finally arrived at the famous Great Barrier Reef at 10.15am!



Brilliant shades of blue water at the Great Barrier Reef / Green Island as seen from our boat



Shridula's sketch of the Great Barrier Reef as seen from our cruise ship

We stayed on the cruise while most of the others that included very young kids and very old adults enthusiastically rented snorkeling gear and got into the water. I was looking forward to snorkeling emboldened by my undersea Sea Walker adventure in Bali. However I didn't want to venture since my friend had warned of possible severe ear pain and the need to avoid air travel for 48 hours after snorkeling for the same reason. So, we had booked for two best alternatives to snorkeling in order to get an underwater view of the Great Barrier Reef – a glass bottom boat tour and a semi-submersible boat tour.

Our glass bottom boat tour started at 10.45am and lasted for 30 minutes. I was reminded of a miserable sea sickness on a glass bottom boat way back in 1998 at Key West, Florida. So, Vidya, Mridula and I popped a Domstal tablet as a preventive measure to avoid throwing up. But the glass bottom boat rarely rocked and we could enjoy the views of hard and soft corals, sea grass, sea cucumber, turtle, a variety of large fishes and schools of fishes and sting rays through the fairly clear glass at the bottom of the boat. The crew fed the fishes in order to attract a lot more marine creatures towards the boat but the hovering sea gulls got some of the hungry fishes to satisfy their hunger. Because the entire area of the Great Barrier Reef is strictly under bio conservation, no swimmers are allowed to touch any of the corals and no one is allowed to fish or hunt any marine creatures. They also have a quota of how much to feed the fishes every day!



Fishes and coral reefs seen through the glass bottom boat

We came back to our main cruise and then boarded the semi-submersible vessel at 11.30am for another 30 minutes. We were asked to climb down a thin ladder into a narrow claustrophobic area below the surface of the water. This vessel took us around the same area and we made similar observations but this was more interesting than the glass bottom boat, since we were in the thick of all undersea action with all marine creatures swimming around us. It felt like the fishes and other sea animals were seeing humans inside an aquarium, rather than the other way around like we see usually. Midway through this ride, Vidya and I started feeling the effects of a wobbling boat with swirling waters glimmering around us. Thankfully, the ride ended just before any effects of seasickness impacted us.



[Plethora of fishes engulfing our semi-submersible vessel](#)

We had over 3 hours to while away our time since the return cruise was only at 3.15pm and there was no option to return early. Under the hot sun, we walked to the island over the pier to be greeted by

strong smell of sea food emanating from the restaurants on the island. We spent time munching on some snacks we had packed, before heading back to our cruise for our free buffet lunch. As we approached the buffet lunch area on the lowest deck, we saw that they had placed rice and beef next to each other and fruit salad and prawns next to each other. It was so repulsive for us that we made a hasty retreat back to the main deck just to recuperate from the harrowing visual experience. We reconciled to having some ice-cream instead. They served awesome soft ice-cream that was also very filling. I ate a scoop of Macadamia Magic ice cream that melted in my mouth.

After ice cream, we headed back for a second tour of the island. We quickly walked past the sea food restaurant to another place where they served freshly made fries and chips. Shridula bought a large serving of something called “shoestring fries” that we all struggled to finish. My initial assumption was that the “shoestring” name was because it was cheap and people on a “shoestring” budget could afford it. However, later research revealed that it was called “shoestring” because of the narrow width of the fries that made it deeply fried all the way to the core instead of a less fried middle in regular French fries. We spent some time energizing in the crystal-clear surprisingly cool beach water without wetting our dresses, though the sharp rocky beach made our walk back quite uncomfortable for our feet. The life guard on duty was prominently displayed at the entrance to the beach and a warning board sounded potential sting ray attacks and asked people not to venture beyond the orange flags.



[At the beach on Green Island](#)

We promptly got back to our cruise at 3.15pm and took the upper deck again to satisfy Shridula, even though the afternoon sun was beating down harshly. The cruise headed back to the mainland at 3.45pm

after double verification of the passenger count by the crew using clickers and also tallying against the names before we departed the island. The return journey was quite turbulent and threw us from side to side all the way back. Many Australians just slept on the upper deck drying the skimpy dress covering their bodies. Mridula and Shridula also blissfully slept with their hats shielding them from the harsh sun, while Vidya and I found refuge under a shaded area at the front of the cruise. It was equally windy as the morning but the sun was relentless now. As we arrived back at the Reef Terminal, we were extremely thirsty and helped ourselves to more ice cream and a bottle of ice cold water. Shridula has a habit of looking at the ingredients of any food she consumes, and so she found out that one of the ice cream flavors was a completely vegan ice cream made with soy. I decided to try out the vegan ice cream that tasted pretty good.

As dusk approached, we walked to the Cairns night market. A huge Indian crowd had gathered in a park nearby and they seemed to be celebrating some religious festival partaking of 'prasad'. The street lights started switching on, bathing the entire road in a nice warm glow welcoming the night life with blaring music emanating from the stores. The main road was buzzing with activity and a live singer in the main square who attracted quite some crowd. We also passed the public beach area that was tastefully decorated. Eventually, we reached the night market that hosted rows and rows of stores mostly selling souvenirs at varying price points. I bought a T-Shirt. We also bought a porcelain doll of the famous blue turtle and a kangaroo sharpener, a watch for Mridula and a salt/pepper dropper modeled with two Koalas hugging each other.



Shridula's sketch of Cairns Night Markets

We had requested for our taxi to pick us back from Pacific Cairns at 7.15pm. Kavi was again there today and he dropped us back to the Palm Cove resort at 8pm. For the first time in several days, we relaxed in our room having returned early. As we looked at the itinerary, we realized the entire day after next (Sunday) was being wasted in the hotel room since our flight to Gold Coast was not until evening. I coordinated with Pratik and Ray for the next day's program to Kuranda rain forest. After evaluating some options, we also finalized on going to Hartley's crocodile tours on Sunday by paying extra. Having come all the way from India, idly spending time in a hotel room was the last thing we wanted to do! By bedtime, it was clear that my greed for eating two ice-creams took its toll on my throat and I had caught a severe cold needing immediate medication from our Indian medicine kit. After discussing with the resort staff over the phone, we realized that the sofa in the living room was meant to be converted to a bed and we missed this the previous night. It was very easy to convert the sofa to a comfortable bed and the girls took this converted bed for the night. With dreams of the colorful Great Barrier Reef, we stretched out for the night.

1st Oct 2022

With promises of the beach being walkable from our resort, we set out at 7am for a 'quick' visit to the beach. We checked with another hotel guest about the way to the beach. Her surprised look and instructions clearly told us the beach was nowhere near by. Yet, we took the laborious 1.5 km walk to the beach. We passed by some pretty and large houses through a deserted road and finally reached the beach front. All along, the girls kept complaining and we vowed never to return to the beach by walk again. This was disappointing – one of the rare false promises made by our travel agent on this trip. We decided to give the benefit of doubt to our travel agent – perhaps he didn't know this either. Thankfully, the sun was not beating down on us and hence the walk to the beach and back to our resort was pleasant. The beach was very serene and cool, and the small nice pebbles on the sand were a contrast to the sharp small rocks we saw on Green Island the previous day. We collected some pebbles for posterity. Pratik had told us to eat breakfast at a restaurant on the beach front today, but we decided it was too early to have breakfast. Grudgingly, we accepted that another walk to the beach was inevitable. Around 9.30am, we reached the beach front again. Pratik had recommended a restaurant with a lot of vegetarian breakfast options but it proved elusive to find. We spent 15 minutes going around the exact spot pointed by Google Maps only to realize we were standing right at the restaurant but it did not have a prominent signboard. However, this restaurant was a let-down. Their menu was significantly different from what Pratik forwarded from the internet and we went to another restaurant called O Donnell's Irish Bar and Grill in the neighborhood. I already had ready-to-eat breakfast at the resort, so Vidya and the girls found interesting breakfast - pancake topped with ice cream and honey, banana cake and some juice. We were just about on time for our shuttle to pick us up from the beach front and had to hurry the cashier for our bill. We got picked up by a shuttle bus from Excellence tours and travels at 10.40am. We were the only passengers on the shuttle though, so it seemed like a private taxi drop. He dropped us off at Smithfield ticketing office for our day tour of Kuranda rainforest.



Delicious pancake with ice cream and honey

At 11.15am, we boarded a Gondola for Kuranda Skyrail. We saw a mention of something called Tree Kangaroos at one of the information displays while we waited to board the Gondola. This term intrigued us since we never expected Kangaroos to be on trees. We were told by a ranger later that Tree Kangaroos are much smaller than the ground Kangaroos and they had adapted to living in trees, this rainforest being one of the few habitats in the world for these animals. We expected to see them as we soared over the rainforest but the ranger also told us that they were extremely difficult to spot. The gondola quickly ascended steeply and the landscape below us rapidly transformed from grasslands and farm lands to a thick rainforest with extremely tall trees and thick foliage typical of rainforests. We expected to see Koalas atop the Eucalyptus trees below us but none could be spotted.



