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From outback to beach in Australia

Bryan Appleyard encounters sheep in the outback, roos at Kangaroo Island, cockatoos in Melbourne, and a big rock in Uluru



Bryan Appleyard in Australia

Bryan Appleyard

In the outback, sheep can do things to a man. It's hot, and I've been left to drove 23 rams down a dusty road on a quad bike. I'm taking them to an orgy. They're to be split up and put in 700-acre paddocks with several hundred ewes — each will “cover” about 10 a day. That's probably why they're called rams.

I have to keep it slow and quiet. Get them hot and bothered and their fertility plummets. I let the quad roll along on tickover and take some time to watch a flock of galahs — gorgeous pink and grey parrots — gabbling furiously to each other. There are 145 species of bird on this sheep-and-cattle station and almost all of them, to British eyes, used to small brown creatures, are fabulously exotic.

A cloud of dust announces the arrival of another quad, driven by Graham Pickles, the owner of this 12,000-acre station. It's called Burrawang West. It's about an hour's drive from Parkes, the town made famous by the movie *The Dish*, which is, in turn, about an hour's flight — or a six-hour drive — from Sydney in western New South Wales.

Pickles bought Burrawang in 2000 from a Japanese construction company that had used it as a retreat for its executives. So part of the deal was a fabulously luxurious resort, with a homestead and a collection of dramatic sheds providing accommodation for 24 people, or slightly more if children are put up on camp beds.

Together we guide the rams into a holding pen, where we divide them up and then take them in a trailer to their allowed paddocks. It takes all day and, at the end of it all, I tell Pickles, truthfully, that it's been the most relaxing day of my life. He grins.

He talks about being out on the quads with Bill Royal, manager of this land for 30 years and wearer of some of the biggest hats I have ever seen.

“Sometimes we just look at each other and ask, ‘Is there any place you'd rather be?’ The answer's no.”

Sheep certainly did things to Pickles. He knew nothing about them when he bought Burrawang. The first thing Royal told him to do was get rid of the flock of merinos — wool sheep that, for years, have been the backbone of the Australian economy. But merinos are pesky creatures, bad mothers, difficult to drove, and shearing is expensive, particularly so when wool prices have fallen and the Chinese can do it cheaper.

So after extensive research, Pickles began to replace them with dorpers, a Dorset-Persian cross. They don't produce wool, they're good mothers, they drove like a dream and they produce excellent meat. Now he's gone dorper crazy. He thinks it's the sheep that can save Australia.

Ah, Australia! Now that Baz Luhrmann's epic movie about the country has made us all conscious of its scale, extremity, history and beauty, Australia is riding high in the recessionary imagination. Here is a place, one feels, along with generations of Brits, where one could start again with a clean balance sheet. Here's a country almost

the size of America populated by fewer than 22m people. It's just so damned . . . empty.

At one point on this trip a cancelled flight meant we had to take a bus from Alice Springs to Uluru (Ayers Rock). There were only four sites of human habitation — the odd sheep station manned by two or three people — in 300 miles.

The emptiness infects the imagination with dreams and wonder.

Of course, it's not empty. The word is a pampered, overcivilised affront to the Aborigines, to whom every square foot is replete with meaning and to the glorious wildlife that gives it meaning.

Animals dominate this place as they once did the entire planet; they even infest the cities. On arrival in Melbourne at night, I was stunned by the beauty of great flocks of sulphur-crested cockatoos circling the illuminated advertising signs. But, of course, the wildlife can be famously lethal.

On steps down to a beach in Byron Bay, I managed to put my sandalled foot within 18in of a brown snake, one of the most deadly. I froze, which, it turned out, was the right thing to do — the snake just slid away. Even the placid goanna lizard — I saw a four-footer at Burrawang — can do terrible damage if it thinks you're a tree. It can race up you, digging in with its fearsome claws.

Then, of course, there are the kangaroos, wallabies and koalas, creatures so strange they should be rare but aren't. One trick Pickles and Royal do for their guests is called Jurassic Park — they quad drive about 300 kangaroos in your direction. If it works, you find yourself surrounded by racing roos. We only got about a dozen, but it was worth it.

The roos even have their own island — Kangaroo Island, just off the Adelaide shoreline. This is a strange and haunting place with only 4,500 people and thousands of acres of impenetrable eucalyptus scrub known as mallee.

For years it has had only small hotels and bed-and-breakfast places, and most people have just taken the brief flight from South Australia's capital city to spend a day there. Now, however, there's Southern Ocean Lodge, which my wife, who knows about these things, confidently describes as the best hotel in the world.

On the southern shore of the island overlooking an ocean that doesn't stop until Antarctica, it forms a dramatic dipping line amid the scrub. The 21 rooms are arranged in a kinked line running away from the huge, circular restaurant and reception area.

As we ended up in the Osprey Pavilion suite at the very end, the walks back and forth along the sloping wooden corridor were surprisingly bracing. The food is minimalistic but superb, and there's a cute, circular spa at the end of a boardwalk through the mallee.

