

A Frenchman in Australia

He thought he was prepared....

Australians are fascinated by things French: its the only explanation for the sheer quantity of books and articles chronicling Australians' French experiences.

What is less well understood is just how much that fascination is reciprocated. Every French person I've spoken to who has not made the trek to Oz dreams of doing so - or says they do, anyway. One does not see the same enthusiasm for the Americas, the rest of Asia or the Pacific islands.

Jean-Pierre is nothing if not earnest. He is also inquisitive and enthusiastic, but not over-adventurous. So I wasn't ready for his reaction when I invited him to accompany me on my next mission to Oz.

Like many French people at the time, he had not travelled much: Before meeting me, his ventures outside *l'hexagone* amounted to two day-trips to London on business, two two-day visits to Italy to attend conferences and a five-day camping trip in Corsica.



He was, like me, an animal lover and yearned to see first-hand, some of the famous Australian fauna. Still, his enthusiasm for this trip took me by some surprise. An indication of the excitement caused by the prospect of this trip was the preparations that took place. Three weeks before we were due to leave, a new suitcase had been purchased, new underwear (!) and, as the trip was to last three weeks, 21 shirts had been ironed and neatly folded. There were packing practices to ensure that the case was indeed of the right dimensions. To ensure he knew all he would be expected to know about this amazing, fascinating place, books had been purchased, read and reread. Written by French people for French people, they focused naturally on the multitude wonders of nature: pictures and detailed descriptions of spiders, snakes, jellyfish, sharks, crocodiles and things. The aim was clearly to terrify and amplify the sense of adventure: only the bravest would venture to such a perilous place! Yet the most lethal aspect of Australian fauna, tended to be overlooked. When asked how, with all these poisonous creepy-crawlies in our gardens, kitchens and beds (don't forget that even the kangaroos can be dangerous: they can give you a jolly clip over the ears if you're not careful), how does the country maintain its population? Well, we are a nation of immigrants, you know: one of the highest rates of immigration in the world. So its true: the place really is dangerous!

We would stay with my ex-husband and his girlfriend, who were renting my flat in Bondi Beach and looking after Vanderbilt and Villeneuve, our Burmese cats.

As the rapture and emotion of our reunion subsided, Tom, returning from checking that all was ready, observed that the huntsman that had inhabited the cornice of the second bedroom was still there. I thought this would interest JP, so we went to have a look, assuring him that this was an example of one of the three species of Australian spider that would not kill you and not one of the ten thousand species that would. But huntsmen look fierce (even more so if you are a fly, one imagines) and this one had descended to eye level - as if it too wanted to scare the visitor. Of course we're not going to kill it! Do you want to be eaten alive by mosquitoes?



The spider theme continued the following day. Despite my serious instructions in how to avoid being rushed to hospital and spending most of his holiday on life-support, JP had left his shorts lying on the bedroom floor, which anyway offended my, and Vanderbilt's, sense of tidiness. In my view, he deserved what he got, which was to see, on emerging from the shower, two thick black spider legs protruding from under them. Eyes bugging out in a pure Hanna-Barbera gesture, he crept

shorts and flicked them. Now, had he listened, he would have known that this is exactly what you should not do. Had that been a funnel-web, we'd be by now feverishly tying tourniquets and ringing emergency rooms. Funnel-web spiders are fortunately rare in Bondi, but the much more lethal Australian sense of humour is prevalent in all parts of the continent - which JP discovered when he spied the combination of bulging blue eyes, yellow eyelashes, pink bow tie and me rolling around on the bed laughing. He thought it wasn't funny, but he was wrong. He was also wrong to discount my credibility on this account.



Harmless and not harmless

Part of my annual mission is to catch up with all my friends, so a drinks party was organised. The flat is extremely well configured for this purpose, and there had been so many parties in the past that everyone knew the routine and their part in it. On arrival the women would finish off food preparation and circulate platters while I went to get ready. The men would bring ice and beer and make sure everyone had a drink in his or her hand: beer for the boys and white wine in one of the dozens of glasses hired for the occasion for the girls. A can of beer was placed

in JP's hand. He asked me for a glass and everybody looked at him quizzically. I indicated where the beer glasses were to be found and he poured some beer into it. Someone asked why he wanted a glass and he explained that he couldn't drink a whole can of beer by himself. The room fell silent.

One of the nicest ways of enjoying Sydney harbour is to walk from Spit Bridge to Manly. On the way JP spied what he thought was a large lizard. About 15cm long, I explained that it was a baby, but even as an adult would not hurt you unless it thought you were a tree. I then explained what to do if an adult goanna came running toward you: lay on the ground across its path and it will run over you rather than up you. "Spiders", he thought.

This was of course not enough, and we had to go and see *la nature sauvage*. I'm a city girl and don't like mud, so won't go far from a big city and my compromise was a couple of days on the

coast near Nowra. We took the scenic route through the Royal National Park and stopped at Audley for a sedate wander through typical bush. I heard a rustle and there, clinging to the side of a tree was a goanna. A good-sized one too: its head was about the level of ours, and there was about 20cm of tail dragging along the ground. JP didn't see it at first and I beckoned him over, reassuring him that it was not venomous, but was very frightened and might give us a nip, so don't get too close. There wasn't much danger of that. He later said that had I not been there he would have run back to the car and not stopped until he got back to the flat at Bondi. He had, it seems, become quite blasé about spiders and was admiring the stunning colours of those - many of which probably were very venomous - we encountered along bush tracks and taking photos with gay abandon. But he wanted to see a kangaroo in the wild and a koala.