Kuranda Skyrail



Shridula's sketch of Kuranda Skyrail

Soon after, we alighted at the first stop at Kuranda rainforest. Cool weather with barely any sunlight welcomed us at this station. A young lady ranger by name Katie gave us a brief but insightful guided tour. She told us how plants fight for sunlight and fight for water amidst the huge trees that soak up all sunlight and rain. As seen on TV, many of the sunlight-deprived smaller plants and trees were covered in moss and barely grew over many years. Katie showed us plants with hollow stalks that were used by the native tribes as a straw to suck liquids. Katie talked about history of this rainforest and how it has shrunk over the centuries to a fairly small area now. She also said it is quite unusual to see such a rainforest with not much rains or moisture, as compared to typical large rainforests like Amazon. The highlight of this 20 minute guided tour was a monstrously wide and tall pine tree with cones embedded in the tree branch – This tree is called the Kauri Pine tree and the one we saw had a trunk diameter of 40+ feet and was easily over 100 feet tall. Katie said this particular tree was estimated to be over 600 years old. This was possibly the fattest tree I have ever seen in my lifetime! There were many other Kauri Pine trees in the vicinity but the sheer size of this tree made the others look miniscule in comparison. It was peculiar to hear from Katie that this tree assumes male and female characteristics (emitting cones or pines) every alternating year.



The massive Kauri Pine tree

We walked up to the same gondola station to proceed to the next station. We had a good panoramic view of Barron's waterfalls and Barron's Gorge before getting down at the next station. We walked down a cemented road which had imprints of the huge leaves of the rainforest trees that eventually ended at a look out point for Barron's waterfalls and gorge. Across the gorge, we saw the Kuranda rail taking passengers down to Cairns. We would board this train later in the afternoon. We stopped briefly for a snack break before boarding the gondola again to the last stop at Kuranda Village station.



Kuranda Rail across the gorge

It was becoming hot now with no semblance of being inside a rainforest. Vidya and the girls had ice cream, and then shopped for souvenirs at the store. After a long time, we settled down on a kitchen towel with a kangaroo imprint as a souvenir. This store displayed beautiful blue butterflies that could be bought as souvenirs, but they seemed very expensive at upwards of AUD 100 for a single butterfly. We had fleeting glances of these brilliant blue large butterflies hovering above the tall trees below the gondolas earlier in the day.

We were very hungry and thirsty now and sunk into a bench outside the last gondola station, nourishing our tired bodies with our packed rice. At the first gondola station, the gondola operator had joked that we will all be literally dying for 5pm by the time we got to Kuranda Village...How true! After food, we dragged our tired bodies and feet up the hill to Kuranda Village.



[Kuranda Village Railway Station](#)

We spent an hour at Kuranda market that housed a plethora of souvenir shops with different price points for every tourist. The girls took a long time but finally bought three finely carved wooden keychains, a fake silver necklace with a unique stone pendant and a cute soft doll that could easily switch from a Koala to a Wombat. By now, we were so used to seeing elderly men or women briskly running a business or being tour guides. The girls were distracted often by another visitor who had three dogs wandering around the stores on a leash. This souvenir store was no exception and was managed by a very old businesswoman who customized the necklace for us very courteously and won the business. By this time, I was very tired to shop with the family and rested at the front of the market while the girls and Vidya continued to look around but did not buy anything.



Kuranda Market

On our way back to the rail station, we had a brief curious stopover at an Opal gemstone store. The lady at the store enthusiastically showed us a hugely discounted Opal necklace touting its history, quality and the benefits of wearing Opal on one's body. She nearly thought she sold it to Vidya at AUD 240 but she clearly underestimated the difficulty of closing a deal with cost conscious Indians! I can vividly remember her exasperated, taunting look when Vidya responded to her offer with the typical "I will come back later" excuse that we use in India to walk away from a negotiation. We had told her earlier that we were tourists traveling from India, so her expression was not unexpected.

At 3.15pm, we walked down to Kuranda train station for the last train downhill at 3.30pm. We had been assigned coach 15 and seats 39, 40, 41 and 42. We got this assignment on SMS soon after we completed the ticketing formalities earlier in the day. After a very average lukewarm chai latte in the train station restaurant, we boarded the train and settled down in the leather seats.



Kuranda Rail



Shridula's sketch of Kuranda Rail

Another very old lady opposite our seats impressed us with her briskness and alertness throughout the 1.5 hour journey downhill. She was among the few people in our coach who didn't sleep through the journey, the other being yours truly. The train and coaches were over a century old with the train now run on diesel engines. For a century old train, it was very well maintained. Since the original steam engine posed a fire hazard to the forest, they switched to diesel engines in 1967. Kuranda staff on the coaches handed out an information card about the Kuranda Rail. There was also a commentary on the

public address system as we descended down the mountains. The train ran quite fast and quickly came to a 10 minute stop, over-looking the Barron's waterfalls and gorge but now on the other side. Subsequently, it went through 15 tunnels that were all built a century ago using just picks and shovels – very impressive for that time. Other than these tunnels that also became a little monotonous after the first few, there was nothing interesting in the entire journey. We remembered our itinerary talked about this rail being the steepest railway in the world and we were eagerly looking forward to a steep drop but it never came – The information card mentioned nothing about the steepest railway either. The train quickly came to level land and we were left fuming about the fake hype created by the travel agents and Australia tourism. It was not until the last day of our tour that we realized that the steepest railway in the world was not at Kuranda but at Scenic World near Sydney. It was not fake after all! At 5pm, we dismounted the train at Freshwater station. This place was apparently the last train station in historical times where the workers digging tunnels could get fresh water to drink, hence the name. Our taxi was waiting for us right outside the station and took us back to the resort with enough daylight to spare. After freshening up, I went swimming with the girls from 6.15pm-7pm. With the pool right next to our patio, we did not want to miss venturing into the water. The pool started with a 2 feet depth but deceptively became 6.5 feet without warning or any indication alongside the pool floor like it usually does. Thankfully, Shridula did not venture into the deeper side of the pool. As dusk descended, the pool became quite dark. The lighting in the pool was pathetic and we decided to step out. The windy evening made us shiver and run into the hot comforts of the shower as soon as we stepped out of the pool. Hot tea would have been a welcome relief after the shiver, but the lack of milk or dairy creamer in our room denied this pleasure. The experience at this resort would have been even more fulfilling if only they had a live reception, which was needed for housekeeping and any emergencies. After a relaxing evening followed by dinner, we packed our bags for departure to Gold Coast the next day.



Swimming Pool at Palm Cove

2nd Oct 2022

The next day morning started with a lot of confusion over daylight savings time change that we were unaware of when we got to bed the previous night. We woke up as usual at 7am, had breakfast in our room and got ready for our taxi pickup at 9.30am. When the driver did not show up even at 9.40am, we called the driver only to be answered by an automated voice message. Visibly irritated, we then called our travel agent who took some time to realize that our clocks were advanced by an hour because of daylight savings time change (like it happens in the USA) and it was actually only 8.30am in Cairns. Queensland (the province to which Cairns belongs) doesn't follow daylight savings time but other provinces follow daylight savings change - our phones were synced to Sydney time zone because that was our first entry into Australia, so it had advanced by an hour while Cairns still stayed behind. Thankfully, we don't have this confusion in India! We went back to the room to relax for a full hour before our driver Andrew (another elderly gentleman) dressed in an unmistakable bright green T-Shirt, arrived to pick us up for Hartley's Crocodile Adventures at 9.30am. Andrew later told us that the Government of Queensland fights over daylight savings every single year to this day and it was a hot political topic. We checked out of our room and apprehensively stowed our bags behind the receptionist's chair to be picked up later in the evening. As indicated earlier, no one mans the reception beyond 4pm and we took a bold chance to leave our bags unattended until 5pm when we would return from Hartley's. The receptionist assured us that our bags would be safe because of the closed circuit cameras monitoring the reception and we had no choice but to trust her words.

For some strange unexplainable reason, Andrew insisted on following Covid protocol and did not allow anyone to sit next to the driver even though none of us wore a mask 😊

He dropped us off at Hartley's at 9.50am after a very scenic drive along the ocean through the entire drive.



After completing the ticketing formalities, we rushed to the snake show at 10am. As we sat down in an open air stadium, we saw a very nice demonstration and explanation about snakes and why we shouldn't be afraid of them. The ranger deftly handled the most venomous snake in the world – the Inland Taipan, and then had a Boa Constrictor casually wrapped around his arms while he continuously talked. He went on to mention that Australia only gets 1 snake fatality per year, very surprising considering Australia hosts 9 of the 10 most venomous snakes in the world.

After this exciting snake show, we hurried across the park to the crocodile boat tour at 10.30am. This was a 20 minute tour that took us through the park's large man-made marsh that apparently took several years to build out. We saw a lot of huge crocodiles in the water at fairly close quarters.



