



The Ambassadors

R. A. Miller

We made the roughly 20-hour flight to Australia because we thought it would be a novel place to get drunk.

Some people cross the globe for history, culture, or an event of world-class proportions. We had no such motivations. While on holiday Stateside, some Australian friends mentioned a favorable exchange rate, free use of an apartment, bars open 'til dawn, and hospitable women, so with little forethought or research we slapped \$2,000 in airfare on our respective credit cards. A few weeks later we touched down in Sydney.

Like Arthur Phillip, who ferried the first payload of British convicts to colonize the island in 1787, we found nothing as we expected...

Day 1 – Saturday; Sydney

The Boeing 747 400ER is the largest passenger plane in the world. I know this not from researching airplanes but from my seat assignment: 55G. I am not in the last row of the plane. I am not even in the last section. Some poor bastard is sitting 20 rows behind me. In the time it takes to disembark, he could unpack, cook, and eat a frozen pizza.

Rob, who shared my flight, clears customs effortlessly. I do not. More than an hour after we retrieve our baggage, we grab a cab for the city. We direct our cabdriver to Kings Cross, location of our Aussie friend Troy's vacant studio apartment.

"At 8 a.m.?" the cabbie asks quizzically.

"Yes. Take us to this address," I say, handing him a piece of scrap paper with directions to the studio.

He shrugs as he puts the car in gear, and I wonder if his reaction has anything to do with Troy's cryptic e-mail adjuration to "...just keep your American street smarts. Sydney is a big city."

The apartment building is on a quiet, unremarkable street. We pay the cab driver precisely double the amount we were told to expect, and we wait for the caretaker to provide us with the keys. Waiting is an art we will perfect before our time in Australia is done.

Inside we face the first of many logistical dilemmas: We have spent 21 hours in transit, 1 hour clearing customs, and 1 hour waiting for some jackass to deliver us the apartment keys. We also have spent 60 seconds realizing that three 30-year-old men will not survive the night in a 12' x 12' flat without benefit of AC. All we want is a few hours sleep, but we know we'd better fix the lodging situation quickly before Rutt shows up on his later flight. We drop our bags and venture out to Kings Cross.

Our best option is the Kings Cross Holiday Inn – slightly nicer than the typical Holiday Inn in the States. They have one room available: two twin beds. We take it and order cot service for Rutt before we head back to Troy's to retrieve our bags. Without a working cell phone, the only way we can advise Rutt of our lodging



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change is by scrap paper and chewed bubble gum applied to the front door of Troy's apartment building. Odds of this important memo lasting six hours to deliver its message: 1 in 15. First lesson in international travel: Don't be late.

A crew of prostitutes is punching in for the morning shift as we traverse the Cross again with our bags in tow, and they recommend we rest our travel-weary souls. If I thought they'd let me sleep I might consider it, but I persevere.

Rutt roles in a few hours later – apparently the gum-stuck note held better than we expected – and we're ready to hit the town for our first night in Australia. We find ourselves at a high-top table in hotspot The Bourbon, which is holding a private party that our globetrotting Australian friends arranged for us to attend in their absence. It is 9 p.m., and clubgoers are just filtering into the open-bar affair. We're on our third drink when we make contact with the natives.

"If you're looking for a place to set your drinks, I think we have space available," Rutt says to two Australian girls as he motions to the tabletop. They laugh because space is not yet at a premium in the near empty club, but they stop anyway.

"I'm Matty, and this is Kat," says the petite brunette. "Where are you guys from?"

"We're American," Rob says proudly, eager to unveil our novelty status.



Matty & Kat: Yankees suck (and they aren't talking baseball)...

"Oh," Matty replies bemusedly. "How long are you staying in Australia?"

"We'll be a few weeks, bouncing from place to place," I

answer her, going into some detail about our poorly planned upcoming travels – to which she responds with the obligatory "that's great" and "oh, you'll have such fun." I try and steer the conversation back to her and her girlfriend, but as quickly as the two women had appeared, they leave the table.

We replace them with a threesome of new ladies, who spend some time trying to determine if we're Canadian or Irish before we announce our Americanism. I isolate one of the girls at the bar.

Katherine tells me of her only visit to the States – when she was in her teens – and compares the experience with the other nations she has explored. She's engaging and rather funny, and we chatter through a couple more rounds before she asks me if I'm proud of my country.

"How do you mean?" I counter, only vaguely aware of where she's taking this.

"I mean, do you think America is doing the right thing? Do you think Iraq is fair?"

"I dunno," I waffle.

"You don't know? So you really haven't thought about it?" she ripostes. "That seems to be a very American response."

"Well, it'll probably surprise you, but I only played a very small role in deciding if we should attack Iraq," I defend.

Sarcasm translates poorly in Australian, and Katherine launches into her thesis statement: "Americans are really quite predictable – whether it's your national leadership or just a bunch of sailors visiting Sydney for a weekend. You think you can do whatever you want and the world will forgive you because you're American. You don't think about consequences because you mostly never have to face them."

I begin the delicate task of addressing Katherine's points on world politics while trying to keep myself in the game, but it's too great a challenge. The Bourbon's sound system is bumping and the crowd has grown thick. Katherine goes back to the group at the table

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and whispers something to one of her girlfriends. In a moment they're saying good-bye to Rutt and Rob.

A couple more hours pass in club land, and we stagger out of The Bourbon and across the Cross toward our hotel. The prostitutes bark their marketing slogans at us and try and coax us into the brothels, but the only place that earns our business is the late-night McDonalds. Saturday night is history.

Day 2 – Sunday; Sydney

"We should at least try something cultural," I say over a breakfast of sloppy eggs and suspicious-looking ham. "I can't go home to the question of 'So, what'd you do down there in Australia?' and have no better answer than 'Well, I averaged about 12 vodka tonics a night and ate McDonalds.' Frankly that's all I do in the States."