Near Stanwell Park we came across one of those private zoos, and I suggested that this would be a good place to see cute marsupials. It was ideal: kangaroos hopping about amongst the visitors - one with a joey peeping photogenically from its mother's pouch, koalas, wombats, baby wombats, emus - everything. There was also a reptile centre. As reptile centres go, it was minimalist but adequate for our purposes. Brown snake: venomous but usually not fatal - not aggressive. Black snake: very venomous and often fatal, but not



generally aggressive. Tiger snake: very venomous, usually fatal and will seek you out in your bed.

This noted, and furry animals fed, petted and photographed, we continued to our motel on the outskirts of Nowra, stopping on the way to admire yet more unspoiled beaches. I asked the motel owner if he could reserve us a table at a local eatery:

- Its 9.30, he said.
- Yes?
- They're all in bed
- ?
- If you choose from this menu here, now, I will see if the Chinese takeaway will stay open long enough for you to drive down and pick up something.
- Um, OK.

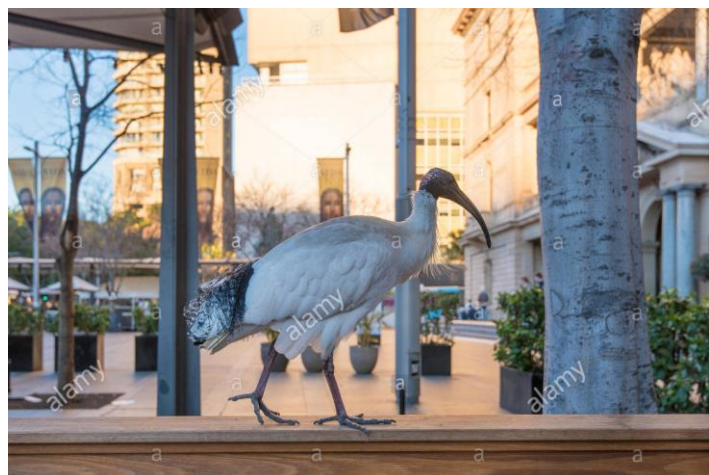
This took some explaining to JP: it represented his first meal ever without bread and cheese, although we did manage a bottle of rip-your-arms-off Australian chardonnay to wash it down. We ate in the dark on the grass beside the river.

The following morning the wife and co-owner of the motel greeted us. She was one of those delightful, unflappable, chirpy women.

- Found a snake in the garden this morning.
- Did you? A brown snake?
- No, a tiger snake. There's been a plague of them, they come down from the mountains looking for water. There've been so many bites, they've run out of anti-venene at the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories; so I've put towels under all the doors: you know how they go really flaaaat? JP tried to appear stoic.

We headed down to Hutchinson for a swim and decided to have lunch at the pub. A sign on the wall announced "No thongs and stubbies". Intrigued, JP asked for a translation and I struggled. But, at that moment, an unreconstructed rocker ambled past, sporting the appropriate (banned) attire, enhancing the look with shoulder-length, uncombed hair sprouting from the perimeter of a middle-aged pate. I indicated with a nod and on cue, the right leg was extended sideways and arm descended for an urgent genital adjustment.

On the day before our scheduled departure, I had left JP in The Rocks, with a French-language tourist book to amuse himself with Australian history while I attended to solicitors and accountants. Everything had gone very smoothly until he bent down to get his camera from his rucksack to encounter at close range the long, curved black beak



plunged into his rucksack in search of a chicken sandwich. I hadn't warned him about the ibises.

It was now about 4.30 and it seemed a good idea to walk through the Botanic Gardens to Park Street to get the 389 back to Bondi. As we walked beside the ponds I recalled a conversation months earlier when I had told him about fruit bats. He had been adamant that bats do not grow to the dimensions I had described and I explained as patiently as I could that they were not in fact bats but marsupials with batwings and eat only fruit. Impossible, he had declared. Alright, if you say so. He was the first one to spy the bats.

- d - did you see that?
 - Oh yes, they're the fruit bats I told you about. There's lots of them here.
 - There's another one!
- He hadn't listened to a word.
- Yes, I told you, there are thousands.
 - Another one!



- Yes, you see all those pods hanging from the branches? They're bats, well fruit bats not real bats.
- What pods?
- See all those black things hanging.
- What all those - there are thousands!
- Yes, that's what I said, they're all bats.
- They're everywhere!
- Yes. Don't worry, they smell bad and they make a mess of the trees but they eat only fruit. They're waking up now to go and have breakfast at Watson's

Bay. They like the figs.

He said OK, he believed me, but was quite keen to get to the bus stop.

For poor JP, by far the worst part of all this is my telling it and everybody laughing. As I said, the snakes, spiders, sharks and crocodiles are a doddle compared to the sense of humour.