Crocodile Boat Tour

The boat operator occasionally teased chicken meat suspended on a long pole on the surface of the water only to be instantly gobbled up by the greedy crocodiles that sprang out of the water with a massive splash and a loud snap of its powerful jaws. Many crocodiles had been named - Gregory (a 500 kg crocodile, the biggest in the park), Newbie, and Billy to name a few. Just like Americans, the Australian rangers were excellent at storytelling and kept the audience engaged and riveted. The ranger also mentioned that some very wild and aggressive crocodiles that attacked other males were in their own separate enclosures at various areas around the park.

Next up on the scheduled shows was the crocodile feeding from 11.30am till 12 noon. We were initially hesitant to see the live feeding but after just seeing the chicken feeding from the boat, it didn't seem very repugnant. We saw hostile fights between several big crocodiles to get their share of the day's feed from the very brave lady rangers who fed them with their bare hands to the loud snapping sound of the powerful jaws. We got a close-up view of the huge crocodiles including their teeth and insides of the mouth.



Crocodiles up close in the feeding area

There was a photography session with a Koala from noon for 30 minutes and we crossed over to that area. Along the way, we saw several Koalas at very close quarters perched on small Eucalyptus trees in an enclosure. It was a delight to see the Koalas with their face turned towards us and moving around when all we had seen until now was a stationary lump of gray body perched up high in the trees.



A smiling Koala

Focused fans directed at each of the Koalas simulated the typical wind in the high branches of the trees that Koalas are usually accustomed to. As we approached the photography area, we could see a number of tourists hugging a cute Koala for pictures. After deliberating for just a moment, we shelled out AUD 36 for Mridula and Shridula to take pictures with the Koala named Kelly. Shridula was very brave to hold the Koala while Mridula hugged it. The ranger handling Kelly told us that she was extremely well behaved and that she was 7 years old and weighed 7 kgs. It was such a delight and rarity to hold a Koala in our arms that we did not think twice to spend another AUD 36 for me and Vidya to take a separate picture. Vidya hesitated to touch the Koala but eventually did. I allowed the little furry animal onto my arms and it gently held on to me with its claws like a human baby would. The claws were not too sharp and this experience was worth its weight in gold. The ranger clicked away the photos while we also took photos on our mobile. After a minute of holding Kelly, we were given the high resolution pictures nicely framed to be preserved as a souvenir – this would be the best souvenir on the entire trip!!!



Holding cute little Kelly

Next, we spent nearly an hour inside the air-conditioned live reptile gallery that hosted a lot of venomous snakes, lizards and frogs. Many of these reptiles had plastic-like skin and barely moved, deceiving us into thinking they were just models and not live animals. Some snakes were actively trying to escape their glass enclosures while others seem to have resigned to their fate and just slept inside their entrapments. We saw the longest snake in the world, the reticulated python. It was massive! The reticulated python did not need to strangulate its prey – the sheer weight of this creature would collapse and crush its prey. We all took photos with a large python, Komodo dragon and crocodile in the play area – we became kids again! Outside the reptile gallery, we saw an enclosure for a live Komodo dragon – To our disappointment, we only saw a small Komodo dragon. We expected to see one of the large Komodo dragons that are usually seen on wildlife TV channels...or maybe not, considering how they easily munch on and swallow large prey.



Reticulated Python and Inland Taipan



Shridula conquering a giant Anaconda 🐍

Then, we walked across to the Gondwana Gateway area that hosted wallaby, kangaroos, emu and bats. The timing of our entry was as perfect as it could be. We least expected to be in such close proximity with these wonderful Marsupials. Not only did we come close to them, we were right in the middle of feeding time. We petted the small wallabies and fed them with pellets that were stocked up by the park. The wallabies were very receptive to our petting and seemed quite at ease with humans.



Petting a Wallaby

Out of the corner of our eyes, we saw plenty of Kangaroos of different sizes. It looked like we could feed them as well. One of the park rangers was distributing hay and frozen sweet corn to be fed to them. The kangaroos were as timid as deer and gladly fed off our hands. They first exhausted the sweet corn before they reluctantly accepted hay. It was an awesome feeling to feel the mild tickle of their tongue on my palm as they gently sucked in their food. Never in our wildest dreams did we imagine feeding a kangaroo. We had only expected to take pictures with a kangaroo inside a zoo cage or enclosure at best. This was another unexpectedly wonderful experience at Hartley's and completely worth the money. I **strongly recommend that Hartley's be planned into any Australian itinerary as a must-do.**



Petting and feeding Kangaroos



Petting and feeding Kangaroos

We walked up the area to see Emus and fruit bats – nothing out of the ordinary. Once we came out of the Gondwana Gateway, we settled down on a bench under the hot sun, had our packed lunch and then walked across to see more crocodiles and alligators. We saw rangers feeding them chicken, but we didn't stop again – we had seen enough of feeding for the day!

Until 3pm when we had the last important show in the park, we visited the tropical aviary enclosure which hosted a few colourful birds, walked to the cassowary area where we could see just one cassowary and finally the predatory aviary enclosure where some of the predatory birds didn't mind us getting up close. Generally speaking, all animal and bird species seem friendly with humans in Australia, given how the entire country preserves their bio-diversity with such fervor.



A Cassowary

At 2.45pm, we got back to the same open air stadium which hosted the snake show earlier in the day – this time for the highlight of Hartley’s – “The crocodile attack”. The ranger was very bravely tempting a huge crocodile aptly called Hagrid (Yes, the same Hagrid from Harry Potter) out of the marshy murky water. He had a knack of exactly predicting where the crocodile was lurking – it was amazing that he risked his life at guessing the exact location and got it right every single time! Through the show, Hagrid came tantalizingly close to the ranger three times. The ranger even ventured into the water with half his body under the water with the big animal hiding under. He gave it bait and demonstrated to us how a crocodile uses the sideward twist and turn and the famous crocodile roll to tear its prey into bite sized chunks. Seeing these two maneuvers of a crocodile was worth the wait and this show definitely lived up to its hype.



Crocodile Attack!

We were now done with all the attractions at Hartley's and our pickup was at 4pm. We filled the time munching on snacks at the restaurant - no ice-cream for me today[®]. We were appalled to see crocodile meat on the restaurant menu – given that all rangers used every opportunity to appreciate these large reptiles and extolling their unique characteristics. The souvenir shop at the exit had a lot of crocodile boutique items made of crocodile leather – this was acceptable (since crocodile leather was harvested from dead crocodiles) but the meat left us very disappointed.



The restaurant menu with crocodile meat 🙄

Andrew promptly picked us up from the park at 4pm. We had a brief stop at our resort to pick up our bags (which remained at the same place since morning!) and get rid of the sweat and stink with deodorants. He dropped us at Cairns airport and bid us goodbye. We were amazed at his energy at that age. He was so quick in loading and unloading all our bags, briskly getting all of us out of his taxi and then proceeding to pick up his next client at the airport.



[A brief stopover at our resort](#)

We waited for 1.5 hours before boarding the plane to Gold Coast at 7.05pm. I had a good **hot** chai latte and the girls had pizza at the airport while we waited. This was a Jet star flight again and we got a 40 AUD voucher on this plane as well. Now we knew exactly what to buy and consumed 39 AUD – obviously feeling bad that we left 1 AUD unused 😊

We landed at Gold Coast on time at 9.20pm. Contrasting and welcoming cool weather at 15 degree Celsius greeted us. We have had enough of hot and humid weather at Cairns. Our baggage came out very quickly on the claim belt and the airport emptied out soon after. After many flights over the last week, Shridula seemed to have gotten rid of her fear of aircraft take-off and landing hurting her ear. She was busy sketching away pictures from the trip, unmindful of the landing. While we waited for our shuttle to our hotel through a company called Con-X-ion, the airport security seemed desperate to usher us out of the airport and lock the airport doors – very unusual for an airport to be locked but we were indeed pushed out in the cold weather with barely anyone at the airport. All shops were closed inside the terminal as we were accustomed to seeing by now. Things shut down very early in the evening in Australia even in busy areas like airports. Australians don't seem to worry about business as much as

they worried about spending evenings with their families. Though the Con-X-ion bus was waiting outside the airport gate, we had to impatiently wait for another 20 minutes before we were allowed to board the bus – seemingly some communication gap about our itinerary. It was quite desolate around the airport but things looked a little livelier as we headed towards Surfer’s Paradise where our hotel Q1 was located.

