

Charmaine's Diary

10th May 2010

Monday

Our first full day in Sydney and what better way to get over jetlag than to sign up to a four-hour guided bike tour around the city. The guide tells us that we are taking in the city's main hotspots - The Rocks, Chinatown, Sydney Opera House, Hyde Park, Observatory Hill, Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney Harbour Bridge. Nicola, a friend from home, is with me on a six week trip visiting some of the International Rose of Tralee centres. Being our first time in Australia, and indeed Sydney, we agree that the bike tour is a brilliant way to orientate ourselves, even if Nicola managed to slip her chain in the first five minutes of the tour, much to the amusement of the rest of the people on tour! Spend the evening with some friends from university who are now living in Sydney.

Tuesday

A trip to Australia wouldn't be complete without experiencing its wineries – so we are told. Hunter Valley, one of Australia's renowned wine countries, lies a couple of hours outside Sydney and we visit 6 of the 140 wineries that are in operation there. Taste over 40 wines as well as cheese, handcrafted chocolate and homemade gelato. Despite all the indulgence, the highlight of the day is definitely the sighting of a troop of kangaroos. Skippy the bush kangaroo was a childhood hero of ours!

Wednesday

Rise early to spend the morning climbing Sydney Harbour Bridge. All geared up in our climbing suits, harnesses, hats and gloves, we are very excited at the prospect of ascending the arc of this magnificent bridge. Although the climb is more of a gently inclining stroll than the abseil that we had anticipated, it is still totally worth it – the views of the harbour are truly breathtaking. Later that evening, we dolly ourselves up for a Rose of Tralee cocktail party. Pat Scullion, the Consul General, hosts a Rose of Tralee evening at his residence where the thirteen Sydney Rose participants are formally introduced to the public. Meet many members of the Irish community including another Charmaine! This is the first time I have ever met another Charmaine in my life and she happens to be the mother of one of the Rose entrants.

Thursday

A day of organization – emails, articles, accommodation bookings, car hire, activity planning. Catch up with family over Skype. In the evening, we figure that the best way to visit the iconic Sydney Opera House is to go see a performance. Delight in our discovery of reduced priced tickets for the under 30s and watch a drama called Honour. The work of an Australian playwright, it questions the nature of love

and does it inevitably erode over time. Interesting. Round off a lovely evening with a cocktail in the Shangri-La Hotel, a must-do for the night-time views of the city from the 36th floor bar.

Friday

Take a train to Blue Mountains, a couple of hours outside Sydney. Blue Mountains are not really mountains at all but a series of hills shaped by dramatic gorges. And their name comes from the colour of a fine mist of oil exuded from eucalyptus trees. We are completely overawed by the jaw-dropping scenery as we trek along bushwalking trails, climb to the look-out points and swing across a valley in a cable car. All the fresh air builds up quite the appetite and we meet with the 2009 Sydney Rose, Romy Farrelly, and her fiancée Louie for some grub. Romy had been my roommate for the Rose Tour and for the Festival in Tralee and we reminisce on fond memories – sitting on the side of the bath every night, soaking our feet after many consecutive 18-hour days in heels; giving ourselves sore throats from the sing-songs on the bus and the craic with shared with the other Roses and Escorts.

Saturday

A relaxing stroll along Darling Harbour. Although approaching Winter in Sydney we have been blessed with beautiful weather since our arrival and this morning is no exception. Spend the afternoon preparing for why I am really here in Sydney – the 2010 Sydney Rose of Tralee Ball. Tom O’Keeffe and his committee put on an extraordinary event and I am overwhelmed by the 500 strong attendance. Irish culture is definitely alive and kicking in Sydney. And, as with everywhere, I discover connections with people that I didn’t know before - a childhood friend of my father’s (who, sharing the same surname as my grandmother, is actually a distant relative), an ex-colleague of my brother’s and a surprising number of friends of friends. A truly wonderful night with Louise Lenihan being chosen as the Rose ambassador for Sydney.

Sunday

Our last day in Sydney. Pack our bags in the afternoon and put some order on our affairs. Collect a rental car. Neither of us have ever driven an automatic before and the car kangaroo hops its way out of the multi-storey carpark. Not naming names but someone’s arm very nearly gets caught in the automatic window of the car when trying to exit the car park! Navigate our way back to our apartment without the help of our insanely contradictory SatNav system, ironically called NeverLost. Our last supper in Sydney is with Romy and her family and we are sad to be parting these wonderfully genuine, generous and fun friends.