

Charmaine's Diary

17th May 2010

Monday

Arise early to hit the highway out of Sydney before rush hour traffic. It is with a fond sadness that we leave this city, where, between climbing the Harbour Bridge, visiting Blue Mountains and seeing the 2010 Sydney Rose being crowned, we've had a lot of fun. Nicola, my partner-in-crime and travel buddy and I take it in turns to drive the 8-hour journey to Coff's Harbour. Have a picnic along the way. Arrive to Coff's Harbour, greeted by pouring rain, roaring thunder and startling lightning. After a quick bite to eat we retreat to our hostel for the evening and read our books.

Tuesday

Donned in our wetsuits we are ready to ride the morning waves. Grandiose notions of becoming surfer babes in Lahinch and StrandHill when we return to Ireland are soon dispelled as we struggle to stand on our boards for even a nanosecond. We are hopeless causes and drag our boards back to the surfing school agreeing that it was great fun but that we are probably more *land* than *sea* people. With this in mind, we turn our hand at horse-riding for the afternoon. Our plodding, docile steeds *Mad Max* and *Cleopatra* take us through the Australian bush, showing us the beauty of rural Australia. As we canter through forests Cleopatra, with Nicola onboard, decides that she wants to be in poll position and snaps a bite at poor Mad Max as she glides past. Being a novice rider, Nicola was far from impressed but graciously hung on. Now only capable of walking like John Wayne, we are relieved to sit in the car for the four hour journey to Byron Bay. This is the first time we have driven at night in Australia and we are on 'kangaroo watch'. The car rental staff have us terrified that we're going to drive into a kangaroo – we even took out extra insurance – such suckers. Apparently the kangaroos are attracted by the car headlights at night and just jump out of the bush and stand there stunned until they are ran over. Thankfully no incidents.

Wednesday

Wake to the sound of the torrential rain feeling absolutely battered after our exertions from the day before. But we soldier on agreeing that the only cure is to get even more adventurous. We head out for an afternoon of sea-kayaking. Absolutely brilliant fun, the best bit being trying to negotiate the waves near the shore. During the sea-kayaking trip we have the opportunity to snorkel in the bay where we see lots of fish and turtles too. We also spot five dolphins, known locally to be quite an exhibitionist school, move across the bay. Beautiful sight. We even see a sting ray jump out of the water. And the backdrop is the most beautiful rainbow. Magical afternoon. Our guide welcomes us back ashore with Tim-Tams and

hot chocolate – mmmm! Zip home for a quick-turnaround before our Bikram yoga class – yoga in a heated room with a temperature of 39 degrees! Never again. Enough said.

Thursday

Drive to Brisbane, the city that hosts the Queensland Rose of Tralee selection. Grab a bite to eat, settle into our hotel and get dollied up for the Queensland Rose of Tralee Cocktail Party. The cocktail party is one of many functions the girls participating in the selection must attend. Super excited to be reunited with Kelly O'Shea, the 2009 Queensland Rose and to again meet her family. What really strikes me about the Queensland Centre is the strong and active community of Queensland Roses from over the years.

Friday

Kelly takes us to Australia Zoo, an hour outside Brisbane. The Zoo is the lifework of Steve Irwin, famously known as the Crocodile Hunter, who, in 2006, was hit in the chest by a stingray's barb while he was snorkelling on the Great Barrier Reef and died. We see all sorts of creatures – Tasmanian devils, wombats, tigers, wallabies, dingoes and many more. We watch a crocodile show, feed the elephants, drape a snake around our necks (the three of us look absolutely petrified in the photo) and hug a koala (a traditional tourist-in-Australia thing to do). Even if the little koala did poo just as I was about to hold him, I do think that he was the cutest thing ever. Someone described koalas to me as being like care bears recovering from an anaesthetic – pretty accurate. Dinner with the Rose entrants and judges at the Irish Club later in the evening.

Saturday

Randomly choose a hair salon to get an overdue hair-chop and who do I get only a hairdresser from Ireland. Ah the world is so small. We have a lazy lunch with Kelly by the river before getting ready for the Queensland Rose Selection. As I attend each selection night it never ceases to amaze me the connections that are made with people – the one that sticks out in Queensland is that the interviewer, James Donegan, is a man from my hometown of Athy and grew up in sweetshop called 'The Gem' that my parents used to take us for sweets after mass on a Sunday. Anyway it is a wonderfully magical night with thirteen girls participating and Aisling Ryan being selection as this year's Queensland Rose. We finish off the night with a trip to a famous 24-hour pancake house with Kelly and her family – YUMMY!

Sunday

Dropped off to the airport by Kelly. We discover that Australia has a Ryanair equivalent and despite our best packing effects we are caught to pay for overweight luggage. A pet hate of mine. But we are on our way to Cairns – to see the Great Barrier Reef – so things are not too bad! Once settled in Cairns we head out for a welcome meal by the Marina. Potter through the stalls of the night market, famous for its knickknack stalls and Chinese massages. We indulge in the latter. Share a sneaky gelato on the walk home.