It took us 1 hour to reach the hotel around 11pm and then another painstaking 15 minutes to complete the check-in process at the reception. The receptionist seemed to conveniently ignore new guests waiting to check-in, which was irritating. But he made up for this by his genuine apology while he completed our check-in process. Q1 hotel looked stunning and modern from the outside and as we stepped inside, the same modernity and luxury pervaded within as well. This was a 4.5 star property and rightly rated so. The Q1 tower has 77 floors, with 41 floors given to the hotel side of the tower. We were assigned room no 708 on the 7th floor though. Our room had two large bedrooms, fully equipped kitchen with a conventional and microwave oven, washer and dryer, a huge bathtub and a standing shower, a separate dining area (The dining area displayed a board that said “No smoking policy strictly enforced” – a classic case of missing punctuation leading to misinterpretation. Mridula assumed it meant the hotel did not enforce any smoking policy but what it really meant was “**No smoking policy**’ strictly enforced” which was the complete opposite of what Mridula assumed – of course it didn’t matter to us either way but I thought of pointing out a quirk with grammar and how funny it can be), security controls and separate air conditioning for two zones (living room and bedrooms)



Our awesome room at Q1 – Dining area, Kitchen and Living area

Despite being on 7th floor, we still had a pretty good view of the streets below. We still didn't know how the view on the other ocean side looked like since it was getting closer to midnight. Trams and buses were still operational at this time but not at the same frequency as Melbourne. The girls were very impressed with the hotel and took a lot of pictures. I had a relaxing bath in the bathtub with the Jacuzzi after a really long time. It took an inordinately long time for the large bathtub to fill but the Jacuzzi experience was very satisfying. After an exciting day, we retired well past midnight

3rd Oct 2022

Pratik had asked us to have breakfast at Q1 itself. Q1 had a different tower called Sky Point Observation Tower, different from the residential tower, where they served breakfast. When we went down to the reception to book our breakfast table, it suddenly dawned on us that this Sky Point Observation Tower was the same attraction on our first itinerary from 'Pick your trail' that eventually got dropped but we were now going to the very same place for breakfast – talk about good fortune and serendipity! We walked around the corner of our tower to the entry of Sky Point in the other tower. We could see tourists from other hotels buy entry tickets for this attraction at rates higher than what we were given

for the privilege of being Q1 hotel guests. At the entrance to the lift, we saw a display that indicated Q1 Sky Point was the 5th highest tower in the world among the 7 tallest skyscrapers. I felt good that Vidya and I had visited 6 of them and seen one of them (Burj Al Arab) from a distance.



Tallest skyscrapers at Q1 SkyPoint

The breakfast was not all that great but the 360 degree view was impressive. However, we did not have enough time to soak in the views all around the breakfast area and deferred this for the next day's breakfast. Our bus to Movie World theme park was waiting for us just across the street in front of another hotel called Voco. As we settled in the bus, we made a mental note of an Indian restaurant right across the road just in case we needed it for dinner. The bus left promptly at 9am and took about an hour to drop us off at Movie World. Despite being a coastal region, the weather was very cool and windy. Gold Coast seemed to have the best of everything – a nice long beach, smooth waves suitable for surfing and an excellent weather to go with these.

The theme park was very crowded because of an Australian public holiday that day along with a 2-week school break. It was good to see crowds back in theme parks after two long years of Covid. I almost thought theme parks would all shut down permanently in the new world after a pandemic. Instinctively and immediately on entry, we compared every aspect of this park with our experience at the four theme

parks at Disney World in 2013. Disney World stands tall amongst every other theme park in the world including better ones like Universal Studios in the USA. The experience in a Disney World park is in different strata – from the way they manage crowds, the experience with the park volunteers, their attention to detail and their obsession to ensure every single visitor has magical memories of a lifetime. Enough of comparison, we told ourselves. We had to enjoy the experience in Movie World now and not keep living in the past.

No physical maps were given out at the park entrance. It was the same at Sea World that we would visit the next day. They asked us to use a mobile app but the app was not updated to reflect the current status of many of the rides. The park had poor directions and signage but the volunteers and store assistants throughout the park were very nice in giving us directions. The ride times shown on the app did not reflect the reality at the rides. The wait time at the ride was much smaller than what the app indicated, so we gave up using the app altogether. In general, we observed that the crowd control and management for the rides was very poor. The loading and unloading time for the rides was too long. The park was possibly about a quarter the size of one Disney World theme park and handling a tenth of the visitors at Disney World possibly. Most of the rides had over an hour wait time, so it was obvious we were not going to be able to cover all the rides by end of the day. However, it was a moot point since most of the rides were wild, adventurous roller coasters that were far beyond our timid selves. Among the four of us, Mridula and Shridula were the bravest with a tinge of adrenalin-seeking mentality. They debated for more than 15 minutes about going on one of the big roller coasters at the entrance of the park, but eventually chickened out citing two lame reasons - the long wait time and no companion on the ride to go with them. Ha, good try girls but I am not falling for it!



Monstrous roller coasters at Movie World

We first went to the car stunt reality show. We had seen similar shows in Disney World and Universal Studios in USA and this was also very nicely done. They shot small videos of volunteers from the audience and assembled these into a larger live video of cars and bikes screeching across the arena. Smell of burning rubber filled the air as the cars did some highly risky speedy chases with sharp turns that burnt the tires. One of the performers acted like a comedian with some stupid moves but eventually we were shocked when he rode a tall quad bike on two wheels just on one side. That was a superlative stunt!

Our next scheduled show was Scoob! 4D experience and we walked to the theater well in time for the show. Along the way, Shridula took photos with DC characters on the main street and posed with a vintage car. The 4D show of Scooby Doo left a lot to be desired. The coordination of motion and video was extremely poor. It wasn't clear which character's motion was being delivered through the motion of our seats. In all, it was subpar experience that left us a little dazed.



Shridula with DC Characters

We settled on going to the Scooby Doo spooky roller coaster, since it indicated moderate thrill level and marked for ages 7 and above. Along the way to this ride, we saw an outstanding dance performance on the main street by 'Team Dreams'. The dancers were mostly young and demonstrated an array of acrobatic moves performed very briskly. We heard the 'screaming song' yet again during the dance, but still could not recall the song when we got back to the hotel in the evening. We briefly saw a parade of Tweety on its birthday before heading to the spooky roller coaster.

We stood in line for the Scooby Doo spooky roller coaster with an estimated wait time of 2 hours. The actual wait time was only about an hour though. The girls bought colored ice cones (These are called Gola in Bangalore) to while away the time and get some respite from the hot sun, that was beating down over our heads now. We slowly moved through the queue from the hot sun into the dark air-conditioned part that eventually led to the ride boarding point. Each of the cars of the roller coaster housed 4 seats across 2 rows and I took the back row with Vidya. It was sad and disappointing to see a few obese parents in front of us who were asked to disembark since the harnesses could not fit them. I never saw such a thing at Disney World. It seemed so insensitive to those people. The children of these

parents braved the ride all by themselves. As the ride started, my worst fears came true. The roller coaster twisted and turned very violently and also included a really fast reverse ride followed by a fall. There were also many bumps over which we were brutally jerked around. I screamed for the ride to end but it was unrelenting. Finally to my relief, the ride ended and I walked out with shivering legs. Some of the kids that traveled alone were seen crying when they met their parents at the exit. This was arguably the most violent ride I had ever ventured on, even beating Space Mountain at Disney's Magic Kingdom (that was also a roller coaster in the dark but not as violent though it was equally fast). Thankfully, this ride didn't aggravate my back and neck pain. I told the girls that I am not getting onto any more roller coasters for the day, even it was meant for babies. I had enough thrill for a lifetime!



The hell that was Scooby Doo Spooky Coaster!

We then took photos with other characters – Tweety, Road Runner etc. Mridula and Shridula went to a smaller Road Runner roller coaster three times and enjoyed it thoroughly, while Vidya and I enjoyed our packed lunch. We briefly visited a candy store called 'Charlie and the chocolate factory' but didn't buy any candies though.



Shridula with another character



Brave Mridula and Shridula enjoying a roller coaster ride

At 4pm, we trudged back to the front of the park in anticipation of the last parade of the day. Most of the park visitors had already lined up on either side of Main Street for the parade and so we had to settle down behind the first row. As we waited, I had a nice chai latte and Shridula grabbed a Nutella frappe (something she had set her eyes on when we visited Scoob 4D adventures earlier in the day) at a

coffee store nearby. It was a quick but nice parade of all DC characters and Warner Brother's movie characters – the sets and characters very meticulously portrayed what the movies showed. Batman, with his high tech matte black car was the highlight of the parade. As we saw the last of the characters retreat, the park nearly emptied but we stayed back since our bus wasn't until 5.15pm.



Batman with a sporty car during the parade

Pratik messaged me at this time that the 2.30pm whale watching cruise for the next day was being cancelled. After some discussions, we finally managed to keep everything back on schedule only swapping the whale watching cruise and Sea World. We had initially planned to visit Sea World in the morning but we would do that in the afternoon instead, after the whale watching cruise.

The bus dropped us back at Q1. We relaxed for an hour before heading to the beach. We hoped the beach was really nearby and not disappointing us like Palm Cove, Cairns. As we walked down and out of our hotel lobby, we found a small but well-stocked convenience store right around the corner of our hotel entrance. We bought snacks and a box of ready-to-eat hard Tacos for dinner. We took a leisurely stroll through the by lanes and eventually arrived at the walkway along the beach. It was a short walk and we spotted a number of people even on the small streets leading up to the beach. On the beach walkway that was well-lit, we could see a lot of people walking, jogging and cycling and skateboarding at full speed. There were well-maintained restrooms along the entire way. Even though it was well past

sunset and dark on the sea, we saw lots of seagulls near the water that resembled white trash from a distance.



[Seagulls on the beach even at night](#)

From here, we got a very nice view of the Gold Coast skyline with towering hotels lit up in different colors. Q1 stood out from the other skyscrapers with green lights highlighting the Sky Point observation deck.