We peruse the tourist rack in the hotel lobby and wind up in The Rocks – Sydney's version of the South Street Seaport or Quincy Market – and clamber onto a Higgins craft for a Duck Tour. The hostess begins an afternoon of kazoo quacking and duck singing that clashes noticeably with the throbbing in our heads. All she needs is one venture to our seats in the rear of the boat to exclude us from the interactive portions of her program, and she leaves us to snap photos and otherwise occupy ourselves with low-impact touring for two hours.



Sydney Opera House as seen from a Duck Tour on the harbor.

When it's over, we invite her to ring up some girlfriends and meet us for an evening out, but she doesn't

appear too interested in organizing a welcome wagon for strangers in a strange land – as evidenced by a rushed "I don't think so boys; I

think I'm staying in tonight," followed by a quick pivot turn and near sprint down the sidewalk. We're collectively depressed for a minute until Rutt checks his watch: 4 p.m. local time, or roughly noon on Saturday back home – either way a perfectly acceptable hour to start drinking.

We change clothes, then take dinner at the W Hotel at the wharf at Woolloomooloo – a converted shipyard building roughly three football fields long with the requisite hottie W waitresses and neo-lounge atmosphere. We dine al fresco in the warm dusk with one of the best city views I've seen from a ground-floor restaurant. We ask the waitress for recommendations on Sunday night life, and she directs us to Bondi Beach and Icebergs – a name I recognize from an article in some men's magazine I read months earlier. She gets off work at 10 p.m. but balks at an invitation to join us.

We have little time to sulk because it's during this planning process that we realize we have to factor in the logistics of the NFL playoff game taking place later in the States. Some quick calculation leads us to realize that the New England Patriots/Indianapolis Colts game will start at roughly 8-ish... a.m. Rob makes the call to play through.

We settle our dinner tab and grab a cab to Bondi. Rutt 'wins' the front seat and settles in next to a slight Middle Eastern man named Ahmed or Armod. Not one to ride in silence, he opens the conversation amicably.

"Where are you from, sir?" Rutt says.

"I am Pakistani," replies Ahmed/Armod. "I have lived here for four years."

"Islamabad or Karachi?" Rutt asks.

"Islamabad," answers the driver.

"Oh, Islamabad. Great city. I played cricket for Islamabad High School North. Almost made all-city," Rutt deadpans.

The driver does not laugh. "What are you? Americans?"





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"Well, technically yes," Rutt persists, "but my father was Special Liaison to the Assistant Ambassador to Pakistan when I was in high school. Great times, man, great times."

"So you are American? So you love George Bush?" Ahmed/Armod queries.

"Why?" Rutt counters. "Is something wrong with George Bush?"

"Is something wrong with George Bush?" Ahmed/Armod's voice is rising steadily. "Yes there is something wrong with George Bush. He is a murderer. He commands murderers."

"Is that so?" Rutt asks. "Who has he murdered? Can you name someone?"

"Well, no. I cannot name specifically, but George Bush, he murders the people of Afghanistan. He murders them every day."

"Well, if freeing them from a terrorist leader and an oppressive regime means he murdered them, then maybe," Rutt volleys back, his voice now rising to match Ahmed/Armod.

"He murdered in Iraq. He murders Muslims. And children. He murdered innocent children."

"Oh, well Saddam Hussein wouldn't have done that. I'm sure people were perfectly happy under Saddam and his leadership. I'm sure George Bush didn't help those people out."

"You can't have thought Saddam Hussein was a good guy," I interject, hoping to play Kofi Annan as the taxi takes a corner aggressively.

"No, Saddam Hussein was bad," the driver concedes, "but George Bush, he is worse. Do you know what they do – the American troops in Afghanistan? Do you know? They rape the Afghani women. Do you know what that means? It means she is no longer Muslim. She cannot go to heaven once she is raped by American."

"Americans have no respect for what is sacred. You only respect what is American. We have greater respect for Allah. We take Allah more serious. If a married man sleeps with a woman – not his wife – he is to be

stoned. If I were to sleep with a woman not my wife, I would be stoned. Americans, you do this all the time, you do it as President."

"And you're okay with that?" Rutt asks. "You're okay with having your personal trials punished by law, with being put to death? With no separation of church and state?"

"Yes, I am okay. That is law. That is what Muslims believe. Americans have no place in the Muslim world. Americans should go home."

The cab stops. "That's it; you are here. You can get out now."

We are at the end of a long stretch of beach. Shops line the beachfront road, but we do not see anything resembling the club as our waitress described it.

"Where is Icebergs?" Rob asks. "We want to go to the club Icebergs."

"I don't know. I don't know this club." The driver is visibly flustered.

"Bull sh—" Rutt starts to say. I cut him off. "This is fine. We'll find it from here."

"I don't know that club," Ahmed/Armod reiterates. We're already getting out of the car.

Rutt leans over with the money. "Hey, I have a question: Why aren't you still living in Pakistan?"

We don't wait for a response. At a convenience store we ask the clerk for directions. He points out lights on a hillside at the opposite end of the beach, easily a half-mile away, maybe farther. We debate about the walk over a beer at a beachside bar.

After another we opt to get a cab instead – a point the driver points out as quite American – and Rob pays him off as Rutt and I approach the doorman. There is no line to get in.

"Icebergs?" I ask a man in all black.

"It is."

"Okay, um, three I guess."

"Okay mates, you have your cards?"





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I look at him blankly while pulling out my wallet. “What ones do you take?” I ask fingering a Visa and wondering just how much the cover charge must be.

“It’s membership-only guys,” he clarifies.

“Oh, okay.” I had encountered this in London a few years before. “No problem, I guess we’ll just take three memberships then.” I reveal a thin stack of 20AUD bills behind the wallet.

“No, we’re full up.”

Icebergs just isn’t giving off the vibe of being cold crackin’ on a Sunday night.

“Seriously?” I ask.

“Yeah mates. Seriously.”

“Look man, I read about this place back in the States. I’d just like to check it out. I’ll probably never be back.”

“Sorry mates. We’re full.”