The average stay here is about two and a half nights, and you are provided with a suggested itinerary the moment you arrive. The advice is: do it. The main reason is two of the lodge's guides, Sandy McFeeters and Veronica Clark.

They are both so breathtakingly into this island that, after an hour or two, you feel you really ought to settle here. McFeeters has gone one step further by adopting an orphaned roo — his mother was killed by a car, which happens a lot. He's called Sol, he lives in a pillowslip and, yes, I bottle-fed the amiable little bastard.

Kangaroo Island rather lamely tries to sell itself as the "Australian Galapagos". They shouldn't do this as, wildlifewise, it pretty much stands alone. At a place named with epic Australian literalism, Remarkable Rocks, you can gaze down from surreal granite boulder formations at basking fur seals and, elsewhere, walk among sea lions, stare up at koalas and go out with McFeeters for an evening of kangaroos and canapés. Also, a tiger snake eyed me up — they seem to have a thing for me.

All wonderful, of course, but the trick is to get taken to the strangely named American River. It's not on the tourist trail, and there's not much there but for a store, a tiny harbour and some houses — though several new ritzy weekend pads are being built. But, in its way, it's the essence of the island. It is on the edge of a vast inlet inhabited by pelicans and black swans.

Standing on the rocky beach, it's easy to forget even the few human inhabitants. The sublime stillness is devastating.

Southern Ocean Lodge was a tough build, admits Mat Daniel, general manager of the Baillie Lodges company. There was resistance from locals who fear any invasion of their strange paradise. But, says Daniel, Australia needs more five-star hotels.

"Australia is not perceived as a five-star destination. People coming for the outback or the Great Barrier Reef traditionally stay in three- or four-star places."

Things were made worse by the lamentable television “Where the bloody hell are you?” ad campaign, which served only to stereotype the place yet again as the land of larrikinism — basically gung-ho, barbie-firing beer-swillers. Everybody I met on this trip winced when I brought it up.

Now, perhaps more intelligently, the tourist authorities are using the Luhrmann film to give the country a stronger narrative identity.

Australia is, after all, a great story.

And, at its heart, is Uluru, the Aboriginal St Peter’s, as one artist I met at Burrawang called it. The weather when we arrived after our bus journey was Wagnerian — racing clouds, rain and, in the evenings, dazzling lightning displays across the immense horizon line. The rock itself was, as a result, constantly changing in colour, demanding your attention at every moment.

The five-star place here is Longitude 131, a collection of fabulous high-tech rooms on stilts covered by canvas, all of which look directly at the rock. The food is heartier than at Southern Ocean Lodge and almost as good. Again, what you do is pretty clear. You go out for the sunrises and sunsets, you go round the rock, and you visit Kata Tjuta, another astounding outcrop with two walking tracks for whitefellas.

The remainder is too sacred to the Aborigines. As at Uluru itself, they don’t want white folk dying here as it means it will be inhabited by a foreign spirit. You can, at certain times, climb Uluru, but don’t. I can’t imagine anything more blasphemous, which is why I also don’t like the look of the helicopter rides or Harley-Davidson trips on offer.

“It’s very spiritual out near the rock,” says the Longitude general manager, Anneke Brown. This is an understatement. The great red cliffs rising out of the ground, its humped, rounded profile, the deep gorges, caverns and water holes, the birds, flowers and pale green eucalyptus leaves against the redness, the astonishing effects of weathering, the sheer livingness of the rock are evidence enough of greater powers than mere man. Sit quietly here.

The Aborigines own the land, and there’s a big visitors’ centre that is nice enough but, to me, intrusive.

Longitude itself, with its staring tents, is at a more respectful distance, and one does feel, even in these superluxurious rooms, that one is here to pay homage even as one adjusts the air conditioning.

Definitely do the Kata Tjuta walk. This is a more rugged and demanding place, stricken with even greater darkness and mystery than Uluru.

And if it has just rained, as it had when I went, it has one more weird delight. There are frogs here that live underground in moist mucus bubbles. Rain brings them out in a rabid, horny frenzy to breed. As you approach, you can hear them singing. And guess what? From a distance, they sound exactly like huge flocks of sheep. In the outback, sheep can do things to a man, even when they’re frogs.

Australia has a long story that is only partly about white settlement. It’s also about the sacred land of the Aborigines and about animals — millions upon millions of animals. Nowhere else in the world, not even Africa, makes one so aware of the serenity, power, violence, lethality and sublimity of nature. It is, perhaps, the contrast between the way the white humans seem to be clinging on to precarious footholds, even in the big cities, and the black ones still wander and worship.

And yet there are not many more visitors annually than there are to the British Museum. It is, I think, because the story has not been understood, has not been internalised into our collective mythologies in the way that America has been. So go out there, herd a few dorpers at Burrawang, have canapés with the roos at Kangaroo Island, watch the cockatoos in Melbourne, stare at the rock from your high-tech tent, marvel at the singing steel of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. But, above all, listen to the stories.

Bryan Appleyard travelled as a guest of Original Travel

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