Skyline of Gold Coast – The Green lighted floor is Sky Point Observation Deck at Q1

After walking for a couple of kms, we reached a very busy junction right next to a large Surfboard sculpture, and decided to cross over into the crowded street.



[Surfboard sculpture along the beach walk](#)

This was the famous Cavill Avenue, synonymous with Gold Coast’s nightlife and the most happening place in Gold Coast. We did not plan to visit this place but accidentally stumbled on this busy happening place. As we crossed the road leading into Cavill Avenue, sounds of “Hare Rama Hare Krishna” drifted in the wind towards us. We were pleasantly surprised to see two ISKCON devotees chanting the holy name and playing the trademark Dholak – one looked like an Indian and the other was clearly an Australian.



ISKCON devotees

Entrance to Cavill Avenue at Surfers Paradise

They continued singing unmoved by the attention from passers-by. I visited McDonald's for a brief bathroom break but regretted the visit - it was the worst maintained toilet I had ever seen in a Western country. This toilet would have easily ranked among the bottom 3 in terms of hygiene anywhere in the world including undeveloped countries. As we walked through the bustling street, we saw a lot of boards preaching Christianity and the healing effects of Christ. For the length of the street spanning half a kilometer, we saw multiple ice-cream stores selling varieties of ice-creams from different countries. We recognized most of these brands and Vidya and the girls stopped at Movenpick, the Swiss ice-cream brand. We saw a lady singer whose street performance was very good. Shridula bought earrings on sale at an artificial jewelry store.



Lady singer on the lively Cavill Avenue

As the night progressed, we were losing our patience to shop but we still managed to buy a T-Shirt for Mridula at an Australian souvenir store. There was a colorfully-lit sling shot ride around this area and we paused to admire the courage of the tourists screaming on this ride. The walk back to our hotel was not too long and we passed two more Indian restaurants on the way, one very close to our hotel. After a quick dinner, we retired for the night.

4th Oct 2022

We got ready to have a leisurely view atop Sky Point Observation deck at breakfast today morning but that was not to be. Tuesday was a weekly holiday for Sky Point, so we had to wait another day. Instead, we crossed over to Voco for continental breakfast. Breakfast here was really sumptuous, with a variety of fruits, nuts and lactose-free milk alternatives. A taxi dropped us at Sea World Cruises at 8.15am, shortly thereafter. Sea World was much closer than Movie World. Sea World Cruises operated the cruise for the Whale watching activity and they were famous for their high success rate in spotting the whales. We boarded our cruise at 9am and got to the upper deck immediately. The public address system announced safety instructions with a great sense of humor – it said “If you feel funny with your tummy because of the motion of the ocean, use the toilets in the lower deck”



Heading out for the Whale Watch – View of Gold Coast from our cruise

As we headed out to sea, there was a nice commentary on Humpback Whales that we were expected to see in some time. The water became quite choppy and people on the upper deck were thrown around from side to side. We struggled to get to the bow (front side) of the ship for a vantage viewing point and struggled even further to hold our spot there, clenching on the handrails for safety. As we got into deeper waters, the captain of the ship turned off the engines and pointed to two whales swimming at relatively close quarters (I assume they might have been only about 100 feet from the cruise but then distances on sea are very deceptive) One was much larger than the other.



Humpback Whale in the sea

The biodiversity ranger on the cruise told us that it was a mother whale training its baby in preparation for the long swim all the way to Antarctica for the annual migration. It was delightful to see and hear the sounds of multiple sideward flips and spurts of fountains of water that we typically associate with the breathing of whales. The ranger told me that the waters were relatively shallow at only about 100 feet, apparently because whales needed only that much depth to train in the "warm waters" of Gold Coast – The water here was definitely warmer than the freezing waters of Antarctica! We spent a wonderful 30 minutes at nearly the same spot through turbulent waters and wild swaying of the deck but managed to see 6 whales in total. Mridula felt seasick and settled down in the seat for most part of the journey. Pratik later told us that we should consider ourselves lucky since many prior visitors could not spot even a single whale.



The cruise ended at 11.30am and we walked across the parking lot to Sea World. Sea World was not as crowded as Movie World. We started with a brief visit to Penguin Encounter – we didn't spend much time here since we had already seen enough Penguins in the trip. Then we visited the Illuminated Sea Jellies which hosted dark passageways where the only colorful light came from enclosures lighting up jellyfishes of various types. Each jellyfish had a 'stingometer' reading indicating the power of its electric sting. This area also had an elaborate lab upstairs researching on jellyfishes.



Illuminated Sea Jellies



Shridula at Sea World

We then passed by the center of the park where park rangers were feeding dolphins.



Sea World park ranger feeding dolphins

The intense noon sun started draining us today and Vidya felt a little dizzy albeit temporarily. I have to sheepishly admit that Shridula and I went on a Ninja Flyers pedaling ride that was meant for young kids. This was just about the thrill level that I could tolerate 😊

Mridula and Shridula then went to the Bikini Bottoms submarine ride – a bus-sized submarine-shaped vehicle that tossed the riders along multiple axes – not for faint-hearted folks like me.



At 1.30pm, we went back to the central lake of Sea World where the Thunder Lake stunt show was in progress. Park stuntmen and stuntwomen demonstrated an array of high speed adventures with speed boats, followed by a one-off cycle stunt. After this show, we retired to the comforting shade of some trees to treat ourselves to a lunch of home packed food trying to keep some hungry seagulls at bay. Soon after, we settled down in an open air stadium for the Seal Guardians show. While we waited for the show to begin, I bought popcorn and Churros (A churro is a cinnamon and sugar-topped fried pastry dough stick of Spanish/Portuguese origin. Churros are similar to doughnuts, but they have ridges. Because they are fried instead of baked, churros have a fluffy and tender interior with a satisfyingly crispy exterior) Shridula knew about Churros surprisingly, so she was delighted to taste it in the park.

The Seal Guardians show was even better than the ones I had seen in Sea World, USA – 3 species of seals performed brilliantly well including dancing to music, having an acute sense to throw recyclable rubbish into the right bin and waving to the audience on cue. Shridula was super impressed with this show since she didn't remember anything of Sea World in USA, being only 5 years when we visited USA.



Seal show

The park had quite a few thrilling roller coasters which were only good for looking at – The Vortex which suspended riders and rolled them upside down like chicken on a grill, Jet Coaster which was an extremely fast boat-shaped coaster on a slightly inclined track and Storm Coaster which was a very tall coaster that landed riders into a swirling splash of water. Storm Coaster was nicely setup with real shipping containers to mimic a ship running aground in a storm. We safely decided not to brave the adventure on any of these rides.

We spent the remainder of the late afternoon visiting the sting ray pool where I touched several sting rays and felt their slimy exteriors much to the repugnance of the girls who wanted to be nowhere near water creatures. I had wrongly assumed that all sting rays were dangerous, specifically since the most famous Australian ranger Steve Irwin died of a sting ray bite after several nail-biting encounters with the most venomous and dangerous creatures in Australia.



Bravely touching a Sting Ray

Lastly, we visited the polar bear area where a lone huge Polar bear restlessly ambled in its enclosure. Having seen a polar bear earlier, it wasn't surprising to any of us that polar bears have a pale yellow fur rather than the striking white that we see on TV – that striking white is mainly from sunlight reflected off the ice where these giant creatures live as their natural habitat. Though the polar bear looks cute like a soft toy, they are extremely wild creatures.



A lone Polar Bear roaming inside an enclosure

Because we skipped many of the busy thrill rides, we had seen all of Sea World by 4.15pm. We spent the remaining one hour in souvenir shops until our taxi picked us up at 5.15pm. We wanted to revisit Cavill Avenue but this time we walked along the main road off our hotel. This walk was less interesting and less lively than the beach walkway but we managed to buy some souvenirs in a store that claimed to sell everything at 70% or more off the marked price. In our quest to get back to Cavill Avenue, we briefly lost our orientation but regained our way using the colorful sling shot ride as our reference. This evening seemed less exciting and less happening for some reason. We crossed over to the beach walkway, stopped for some time to see some terrific beach volleyball (perhaps played by professionals) while Mridula sketched some of the players. We could also see several school kids playing volleyball on the beach.



Beach Volleyball

After another 20 minutes, we were back in Q1. It was now time to pack our bags for departure to Brisbane and Sydney the next day. By now, we had made one more observation of the Australian accent – they end most sentences with questions such as isn't it, is it, do they etc.

5th Oct 2022

Today, we got back for a leisurely breakfast at Sky Point observation deck and soaked in the beautiful 360 degree view of Gold Coast. We could see the beach walkway that we had used on the two previous nights and several other buildings we had seen during the daytime.



View of Gold Coast from Q1 SkyPoint

We still had some time for our guided tour of Brisbane. I had promised Shridula that we could experience a tram ride if we had the time, and it was time to honor that promise and make up for the lost opportunity at Melbourne.