Rob has already flagged the cabbie that had dropped us off a few minutes prior. He had u-turned at the end of the lane and was headed back toward us. Rutt directs him to The Bourbon in Kings Cross. At least we’ll be within a shamble of the hotel.

The Bourbon doesn’t appear it’s going to be much more accommodating. The line to get in is 30-40 feet long. The doorman sees us milling about and asks if we have memberships or are on the list. We obviously are not.

I mutter something about giving up and Rob reminds me about playing through. It’s already well after midnight, and we may as well finish out the evening before hitting the 24-hour sports bar for the game. To sleep now would mean missing it. Plus our flight to Cairns and Port Douglas leaves at 1 p.m. tomorrow. We won’t be back in Sydney for two weeks.

Almost on cue, the doorman behind us starts waving in the people waiting.

“It’s alright mates; they’re letting people in now.”

We assume our familiar post at a table just off the bar.

Australian girls – and a handful of Australian guys – are dancing on the tile floor in front of us. They dance with total abandon, sexed enough to shame a hip-hop act. Their arms are up, palms open. Their bodies ripple from their wrists to ankles. They move fluidly, but they seem to have no control. I watch forever, drink after drink. I try to lure the girls closer with my eyes, but they may as well be outside. Rutt and Rob are snaring girls as they pass by our counter, only to lose them after brief exchanges.

“I’ve crossed the line,” Rutt says. “I’m officially immune. The rejection doesn’t even hurt anymore. Bring ‘em on. I’ll get shot down 100 times tonight alone. I just don’t care. I just want to have an effect on someone, anyone.” He marches toward the bar.

I think to myself, maybe it’s us. Maybe we just come off as the arrogant Americans. Maybe we just need to be more open, more continental. As Rutt is signaling toward a bartender, I turn to face a plain-looking woman of heavier build.

“Hi. What’s your name?” I greet her, hand extended.

She smiles, limply shakes my hand, then turns around without saying a word. I stand there, frozen in the position of my greeting, and after a minute of this awkwardness she slides away from the bar and disappears. I turn back around, and Rutt has 15 murky shots lined up on the counter.

“What are—”

“They’re called Quick Fucks,” Rutt says before I finish the question. “The bartender says they’re the most popular shot in Australia right now. Bailey’s, Kahlua, and a dash of Midori. Take three and then figure out what to do with the rest.”

He tosses three down in less than a minute, then grabs two more and reaches into a mixed group standing just off the bar.





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One (or 14) too many: Even free booze wouldn't loosen up the locals.

"Free shots!" he cheers.
"Free shots from your friend America. Free shots."

I swallow down my three. It seems like a

good time to get numb. I hand out a pair of shots to some guys on their way to the bathroom. They eye me suspiciously, so I do another from what's left of the row on the bar, and they knock theirs back and carry on.

Rutt clues Rob into the game as he orders another 15. The bartender asks for a credit card to secure the tab. I throw a 'rock' to their 'papers' and fork over my Visa. Rutt doubles the order to 30 drinks.

"I'm holding the tab, not necessarily paying it," I declare before things get so far out of hand that my companions mistake me as generous. They nod in recognition and continue to hand out drinks. But even giving away liquor isn't a crowd pleaser. A surprising majority of the club-goers don't want a Quick Fuck, be it from an American or otherwise, and we end up drinking far too many of the props ourselves. We meet a woman and her business acquaintance, a big Russian guy with a severely receding hairline and a broad, pink face.

"We're in import/export," he says with good English but a thick accent, and I can't tell if he's slurring his speech or I'm at the point where I'm slurring my hearing. "I spend four months each year in Australia."

"With your lady friend?" I ask, nodding toward his acquaintance.

"She's just partner."

"Do you meet many girls when you're here?"

He looks at me for a moment. "Whores."

"Whores. Right. Yes, we've seen those. I think the Australians like us less than you guys did 20 years ago."

He laughs. "Even when we hated you, we didn't really hate you. Jealous maybe. And the whores, they not so bad."

I excuse myself for the bathroom and realize I am more than a little drunk. I am flat-out 'faced. It's 4 a.m., and making the start of the Patriots game is looking really tough. I shuffle back to my spot at the bar. Rutt and Rob are missing. The Russian is drinking a Coke. There is one shot left on the bar, and I grab it.

"I'm going to have to go," I tell him. "At the very least I need to get something to eat."

"I should go too," he says.

I drink the last drink and turn to get the bill. There's no sense even looking for the guys at this point. The tab is 860AUD before tip. I pay it and laugh. One thousand dollars and 11,000 miles away and I'm leaving an Australian night club with a big Russian guy at 4:30 on a Monday morning.

We amble down Darlinghurst Road, and the Russian is talking about something I can't understand, but I am nodding. Under a sign that reads "Porky's Live Show," a rail-thin woman with stringy hair asks us if we want to party and blocks our way. The Russian looks at me and shrugs, and I just smile and walk around her. I look back 20 feet farther and the woman is there, but he is gone. I head to the McDonalds.

I am about to start on my second Quarter Pounder when Rutt comes staggering in. An employee tries to discourage him from entering – even the McDonalds closes eventually – but Rutt sees me and pushes his way through. He talks the counter clerk into giving him a burger.

"Where's Rob?" I ask.

"The last I saw him he was dancing in the middle of the dance floor, possibly by himself."

This is bad. Thirty-year-old men should not dance, and definitely not alone.





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"Maybe we can stake out a good spot at the sports bar," Rutt says. "It's liable to be crowded full of ex-pats for the game."

In my deluded state, this risk seems quite real, so we finish our food and hurry down the street to the 24-hour sports bar. The doorman is letting no one in. We express our concern about the game.

"American football?" he asks. "Is there even a game today?"

We assure him that there is.

"Let me see if we have it on."

He returns a minute later. "Oh yes, it doesn't start for over two hours. You'll have to come back."

"I thought you went 24 hours," I state. "Why can't we come in and get a seat?"