Shridula and I went to the Surfers Paradise tram station right at the hotel entrance, bought tickets to 'Main Beach' that was 4 stations away and boarded the tram that arrived five minutes later on schedule. It took us 10 minutes to reach Main Beach. Shridula enjoyed the ride though it felt the same as any metro. We assumed this station would be alongside the beach but that was not the case - The beach was at least a kilometer by walk. We spent some time taking pictures of the buildings and the calm river that flowed nearby. It was now time to head back to Q1. We waited for the returning tram but we were unsure if our tickets were valid for the return journey. We missed one of the trams because of this confusion that finally ended with a helpful Australian woman who clarified the ticket usage from other tram passengers. The ticket we had bought was valid for four hours and could be used any number of times on any tram route until the time expired.



At the tram station

We got back to Q1 with a happy Shridula and were greeted by Mr. Peter, the oldest gentleman on duty that we met thus far on this tour. Peter was very courteous, soft spoken and well informed. His face had very visible red arteries giving it a very unique cracked look – something that has stayed in my memory.

Peter was our guide for a tour of Brisbane after which he would drop us off at the airport for our onward flight to Sydney.

We all slept on the nearly two hour drive to Brisbane City. First, Peter drove us into a cool mountain called Mount Coot-Tha, a very old mountain that belonged to the Aboriginal tribes. The view point atop this mountain offered spectacular panoramic views of Brisbane with the central business district, harbor and all surrounding areas including the ubiquitous rivers that seemed to flow through every Australian city. Coot-Tha was a take on the original word “Ku Ta” which meant honey of the stingless bees that inhabited this mountain. Peter told us that early Brisbane residents used this hill for picnics with a brilliant view – so they cleared all bushes at the top leaving a single tall Eucalyptus tree that caused this mountain to be called the One Tree Hill. However, this lone tree eventually died, so we could no longer see it.



Mt Coot-Tha Summit Lookout



With Mr. Peter atop Mt Coot-Tha – Brisbane downtown seen below in the background

Peter drove downhill through a sprawling botanical garden and dropped us at Southbank Parkland, one of the largest parks in central Brisbane. He gave us an hour and a half to explore the park and return to the same point. We strolled through the park leisurely while Mridula, the artist, settled down on a bench to sketch the landscape. Vidya and the girls grabbed an ice-cream at a stall and then we visited a Nepalese temple.



Exploring the menu at an Ice-cream Bar inside Southbank Parkland

We could see the entire skyline of Brisbane from the park. The park also hosted a giant open air theater and cruises on the river that flowed alongside the park. We were back at the pickup point a few minutes ahead of schedule.



Brisbane downtown up close



At the entrance of Southbank Parkland

Peter spent the next hour driving us through the city pointing out various city landmarks along the way. Brisbane was full of ups and downs, with winding roads weaving through the city and the relatively calmer outskirts lined with pretty houses. The girls fell in love with Brisbane and said they would settle down here if they had a choice!



Ups and Downs of Brisbane

Brisbane was about 20 times the size of Bangalore with a population a sixth that of Bangalore. So it came as no surprise when Peter casually mentioned that though he had traveled to other countries, he loved the stress-free Australian culture that focused on spending time with family and enjoying life, rather than the never ending long working hours typically seen in most countries.

He dropped us off at Brisbane airport at 2.30pm. We felt a tad emotional to bid this gentleman goodbye but so we did.

Shridula was feeling very hungry but she could only find an extremely bad burger at the airport for a whopping 20 AUD. Shridula struck a conversation with an Australian couple while we waited for our flight to Sydney. Just before boarding, the girls found a Krispy Kreme donut store tucked away from plain eyesight and quickly grabbed a few donuts to compensate for the miserable burger.

Our flight to Sydney was now on a Qantas plane but it didn't seem long. They served us several packets of delicious Nachos with Salsa, Pretzels and roasted almonds. Sydney airport welcomed us with rainy weather and cold winds.

Our driver was at the baggage claim area with a placard bearing my name. We waited in the shuttle for other passengers and got dropped last at Holiday Inn express, Potts Pointe. There were a lot of road flooding, potholes and barricades announcing metro work reminding us of Bangalore roads.



[Our hotel at Sydney during daytime](#)

At 10pm, we checked into our hotel spread across two rooms a little apart. After settling down, we used the common microwave in the breakfast area to heat up the ready to eat MTR food for dinner. This was the lightest day in our entire itinerary thus far. Before we retired for the day, Mridula reminded me about exploring the possibility of visiting a candy factory called **Sticky** on the next day's tour of Sydney. I talked to Pratik who said it was possible. I thanked Mridula for the reminder - she had chanced upon this candy factory during one of her YouTube searches and it had totally slipped my mind to include it in the itinerary. The usual pangs of a concluding holiday set in, realizing that we were in the last leg of our tour.

6th Oct 2022

We woke up to gloomy skies, mild rain and chilly winds. The forecast on the TV predicted inclement weather for the next three days, not a cheerful start to our day. We had seen a Woolworths store across the street when we came to the hotel the previous night. Since we had some time for our taxi, we decided to use it for chocolate shopping at Woolworths. From the outside, it looked like a small building housing a small store but as we went in, we saw that the entire store was spread across three basement levels. We bought a variety of chocolates including a native Australian brand called Whitakers, for family and friends back home.



Wet Sydney weather

We had a good continental breakfast with Shridula obsessing over unsweetened orange juice. Our driver and tour guide for the two days in Sydney was a gentleman called Greg. He was at a different Holiday Inn because of a communication gap and was late to arrive at our hotel by 10 mins. In the larger context of the entire day, this wasn't so much of a delay however. We immediately told Greg about an unscheduled visit to Sticky and he gladly obliged saying he was happy to do anything as long as the girls enjoyed the trip. We started the Sydney City tour at 10.15am. As Greg drove through our area called Kings Cross (there's an area called Kings Cross in London too), he carefully told us that this was originally a red light district (Sydney was initially a British penal colony, so there was no focus on developing the city) without going into the detailed explanation because of the young girls in our car. Kings Cross eventually got developed over the years into what we were seeing today as a modern neighborhood. We passed through metro construction activities and detours - Greg told us these grand infrastructure projects were always delayed, again reminiscent of the delays back home. We struck a great bonding with Greg almost instantly, engaging him in small talk and discussions and comparisons with India. He said he had visited Bhubaneswar couple of years ago as part of event management for the Australian hockey team. Greg expressed he was shocked at how Indians use horns on their vehicles and contrasted that at every opportunity to show how Australian drivers used the horns very sparingly. While chatting, it came to light that his younger daughter Claudia shared her birthday with Shridula. That coincidence made our interactions even more enjoyable.

Our first stop was at Sticky. Since Greg had never taken any of his previous tourists to this place, he had to rely on Google maps and some enquiries before we all went to the candy factory. By this time, the

drizzle turned into an outpour and we had to use two large umbrellas that Greg had ready in his car to avoid getting drenched. Greg was curious about the candy factory, so he stayed with us for the entire 1.5 hours of sheer delight. David, the owner of Sticky, demonstrated the entire process of making a candy, starting from molten sugar all the way to beautiful and colorful small rock candies with the exact lettering specified in the custom candy order cleverly created in miniature inside the core of every small candy.



Candy making in progress at Sticky

There were at least two dozen visitors seeing this demonstration live - Sticky must be so confident on their art and creativity if they demonstrate the entire process in front of the general public (they also put up these demos on social media like [YouTube](#) and Tik Tok, which is how Mridula knew about them) We bought a bag of Halloween candies as a gift to Claudia. Greg in turn, answered a quiz question from

David during the candy making process, won a gift of raw uncut candy and simply offered it as his gift to Shridula. Such an awesome guy with an awesome attitude! We bought a few more bags of candies for giving away to our family and friends back home.

It was interesting that two of the unscheduled visits in our itinerary, Hartley's and Sticky, were the best on our entire trip!

As we moved on, Greg told us that his elder daughter was named Anushka - we were surprised at the name but he said it's also a Russian name since his wife was Russian. Greg was a storehouse of information, knowing everything about the history of the city. We saw trams, drove through a long tunnel below the city business district, passed by Centennial Park - a vast lush green park that ran into several acres and drove past other landmark buildings in the city such as the treasury, library and the Supreme Court.



Centennial Park seen through the window of our car

The rain continued pouring, threatening our program for the remainder of the day. Greg was unperturbed by the rain and he drove us through Bondi junction to Bondi beach (All of our family is not into binge watching or reality shows, so we were blissfully unaware of the famed Australian reality show called Bondi Rescue and even how Bondi is pronounced - its pronounced Bond-eye instead of Bondee as we had assumed) Greg stopped at the famous Bondi beach where we got out of the car for taking pictures shivering in the wind, while there were surfers on the cold waters below seemingly delighting in the wild waves and the associated surfing adventure.



At Bondi Beach – Surfers seen in the water

Greg was a great storyteller, having previously worked as an entertainer on a cruise ship and also stage acted before he became a tour guide. He told us stories of his childhood growing up in Bondi beach and how everyone desperately wanted to become a member of Bondi Icebergs, an exclusive club of swimmers who had to swim in the icy cold waters every single Sunday for an entire year irrespective of the weather. We also visited a smaller beach called Tamarama in this area. Greg said this beach was popularly known as 'Glamarama' since most of these beach visitors were the high and mighty of the area. Another trivia Greg told us was that Bondi beach had warring factions in the past where surfers used the wild waters and sharks to dispose of their enemies rather conveniently.