"We do, but I can't let you in right now. Don't ask questions. You want to come back later, then you come back."

I look at Rutt. He shrugs. We head to the hotel as the sun is rising.

Day 3 – Monday; Sydney

Rob bursts into the room yelling for us to get up. We're missing the game. It's 8:30.

We don't need to dress; we're still in our clothes from a few hours before. We brush our teeth and scurry toward the sports bar. Normal people are hustling to work in their suits and skirts. Australians, for the most part, are well-dressed.

We greet the doorman at the entrance, and he eyes up Rutt and I and smiles. He didn't expect to see us back. Our fears of not getting a seat to see the game are not justified. In fact, no one has even requested that the game be turned on. Most of the TVs are showing weekly highlights of English Premier League soccer. The other patrons include a guy with his face down on a table in the back, and a toothless woman at the bar.

Rutt orders beers, and Rob explains his late arrival at the hotel – a tale involving being the absolute last person to leave The Bourbon, a

fight with a hooker on the street, and a fight with a guy selling falafels in a corner storefront. Aussie/American relations remain strong. I mention the 1,000AUD bar tab.

"Look on the bright side," Rutt reminds us. "With the exchange, that's only \$800 back home. That's only \$266 each."

We sip our beers through the game, all of us anticipating the hangover that's sure to come. I keep looking at my arms because they feel like they're shaking, but they are motionless. Rutt brings it out in the open:

"I think we should grab a case of beer for our travels today. We have to leave here right after the game, check out of the hotel, and get to the airport – and we don't have much margin of error. It'll go smoother if we don't run out of beer."

"I would guess Australian transportation officials might have a problem with that," I mention. Rutt looks at me like I have two heads. In his condition he may actually see them.

"I would think you might not want to be such a pussy. What can be the harm? We're packing a few beers for our holiday up north. Your alternative is not going to be very pleasant."

There's no use arguing. The Patriots hold off the Colts, and we have about 75 minutes to be out of the hotel and at Sydney Kingsford-Smith Airport.

At the bottle shop next to the sports bar, we ask the clerk to recommend a good traveling brew. He asks where we're headed, and we tell him Cairns and Port Douglas.

"Queensland," he says with a chuckle. "Well, you want XXXX (four-ex) for certain, mates. This is all they can drink up there – mostly on account that no one there can spell b-e-e-r."

This explanation makes perfect sense to us after 15 hours on the sauce. We buy a case and roll out. We depart the hotel in less than 10 minutes – clothes stashed haphazardly in overstuffed bags. Moments later we have a cab on the way out of town.





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I win the front seat. The driver is another Middle Easterner, a cheery fellow who ignores the long gulps I pull from my XXXX as we speed down the expressway. "Where are you from?" he asks me.

"USA," I say, a little leery of even bringing it up.

"Ahh, Americans. I love Americans; love talking with Americans."

Without looking around, I can feel Rutt lean forward with anticipation.

"And where are you from, sir?" he asks.

"Afghanistan," answers our driver. "But Sydney for eight years."

"Oh, Afghanistan," Rutt responds. "Kabul or Kandahar?"

"Kandahar."

"Kandahar. Gorgeous; gorgeous. I'm a Kabul man, myself. Played Cricket for Kabul North."

Our driver laughs. "Kabul North, you say?"

"Yes, Kabul North. What? You don't believe me?"

The cabbie laughs again. "You're funny, you Americans. Love talking with Americans. You like George Bush?"

"Do I like George Bush?" Rutt asks. I cringe. I hear another beer open in the back. I take a big gulp of my own. "I voted for the man. I support the man in his policies. Yes, I guess I like any man who makes difficult decisions to make the world a safer place."

"This world is not a safer place," our cabbie replies. "Trust me. I drive Americans to the airport all the time. Soldiers. They do not think it's safer. George Bush has angered Muslims. You cannot think doing that is safer."

"George Bush has toppled two Muslim tyrants," Rutt counters. "I think the world is safer. Yes."

"Has he toppled tyrants? George Bush is a tyrant. Who has killed more people? Over history, who has killed more people? Saddam or Bush? Yes, it is George Bush has killed

more. The U.S. should go. You should not be in Iraq. You do not make Muslims happy by being in Iraq." The cabbie laughs. "I am not fighting with you. I like talking with Americans. I do not not like you. But you are misguided in your politics. I try and correct you."

Rutt laughs. "You? Try and correct us? Who has the best standard of living in the world? Who has the fairest, most efficient economic system in the world? I think we have things worked out just fine... Rob, why aren't you drinking your beer?"

"Leave me alone," Rob answers.

Rutt shakes his head in adjuration and turns back to the cabbie. "You don't live in Afghanistan anymore," he states. "So just how great was it?"

"You are correct. I do not. But that doesn't mean I don't understand the politics. I came here to make money for my family. Maybe someday I will go back. But that doesn't mean I do not know Muslims. George Bush does not know Muslims."

We arrive at the domestic departure terminal for Qantas.

"Thank you for riding with me," The cabbie says with complete sincerity. "I know, maybe you do not like my views, but I like having someone to speak them to. I like talking to Americans. Always fun with Americans."

"Thank you," I say. "No harm taken. Believe it or not, most Americans are open to talking politics." Rutt shoots me a look.

We clamber out of the cab; I'm holding the cardboard case under my arm and my beer in my hand. Rob hoists my duffle bag on my opposite shoulder, and we head to the ticket counter.

The agent is a welcoming chap who says nothing about the XXXX I place on the counter to retrieve my passport. He asks if we want to sit together; we tell him no – we'd rather have aisle seats than company. He laughs. He checks our bags as Rutt and I polish off our open beers and toss the cans noisily in a





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receptacle near the counter. It strikes me that I am still very, very drunk.

At security I become confused about how to move the case of beer – now two-thirds full. I pull my keys, rented cell phone, and coin currency from my pockets and place them on the belt, and I start to walk through the detector with the case, then stop. I show it to the guard, who just looks at me blankly. Rutt and Rob are laughing behind me.

“Is that full?” he asks. He can only see the cardboard box, not the containers inside.

“Um, no.”

“Well okay mate, just step through then.”

I step through. The alarm goes off. He steps to me with the wand, which goes haywire when he passes it over the case of XXXX.

“I thought you said this wasn’t full,” he says, giving me a good look over and probably a subtle sniff.

“It’s not; we’ve had about eight of them already.”

I can’t tell if he’s annoyed or amused, but in an even tone he says, “Put it on the belt.”

I do, then retrieve it on the other side. Rutt and Rob see this as high comedy.

We make our way to the departure gate, somehow 50 minutes early for the flight. Rob has sworn off drinking for the rest of the day, much to Rutt’s disappointment. The terminal is very quiet, much different than a Logan or O’Hare. Rutt uses the downtime to bear down on Rob, who – eyes closed – is listening to his MP3 player and keeping very still.

“Rob, help Miller with those beers.” He gets no response. “You’re on vacation; lighten up and have a beer.”

Rutt cracks another XXXX and starts waving at random people sitting at the gate. An Irish guy sitting a few seats away makes the mistake of eye contact. The poor guy wants to resist, but in a moment he’s raising a can to Rutt’s loud toast of: “One world. All people.”

We have about 10 beers remaining when they call our flight. I am sure this is where the party ends because I can’t see them allowing me on board with a half-consumed case of beer. I hand my boarding pass to the attendant – the box of cans under my nearside arm – and she smiles and says welcome aboard.

Although I was nearly out of my skull all morning, in my seat, I’ve settled into a very pleasant buzz. I start jotting notes from the previous days’ adventures, and when the plane takes off, I open another beer and really start to write. Rutt comes forward and demands three cans to take to the rear of the plane. Moments later I hear him cajoling some unsuspecting victim into chanting his college fight song.

“Excuse me mate,” the steward is saying to me as I’m scribbling away. “Where’d you get that beer?”

“Huh? I, uh, bought it.”

“Bought it where?”

“Well, I bought it in a bottle shop in Kings Cross. I got thirsty waiting for my flight, so I drank a few, and then I boarded the plane.”

“No one stopped you?” He is incredulous. “No one said a word?”

“Uh, no.”

“Um, mate; listen, uh you really can’t bring your own beers on the flight. It’s not a Qantas rule really, it’s kinda the law.”

“I had no idea. I am so sorry. I really didn’t know the law.”

“On holiday eh? I guess now that we’re in flight it’s alright but, uh, can you try and not open another one? Thanks.”

In the back of the plane Rutt is singing something from Twisted Sister.

Days 4-5 – Tuesday-Wednesday; Port Douglas & Cairns

Port Douglas is a beautiful seaside resort town, and in it we find some semblance of a normal touring vacation – though the prepared





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tourist would realize that January may be the worst month to be there.

The beaches, more beautiful than any in the States east of Hawaii, are essentially useless because of the seasonal presence of Irukandji “Stingers” – painfully poisonous jelly fish that have hospitalized several tourists in the weeks prior to our arrival. The thick heat and ultra-potent tropical sun severely limits the time we can spend on outdoor activities.

Nonetheless, we visit the Great Barrier Reef and tour a game preserve. We swim with exotic fishes and pet kangaroos and lounge by the five acres of pristine lagoons encompassed by the luxurious Sheraton Mirage Resort. The meals in the Port Douglas restaurants are top-notch, and the hot weather quells our drinking to a mere half-dozen cocktails each night.

On Wednesday after several hours at an Internet café and the Aussie version of hotels.com, we make perhaps our wisest transportation choice of the trip: the Quicksilver high-speed ferry from Port Douglas back to Cairns. It moves at 40 knots over the open water, so we'll make Cairns in a little more than an hour, with unprecedented views of the Queensland coast and without the delays of a shuttle van.



The view from the Quicksilver ferry leaving Port Douglas.

Our driver from the hotel to the ferry dock is a bright-eyed old codger who's pushing 80 years if he's a day.

He sizes us up as Americans in an instant.

"It's good to see you boys," he says, and Rutt, Rob, and I look at each other in bafflement. "I used to carry dozens of Americans each week during the peak season... but I guess it hasn't been the same after September '01..."

"You're one of the only people we've found who holds that view," I respond. "Don't get us wrong, we're having a great time here, but not everyone has been glad to see us."

"Well, the folks here your age don't really have perspective. I served for Australia in the 40s – in the second World War. I believe we would have lost that war if not for the US. I don't know if everything you're doing is right, but I know what it means to be an ally. Right now, Australia should be yours. Maybe soon you will straighten everything out and the world will get back to normal. Maybe the travelers will come back. It may sound strange, but it feels funny not having the Americans around."

Rutt and Rob and I exchange glances again. As individualist as we see ourselves, the cabbie's sentiment is reassuring. We board the Quicksilver in a good mood, and the ride is only an enhancer. We float into the Cairns harbor as night falls.

In Cairns we opt for lodging different from the luxury resort in Port Douglas: a modern efficiency apartment several blocks off City Place. Cairns is a small city, no more than a couple of square miles, comprised of wide boulevards and arcades. In the heart is the Woolshed, a restaurant and pub serving the thriving backpacking community: modern-day hippies shacking eight to a room in various flophouses as they hike and bus their way across Oz – their worldly possessions in a JanSport.

The proprietors of the Woolshed and other hotspots in the “destination” cities of the antipodes don't hesitate to remind these youngsters that they're on the trip of their lifetimes – just in case they consider passing on that one last round of drinks or the Cairns tee shirt at the merch table – fortunately simple spending inelasticity prevents rampant tourist inflation.

We pay 10AUD for a spaghetti dinner at the Woolshed – dollar for dollar the best meal deal to date. (We would've paid 8AUD if we had foregone our showers and posed as backpackers.) Later, we slide over a few blocks to the Sports Bar Rock Café. Here we

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have a rare encounter with American women, sophomores at North Carolina's Elon University. We're the first American men they've seen since their study-abroad program began two weeks prior, and we chat about real American things – like the upcoming Super Bowl, and Michael Jackson, and college. No one discusses politics.