We had to now quickly proceed to the Sydney Opera House for our scheduled guided tour at 1.30pm. It was now pouring cats and dogs literally. Greg escorted us through the heavy rain all the way to the Opera House counter where the guided tour would commence. We deposited our wet bags and umbrellas at the collection counter and uncomfortably stood around our guide in our soaking, dripping shoes.



Opera House in the rain

While the guide at MCG spoke aloud for all tourists to hear, the guide at the Opera House was more sophisticated, handing over headsets to each of us through which we could hear him. He told us the history of the Opera House and how its architecture came to be renowned as one of the most famous landmarks in the world. He also told us how the erstwhile Australian Government boldly approved the unique architecture of the Opera House though there was no guarantee of the design being realized. It was that visionary government that led to the Opera House being what it is today. We passed through a creative area for children around the theaters, which hosted different creative events for kids every weekend. We started the one hour tour with a visual narration of the Opera House beamed inside a planetarium-like dome. We couldn't visit the main opera theater because of an ongoing performance. However, we had the opportunity to see the architectural marvel underneath the giant lotus petal structures that we see from the outside. Then we also visited two smaller theaters - one with 544 seats and a slightly larger drama theater with 1540 seats. The guide told us that the acoustic quality and dynamic/configurable stage setting were the key features of any theater in the Opera House. It is well known that performing here is very prestigious. The famed 'Phantom of the Opera' was being readied for an upcoming screening. The guide concluded the tour by saying that Performing arts always got the first priority ahead of hosting other events that brings in more money for the Opera House - this was to ensure that the main objective of the Opera House remained unchanged over the years, despite

pressure to be profitable. Very commendable indeed! The rain continued unabated, preventing us from taking many pictures of the Opera House in daylight, much to our disappointment.



Inside the Opera House

We ran out of time to have our packed lunch inside the car which Greg didn't have any objection to. Greg took us next to the Madame Tussauds wax museum. It was commendable that Greg came to every single place with us to get the tickets and everything else sorted out - he need not have done that. We had seen the Madame Tussauds wax museum in New York, so our expectations were fairly low. But as we stepped in, we realized that the wax museum had a complete makeover with a lot of innovative interactive exhibits that made each area very interesting. Shridula took photos with every wax character in the museum whilst Mridula spent time sketching many of the characters (and also getting adulation from an Australian tourist who continuously observed her sketching) In one of the areas, they even had a variety of clothes that one could try on and pose in front of a camera for a mock fashion show. Near the exit, we heard the screaming song play yet again and this time, I paused to note the name of the song - "Jump around" released in 1992! Ever since, I've played this fast rap song several times - very unlike my taste but this one has a really catchy tune and rhythm. When we finally got out, our clothes and shoes had dried completely. We barely heaved a sigh of relief only to get our shoes wet again in a puddle near Greg's car. It continued to pour and the sky was very overcast with clouds covering most of the skyscrapers in the central business district.



Shridula with Captain James Cook at Madame Tussauds



With the famous swimmer Michael Phelps



With the Queen, Nelson Mandela, Shane Warne and Shahrukh Khan

Greg suggested skipping the visit to Sydney Tower Eye since we could barely see anything above the heavy clouds and instead offered to take us back to the hotel to change our clothes and shoes for the evening show cruise. We gladly accepted his offer and used the interim 45 minutes for a hot tea and changed into new clothes.

Greg took us to the Sydney showboat cruise at 5.45pm only to be told that the cruise only started at 7pm. Greg tried his luck by driving us to the Sydney Tower Eye. Our small glimmer of hope was squashed immediately - the lift to the top of the tower had stopped working because of the rain and they promised to be operational the next morning. With disappointment, we returned to the Sydney showboat cruise. The rain had finally stopped now. The cruise started at 7pm and headed out under the Sydney harbor bridge adjoining the Opera House. We stepped out in the nippy air to take several pictures of the Opera House that we had missed in the afternoon.



Once we came inside the cruise main room, we were served very good quality food with Indian starters, main course and desserts. Once all tourists on board the cruise had completed their dinner, they started a series of brilliant group dance performances with accompanying loud music. Meanwhile, the cruise made several repeated rounds in the water around the harbor bridge, Opera House and a brilliantly lit theme park called Luna Park. The performances were all very good but the loud jarring music was beginning to start a splitting headache for me, when it ended thankfully at just the right time.



[Opera House and Sydney skyline at night from our cruise](#)

We returned to the dock at 9.45pm, waited 20 minutes for an Uber taxi and then reached our hotel at 10.30pm.

Pratik called to tell me that our visit to Jenolan caves for the next day got canceled because of incessant heavy rain that made the roads very dangerous. We had no other option but to ask for a refund and accept whatever the weather was going to throw at us the next day.

7th Oct 2022

We started the day with continental breakfast. After reconciling to the poorly-made warm tea using tea bags all these days, I finally figured out that we could make tea as close to that brewed at home by heating tea bag and milk in the microwave - it was too late a realization for this trip but this learning will be useful in our future trips outside India. At breakfast, we played an estimation game similar to those

we hear being asked in interviews at Amazon, Google etc. Each of us took turns at estimating the total number of photos we would have clicked on this 13 day trip across all four of our mobile phones. Shridula estimated 4000, Mridula and Jagan estimated 6000 and Vidya estimated 10000. The final count after eliminating duplicates ended up being a whopping 7900! That's the amount of digital media we generate every second. In comparison, the total number of photos we had taken during our **45 day visit** to the USA in 2013 was only about 5000.

Greg was waiting for us at 10am. It was a much better day today with some sunshine and only slightly cloudy. We immediately went to the Sydney Tower Eye which had resumed operations now. Greg presented our tickets from the previous day but they honored it without any questions. Greg talked about the Australia vs New Zealand rivalry (that we knew from cricket) and how New Zealand built their tower eye that was taller than Sydney tower eye but only because they had a very tall spire. Greg didn't concede defeat to New Zealand on this one for sure! A narrow wedge-shaped lift took 76 seconds to reach the top at about 250 m - quite slow in comparison to the Q1 lift.



Elevator to the Sydney Tower Eye

Going to the outside area of the tower eye needed a 2-day advance booking and we would have also needed to be strapped with safety harnesses. We were not interested in venturing outside anyway, so we didn't have any regrets on this one. Greg accompanied us to the top as our tour guide and explained various points in the city landscape below. Greg pointed out to us that there were two ocean entry points to Sydney and there was a ferry from one of the ocean entries to the city of Parramatta that takes an entire hour. He also explained how Australia would have become a French colony if the French had discovered the easier ocean entry point ahead of the British. Only one of the ocean entry points and the harbor bridge seemingly had a strategic vantage point during the olden days. We were surprised to know that all water bodies in Sydney are salt water. In contrast to the Australia-New Zealand friction, Greg pointed to the famous Anzac bridge in commemoration of the joint army cooperation of Australia and New Zealand Army Corps in Turkey in the early 1900s (hence the abbreviation ANZAC). The Sydney Harbor Bridge and Opera House were mostly hidden behind large buildings. Many new skyscrapers were coming up all around, one of them taller than the tower eye. We could see the airport (Greg's house was behind the airport), the older part of the city and the transformed, newer part of the city. Several Navy ships were stationed along the dock. We could fathom the spread of Centennial Park from the Tower Eye and also saw St Mary's cathedral - the largest church in Sydney. It was now time to head down and out to the Blue Mountain.



[Sydney business district from atop Sydney Tower Eye](#)

On our two hour drive to Blue Mountains, I was the only one awake for the entire journey to continue chatting with Greg. He left us in awe with detailed answers to a variety of questions ranging from the Australian education system, facts about Blue Mountain, Australian animals and their unique

characteristics, politics, road rules and speed enforcement, his daughters and family, global weather systems like La Nina and El Nino, history of Aboriginals and the like. Greg explained how and why the Blue Mountain got the blue color and name – his curiosity was piqued when I told him about our own Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu and how Nilgiris literally meant Blue Mountains. Along the way, he also told us the story of Hungry Jacks vs Burger King. Right from our first day, we had been noticing a burger joint called Hungry Jacks everywhere and it sported the same logo as Burger King. We wondered how they can have the same logo and not be sued by Burger King. Interestingly, as the story goes, Burger King actually got sued by a very popular local restaurant by the same name in Australia and they were prevented from using their original name anywhere in Australia. Hence, they operated their entire chain under the name of Hungry Jacks. Greg surprisingly did not know why they had the name of Hungry Jacks – one of the rare occasions where he didn't have an answer.





On our way to the misty Blue Mountains

We drove through misty mountain roads passing idyllic countryside houses. In many places on the scenic highway, we saw Lykens – a type of orange moss on the rocks that nearly looked like orange flowers. As we entered Blue Mountain, a digital signboard indicated clear sky over the mountains but it started to steadily drizzle as we slowly went up the mountains.