We order drinks for our new friends and turn back to see them being entertained by a pair of bleached-out local kids, Blaine-doll cut outs, as aggressive as any Steve Irwin critter. The Elon girls, cute as buttons in a sorority girl way, are swept away in the seductive undertow. We watch them drifting on the dance floor, and when one slides her hands down the back of one of the surfer's jean shorts, we pull the plug.

We're cranky and defeated, and we're detecting a frightening new problem: it's becoming near impossible to get drunk.

Days 6 – Thursday; Cairns

We wake at noon and embark on what's becoming ritual: a sloppy breakfast (or none at all), a trip to the Internet café, and a stroll down whatever boardwalk or strip our current port of call has to offer.

Our next stop will be Surfer's Paradise, arriving Friday night and remaining until the final weekend in Sydney. It will be at least a five-night stay, for which we have secured lodging on zero of the five nights. Each of us picks a list of potential hotels or efficiencies, and we start firing off e-mails to the proprietors.

After an exotic lunch at Subway, we return to our apartment and tend to laundry and mid-trip re-packing. Shortly after, we're back at the Sports Bar Rock Café to address the mystery of the disappearing buzz. Thursday night in Cairns is about as thriving as a Thursday night in Amish country, and 15 beers later the only thing I have to look forward to is a late-night sausage from a street vendor.

I'm drawn to the sirens call of grilled meat and a sign promoting the Hawaiian Dog, a

masterpiece of pork sausage, bacon, and pineapple.

"The States," the sausage man declares when I place my order. "I'd guess Boston or New York."

"Boston," I tell him, "but I grew up in New York."

"Ahhh, Boston," he says. "Spent 8 years there. I know it well. My brother, he is still there. He owns the 7-11 near the Fleet Center. Yes, I know Boston well. We moved there from Lebanon. It's not so good now, though, I guess."

"No?" I ask genuinely surprised. Had I missed a breaking news story?

"No. No, of course not. How can it be? You are all living in fear there now. Your President has made a police state. I do feel bad for you – and for my brother."

"Really? I mean, yeah some things have changed, but it's not so bad. I don't walk around in fear of being bombed."

"Some things have changed? Maybe for you. For a lot of people everything changed. George Bush. Asshole. For a lot of people he changes everything. My mother; my sister? Gone now. Back to Lebanon without my brother, who is a U.S. citizen. Some changes, you say?"

"That's too bad," I conciliate. "Problem with their Visas or something, I guess, huh?"

"No problem. My sister was a marketing manager with Calvin Klein. She had no problem, until Bush."

I have nothing really to say, and I stand there for a minute while he presses sausage, bacon, and scoops of crushed pineapple into a roll. Some prospective customers are approaching the booth, bringing our conversation to closure as he passes me the sandwich over his cart.

"America. You're not the America you think you are. Not any more."

His tone – contemptuous, but sad too – reverbs as I walk home.





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Day 7 – Friday; Cairns

I wake around 5 a.m. A mule is kicking the inside of my stomach, and I feel that tingle in the esophagus that usually precedes a violent expulsion of the better part of one's digestive tract. I've never had food poisoning before – but as an accomplished drunk, I know the difference between an upset tummy and a dire problem. I have a dire problem.

I try and get out of bed, but the muscles in my back and abdomen are too cramped to sit up. Instead, I roll to the floor and crawl for the john. I spend the next four hours in significant pain curled on the tiles. Without even the relief of a good hurl, I lie dry heaving until the sun is long up. I have plenty of time to think about the sausage man, and I wonder if he deliberately tried to kill me. But even in my semi-drunken state I never took my eyes off him as he cooked the meat – and he spoke to me long enough to have cooked it well. I write it off as unfortunate coincidence.

I get 25 minutes of sleep before the phone starts ringing incessantly. The proprietors are holding us to the 10 a.m. check out. We have a 2 p.m. flight to Brisbane, and we have yet to arrange our ground travel to Surfers Paradise.

Rutt and Rob are packed and barking orders at me as I stuff things into the duffel. The pain in my gut and general ill feeling is not subsiding. I'm also exhausted.

On the plane, I can't sleep, but through sheer determination I force myself to a lower state of consciousness – eyes closed, my head resting on the chair in front of me. The passengers around me are disturbed. The flight attendant asks Rob if I am okay; he tells her I had too much of a good time the night before. Even in my agony I am insulted, and I mentally note to drown Rob in alcohol when I recover.

In Brisbane we find a problem. None of the hotels or efficiency apartments we contacted via e-mail the previous day have returned our messages. Rob and Rutt start making calls frantically while waiting in line at the tourist information booth. I gather all our luggage into

a pile on the floor and lie on it, still praying for sleep.

Apparently Australians like to go to the beach on their summer vacations; not one open room exists in Surfers on the Friday of the long Australia Day holiday. After one hour of haggling, negotiating, and begging – an hour I spend sprawled on the terminal floor as an object of curiosity for Virgin Blue flight attendants, Asian tourists, and other onlookers – Rob and Rutt arrange a complex system in which the tourist liaison will call brokers for various properties in Surfers while we board the 90-minute Airtrain south. When something opens, she will call us. I begin mentally preparing for a night dry heaving on the beach.

We get the call to try Legends, a luxury hotel in the heart of Surfers. They have three single-bed rooms available for one night only, on the floor with the hotel's service departments. We happily accept. I check in and crawl into my bed fully clothed. I don't get up for 14 hours.

Days 8-12 – Saturday-Wednesday; Surfers Paradise

Surfers Paradise is the Wildwood, NJ of Australia – well, maybe a little cleaner. Here you can find tee shirts with catchy slogans like “Hey, I f#&#k your girlfriend!” under a smiling picture of The Fonz, Surfers Paradise can cozies, and little kangaroo dolls for 3AUD. It has fathers wearing boat shoes and dress socks snarling at their teenage children as they troll the boardwalk. We take all this in as we schlep our gear from luxurious Legends to a run-down efficiency apartment about a mile up the beach.

No single day in our tenure at Surfers provides a distinguishing memory. Each evening before going out, we declare that we're going to rise in the morning for surfing lessons, jet-ski rides, or a trip to the game preserve. Instead, we rise at noon and crawl to an Internet café. At around 3 p.m. we hit the beach. The routine is relaxing – and for the first two days no one complains – but soon we're getting restless.





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Drinking has become a fruitless endeavor; it is impossible to consume enough beer in one evening to even replicate a buzz, and Australia's standard pour laws make it a waste to drink cocktails. We turn to gambling, but even that doesn't satisfy. Six times in a row I find myself in double-down situations at the black jack table, and six times in a row the house wins. Several hours and several hundred dollars pass before the thought occurs to me: I can't win in this country. At anything.

On Tuesday we decide to call it off; we make plans to head back to Sydney on Wednesday afternoon, a day early. Tuesday night we turn to Red Bull and vodka at Melba's in hopes that caffeine will do what alcohol can't.

We meet some girls from Norway who dance us silly and talk about New York City and American films in Norway and unrequited love affairs with Americans they've met before. They hug us and give us little kisses and buy us drinks for hours. At 3 a.m. they are falling over drunk. We suggest calling it a night, but they refuse. "In Norway you go home when the bars close," they tell us. "No one leaves early."

I do. Torn between actually leaving a bar in Australia with a woman and knowing I'd have to wait at least two more hours for the chance, I pull the rip cord. Only Rutt is there to complain – Rob took solace in a strip club long before – and even he has little to say. The country has beaten us. We quit out of exhaustion. We say our goodbyes and aren't even to the door when a horde of young Aussie guys descend on the Norwegians like wolves to the kill.

As we walk leisurely down a back road to our rented hovel, I hear footsteps approaching quickly from behind. I tense up ready for a fight, and I'm actually thankful for once that the alcohol Down Under is effectively useless.

"Hey, hey you," the guy says to my back in a thick accent – not Australian. "I heard you talking; are you American?"

I glance at Rutt and we stop and turn around. It's a gangly Middle Eastern kid, maybe 21 years old, and an even skinnier white kid. Resigned to the pending conversation, I acknowledge that we are from the States.

The Middle Eastern kid strides right up to me and starts raising his hands. He's smiling, and in an instant I must decide if he's making a greeting or planning an attack. From his goofy grin, I guess the former and decide not to hit him first. He grabs my arm and hand and shakes them vigorously.

"Thank you. Thank you," he says to me, and I can tell from his speech that he is drunk, thick accent or not. "I have not met Americans yet this trip. You are the first in two weeks since I left home. I wanted to meet some to thank you."

"Uh, you're welcome. But thanks for what?"

"I am an Arab. I have been listening to people talk about Americans since I left Saudi Arabia to come backpacking. My friend, he is Polish," he says looking at the white kid who is trying in vain to speak English to Rutt. "They do not know what America has done. They only talk about America the aggressors. They do not know that what U.S. did is actually good for Muslims – for all Muslims. They may not like it now, but in 10 years they will know."

"You're welcome," I say again, wondering how a Muslim got so drunk, and really not knowing what else to say. I'm happy I'm not defending myself, but I'm not sure I should be taking credit for the liberation of Iraq either.

"You will see," the kid continues, "technology, better education, equality – it can all happen now. The future is possible."

He thanks me again and tells me his name, then tells me I'll never remember such an odd name anyway. He is right. He says something in another language to the Pole, and the two wave and turn onto a side street and into the night. Rutt and I exchange glances and shrug. What else is there to say?

In the morning we call a cab to bring us to the Airtrain and back to Brisbane Airport for the





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shuttle to Sydney. On the ride we decide to start adding up the vacation's monetary damage. It is not trivial. After 12 days I am down about 1,200AUD in lodging, 350AUD in intra-continent transportation, 800AUD gambling, and 1,200AUD in eating and drinking expenses – mostly drinking. My mates are in the same boat.

“Shhh. I'm trying to tally my dollars per rejection from Australian women,” Rutt says as Rob and I banter back and forth about the cost of the Qantas flights. “I think I'm at about \$2 per.”

The cabbie is listening in and laughs. “No luck with the ladies, eh mates?”

We grumble.

“Ah, you're just going 'bout it the wrong way. If you're going to spend the money, may's well get the sure thing.” He flips open a weekly newspaper to the escort section. “Too bad you're leaving Surfers. We got the best selection on the coast. It's a buyers racket. More premium gals than you could know what to do with.”

“They look delightful,” I tell him – and they do; the full-color ads display beautiful women of every flavor – “but shelling out the dollar for it kind of defeats the purpose.”

“Sounds to me like you've already shelled out the dollar, son,” the old cabbie quips. He extols the virtues of the brothels of Australia's Pacific coast. “Well, you have a good go down in Sydney,” he instructs with a tone of superiority.

By mid afternoon we are back within walking distance of Kings Cross. We check into the Sydney Boulevard Hotel on William St., nap,

shower, and spend the rest of the day bombing around the shopping district.

After dinner we visit Three Monkeys, a great George St. club with a truly international clientele. We chat with Brits and Americans studying abroad, and Rutt storms a circle of petite Japanese and Korean women like some drunken Godzilla. They giggle and compare his massive hands against theirs. Later, he gets a phone number from a Filipino émigré, and we stagger to a cab to hit late night at The Bourbon feeling melodramatically triumphant. She has made a date with us for Friday with her girlfriends.

Days 13-16 – Thursday-Sunday; Sydney

With more than three full days of open time and confirmed accommodations, our final days in Australia feel like a real vacation. We tour Sydney harbor by boat, visit Manly Beach, and attend numerous historical walking tours of The Rocks – the most interesting to us being Friday's Rocks Pub Tour. We are suspicious that the tour is officially sanctioned by the Sydney Visitor Centre, but we set a goal to get the tour guide legitimately hammered and end up having a great time.