The entire mountain range was not too tall at only about 1000 m but it was very wide – Greg said this was the fifth longest mountain range in the world at 3500 kms, also called the ‘Great Dividing Range’. Greg said this mountain range is mostly unexplored even to this day and that the British built the road on top of the original mud road that the mountain tribes used in the early days. The British apparently took 50 years after they came to Sydney before they discovered Blue Mountain and laid the road. This road leads to small villages and lot of farms on the other side.

We first stopped at an overlook point over the Blue Mountain range. Greg took us for a short walk to a cave under the sandstone cliff. All cliffs here were unguarded and without safety rails, but had a lot of warnings and disclaimers as seen all over Australia (Greg joked that Australia recommends people drink ‘responsibly’ and all disclaimers are similar to this – even here, the boards mentioned visitors must explore the cliffs ‘responsibly’) When we enquired if Australia had leeches, Greg said there are large leeches in Australia indeed - freaking out Vidya momentarily. It was good that we knew this fact on the very last day – else Vidya would have refused to accompany us on the rain forest walks and missed out on all the nice experiences. Greg told us an eye-opening fact that fire is needed for regeneration of forests because some of the hard seeds in this region can break open only with some fire - and only then

can new plants/trees grow on the mountains. We had always assumed brushfire was bad for the mountains and vegetation but this was an interesting twist.



The cave under a sandstone cliff

Then, Greg took us for a short stop at the picturesque Leura garden village. This small village was surprisingly busy with tourists dotting the flower-bedecked streets and colorfully painted by lanes.



Colorfully painted by lane and a street in Leura Village with flowering trees

Mild rain started with lot of dark gray clouds gathering in the sky and the weather turning very cold here. We quickly retreated to the warm comfort of Greg's car and hurried to Scenic World. We did not have enough time for lunch at Leura and had to wait until 5pm for a much delayed lunch of our packed food.

Greg accompanied us until the entrance of Scenic World and got us our tickets. He pointed the Three Sisters to us and told us the story of why the name came to be. Three Sisters is a natural rock formation with 3 pointed rocks at the edge of a steep cliff. Greg narrated the story as quoted below (courtesy bluemts.com.au)



The Three Sisters

“Three sisters, Meenhi, Wimlah and Gunnedoo had a father who was a witch doctor. His name was Tyawan. Long ago there was a Bunyip (swamp monster) who lived in a deep hole and was feared by all. Passing the hole was considered very dangerous, therefore whenever Tyawan had to pass the hole in search for food, he would leave his daughters safely on the cliff behind a rocky wall. One fateful day, Tyawan waved goodbye to his daughters and descended down the cliff steps into the valley.

Meanwhile at the top of the cliff, Meenhi was frightened by a large centipede which suddenly appeared before her. Meenhi took a stone and threw it at the centipede. The stone continued on its journey and rolled over the cliff, crashing into the valley below which angered the Bunyip. The rocky wall behind Meenhi, Wimlah and Gunnedoo then began to split open and the three sisters were left stranded on a

thin ledge at the top of the cliff. All the birds, animals and fairies stopped still as the Bunyip climbed the cliff and emerged to see the terrified girls.

As the Bunyip began to approach the girls, to protect them from harm, their father Tyawan used his magic bone to turn them into stone. Angered by this, the Bunyip then began to chase Tyawan. Becoming trapped, in order to flee from the Bunyip, Tyawan changed into a magnificent Lyre Bird, yet in the process he dropped his magic bone. Tyawan and his three daughters were now safe from the Bunyip. Once the Bunyip had disappeared, Tyawan returned in search of his magic bone, yet this was never to be found.

The Lyre Bird has been searching for this magic bone ever since. Remaining in rock formation, The Three Sisters stand silently overlooking the valley hoping that one day he'll find the bone and turn them back to their former selves."

Greg's riveting story telling of the Three Sisters is still etched in our memory – He ended his story with "Who knows, one of the sisters may come alive when you visit here the next time"☺ It had started raining incessantly now.

We first crossed the valley on Scenic World Skyway – a bus like vehicle that smoothly sailed across the gorge, with phenomenal panoramic views of the mountain range and Katoomba Falls deep down the valley. The Skyway was wet with the rains and it was slippery to hold on to. The open windows on the Skyway made us shiver to the bone.



[Scenic World Skyway](#)

Then, we boarded the steepest railway in the world - Scenic World Railway and managed to take three trips up and down before the railway closed for the day. The rail coaches had two modes for the seats –

'Relaxed' for the normal passenger and 'Cliffhanger' for the thrill seeking passenger. We started with the 'Relaxed' mode on the first trip but then became brave enough to switch to the 'Cliffhanger' mode for the next two trips. The railway descended almost vertically through the mountain including a short stretch through a narrow dark tunnel that was carved out of the rocks. Any faster and it would have been another roller coaster nightmare, but that was not to be. It was steep but enjoyable.



Cliffhanger Mode inside Scenic World Railway – the steepest railway in the world!

We were allowed to disembark at the other station and venture out into the mountain for a short walk. The rain played spoilsport and we spent but a few minutes exploring the mountain pathway before returning to the train for the ascent. There was hardly anyone on the train and so it gave us enough time to enjoy the steepest railway a couple of more times.



Misty vast expanse of the Blue Mountains

In general, the signage in Scenic World was very poor and we had to keep asking for directions. Before the park closed at 5pm, we only had time for a ride on Scenic World Cableway, a quick bathroom break, hurried souvenir shipping and ice-cream for Vidya and the girls. When we went on the cableway, we got a glimpse of an abandoned roller coaster that snaked through the mountains, overhanging the cliffs in certain parts. Apparently, this was touted to be the most dangerous roller coaster in the world but it got shutdown for the very same reason even before it got inaugurated. It was too dangerous to operate safely.



Scenic World Cableway over the mountains

We came out of Scenic World and filled our starving stomachs with packed lunch while enjoying the company of a large white parrot that bravely came close to us. Shridula dropped a part of her ice-cream and the parrot gladly enjoyed its share. Several other loud birds chirped around us. We took photos with Greg at Scenic World, before proceeding downhill to the area of Seven Hills where we had to meet my cousin and his family for dinner. All along the one hour journey, Greg asked the girls about all animals they had seen in Australia, our feedback about vegetarian food in Australia and our experience with Qantas airlines. He said he would be visiting India/Bhubaneshwar for the Hockey World Cup in India in 2023 and we gave him an open invitation to visit us in Bangalore if he decided to. He dropped us at my cousin Chakravarthy anna's house and bid farewell. Decently, he asked me if it was acceptable to hug us all in Aussie style but then gently shook hands when we declined the hug. Greg was a great tour guide, thanked his father for his storytelling abilities and the only favour he asked of me was to give him a good rating on Trip Advisor. Of course, I gave him a 5-star rating and he messaged me to thank me for it.



With our awesome tour guide Mr. Greg

I met Pratik, our travel agent who also lived in the same area. Harini manni (my cousin's wife) hosted a lavish dinner for us. After a good dinner followed by family conversations, we walked to the Seven Hills train station with anna and manni. We briefly met their daughter Smriti at the station before boarding the double decker train to Kings Cross. We had to change trains at Central Station to eventually get to Kings Cross, right across the street from our hotel. With this train journey, we managed to use all modes of transport in this entire trip – International and domestic flights, small and large cruises, tram, train, buses, taxis and private cars.

We packed our bags for our return trip to India early next morning. Our taxi was to arrive at 5.45am, so we did not have any time buffer for the next day and had to get everything ready tonight. It was close to midnight when we could hit our beds.

8th Oct 2022

Well, we didn't like it but the last day was here ☺

We rushed to get ready by 5.45am and the taxi driver dropped us at 6am. Our Qantas flight back to India was delayed by 1.5 hours and took off at 10.30am. Based on mandate by the Indian government, face masks were mandatory on the entire flight. It was annoying and completely irrational since we had to

remove the masks for food. Once the masks are removed inside the plane, it defeats the purpose anyway. But we had no choice but to comply. The flight never gained lost time and landed in Bangalore only at 4.40pm. Mohan, our driver, was there at the airport to receive us after we cleared immigration and customs. It was a long 2.5 hour drive back home through the agonizing Bangalore traffic jams and we reached home at 8pm. A yummy home-made Indian dinner and cashew milk home-brewed tea completed a fitting finale to our Australian trip.

Before we conclude, a few other trivia on this trip

- Australians pronounce 'A' as 'I' in most cases, including the word 'Australian' that's pronounced as 'Aaws-try-liyan'. Most cricket fans would probably know this, having heard Australian commentators
- Most Australians refer to their friends and buddies as 'mates' obviously pronounced as 'mytes' (see above)
- We were all obsessed with the cute little Australian kids throughout our trip – but we funnily referred to them using a Tamil word for 'small', during the entire trip (we will keep this Tamil word as our little secret ☺)
- Seat belts are mandatory in **all** seats on buses and cars/taxis
- In most restaurants, the food on display is fully non-vegetarian but all restaurants have decent vegan substitutes when you ask for it

It had been an awesome trip and time simply flew by, isn't it mate?