Brandon, the guide, falls prey to our designs and the alcohol catalyzes the bond between us the way only booze can. He speaks of his previous jobs as a traveling performer, stage actor, and educator with the disillusionment usually awarded to good men trying to do good things in a bottom-line world. He's thankful for his gig with the Visitor's Centre; it's a quasi-government job with regular pay and benefits. Someone comments that the arts and education are always the first institutions to suffer in a free economy, and Brandon is eager to empathize:





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"I know you know where I'm coming from," he

Afternoon sun casts shadows in The Rocks.

says, "considering who leads domestic policy in the States now. Well, there's no sense really focusing on it though, right? I mean it's not like any of you put Bush in power."

Surprisingly, Rutt lets this slide. We move from the Orient Hotel to the Glenmore, with its roof deck, and watch another perfect evening descend on the Sydney skyline.

With a quick refresher and wardrobe change we're ready to descend on Cargo Bar in Kings Wharf, arguably the hottest nightspot in Sydney. At the door we're stymied by the membership rules, and when the crowd diminishes, we again try the universal language of cash to obviate local custom – this time opting for higher stakes than a few 20AUD notes. Even at 200AUD the doorman is unwilling to budge, and Rutt is left frantically dialing his rented phone to contact our prospective dates.

It's the same story every place we go, and no appeal to international hospitality, brotherly

love, or economic stimulus can place us in our clubs of choice. We idle the night away in a pub watching Manchester United take on Liverpool in soccer until it's late enough to slip into The Bourbon, where we meet Rutt's lady friends. They take our date more seriously than we do, and when it becomes clear we're really only good for sloppy, drunken make-outs they excuse themselves and we stumble home, weaving among hookers and their pimps as we stroll Darlinghurst Road to William St.

Saturday is our last real day in Australia. The flight for the States leaves at 9:30 Sunday morning. With the dateline and the time zone change, we'll arrive home just in time for the Super Bowl. The anticipation of this uniquely American event fuels the yearning for home that two weeks of trials Down Under have embedded in my subconscious. I pack every article I plan on bringing back before I leave the hotel for breakfast in the early afternoon. I lay my travel clothes neatly on the desk, anticipating that my turnaround time from bar to airport may be measured in minutes, not hours. One missed taxi cab, one missed connecting flight could cost me the better part of a day in delays. I'm paranoid about it by the time we hit the town.

In the movies, we'd have our grand finale, some turnaround to make the whole trip worthwhile, some victory to restore our faith in Americanism. The only win we notch is a good old-fashion drunk. Through sheer perseverance – and about 10 Quick Fucks each – we wind up in the Empire Hotel on Darlinghurst. It's a classic dance hall dive bar with almost an American feel.

The erosion of congeniality that happens after 15 days on the road rears its ugly head. I can no longer even converse with Rutt and Robb, so I strike out into the crowd on my own. With some degree of predictability, I get rejected by a handful of cute Aussie babes with assembly-line efficiency.

I'm leaning against the bar when an early 30-something mate comes along to buy his drink.





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“American, eh?” he asks unprompted. “I can tell by the jeans. Spent some time over there in the past few years.”

“Really? Where?” I respond, only mildly interested in another awkward conversation about U.S. foreign policy at this point.

“Wisconsin,” he says flatly, as if Wisconsin would belittle his image.

“Wisconsin, eh? Weather isn’t quite like Sydney.”

“No, no, not at all,” he says. “The women will keep you warm though.”

I turn on him, trying to restrain the tone of resentment in my voice, but only barely. “Yeah, I wish I could say the same for Sydney.”

“No luck, huh?” he says with true sympathy, which catches me off guard. “Well, don’t let it get you down. Sydney girls can be bitches. Melbourne, Perth, you’ll find things open up for you a little better. But not Sydney.”

“You know,” I say, really launching into it, “I flew all this way so that for once in my life I’d be someone that stood out. I’ve seen you guys in the States. It’s so great to walk into a club there with an Aussie or a Brit and watch you guys work a room. Guys want to hear all about your native land. Women swoon at your accent. Everyone considers your points of view on everything from fashion to music to world affairs. I, just for once, wanted to be on the other side of that equation.”

The Aussie shakes his head. “It’s bullshit mate. I dunno why. It just doesn’t work that way. American girls will fall over us like we’re the second coming, and it doesn’t make any sense. We’re just trying to get in their pants like any American guy would. But they don’t care; they give it up anyway. And I don’t claim to know anything about the way the world works any more than I know how to fly a rocket. You guys come down here and the ladies could give an arse whether you’re from the States or France or Madagascar. I’ve seen it. I’ve had my American mates down here too. I can’t explain it. I really can’t. But I’ll buy you a

drink, if it makes you feel any better. Hell, I’ll buy you two.”

And even after about 20 drinks already, it did feel better. Not enough to salvage the one-sided political conversations, and the rejections, and the harassment from prostitutes – but a little bit better.

The Aussie settled it up pretty fair and level: The world is full of inequities on every scale, and although that may offend American sensibilities – especially when we’re on the short end – we’ll be better off if we realize the challenges these inequities pose are not binary. There is no simple “on and off” or “war and peace.” The world’s problems are multilayered, requiring incremental solutions more intricate than our “just showing up.”

This is not always easy for an American to grasp. Our society is based on winning and losing; the notion of anything in between or more complicated is unfulfilling.

I bade the Aussie good bye and stumbled out of the Empire Hotel and back to my room for 2.5 hours sleep before catching the flight home. I made damn sure I wasn’t late.

R. A. Miller is a drunkard with an international savoir faire on par with Homer Simpson. He is also the Managing Editor at boutique book publisher Arriviste Press (as evidenced by the gratuitous advertising on these pages).

You can make fun of him yourself right here:

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