

Charmaine's Diary

24th May 2010

Monday

No Monday morning blues these days as I hit the half way mark on a six week international trip visiting some of the International Rose of Tralee centres with my childhood friend Nicola in tow. We have just flown to Cairns for a sneaky holiday between Rose of Tralee engagements. Today is a planning day – articles, activity bookings, travel arrangements. We visit a supermarket shop in an attempt to be super healthy and cook our own dinners but we cannot resist what we have began to love – Tim Tams – chocolate biscuits that are an Australian institution! Mmmmm... Pop down to the night markets for a little potter around. Have a consultation with an iridologist and from studying a photo of our eye she tells us our health ailments - we are both relieved to hear that we're not going to die just yet!

Tuesday

Now to the resounding reason that we came to Cairns – diving on the Great Barrier Reef. It has been over four years since I got my PADI licence and I am petrified to say the least. Since childhood I have always had a fear of submerging my head into water AND too much Discovery Channel watching has done me no favours. With our reassuring and enthusiastic guide we see beautiful coral, colourful fish and all sorts of sea life. The highlight for me is meeting a big friendly turtle and giving him a little tickle on his back.

Wednesday

We are feeling very adventurous this week and today we embark on a white water rafting expedition on the Barron River, just outside Cairns. A group of seven, we rush down the rapids in an inflatable raft, screaming, giggling and terrifying each other with tales of crocodiles. Super fun.

Thursday

I am not a morning person. But this morning I discover that one way to wake myself up is to jump out of a plane from 14,000 feet at 200km/hour. A tandem skydive. Taking off in a little Flying-Doctors-esque plane, I let my mind not think to what I'm about to do. I'm fourth to fall out of the plane which bodes well as four is my favourite number. Tumbling and freefalling through the clouds, whooping and screaming. Exhilarating stuff. When the chute is pulled we are still above the clouds and leisurely float towards land taking in the beautiful scenery – corn fields, crocodile farms, tree-covered islands. I had always thought that the landing would be quite sore but we gently slide to a graceful stop. I am a little wobbly on my feet when I stand up. The twisting and turning of the parachute as we aim for our landing spot has caused motion sickness. But I'd do it again in the morning. Loved it. Shortly afterwards we are back in the sky again, flying from Cairns to Darwin. 25 degrees Celcius in Cairns and 31 degrees in Darwin and I am wearing five layers to avoid excess luggage charges. Ugh! Welcomed at the airport by two members of the Darwin Rose Centre and filled in on the itinerary for the next couple of days. The heat

and humidity is stifling and I quickly shed some layers. Bless the person who invented air conditioning. Anne McNamee, the 2009 Darwin Rose, takes us to the night markets at Mindil Beach where we watch the sun set and indulge in the culinary delights on offer there. Nicola tries some local fare - crocodile and kangaroo at the "Roadkill Café" stall.

Friday

Along with Anne and three of the Darwin Rose participants I do a short radio interview on 104.9 Mix FM about the Rose of Tralee and the upcoming Darwin selection. Great excitement amongst the participants about the Ball. Later meet back with Anne and her parents for an action-packed fun day out in Darwin. Over lunch we reminisce on the fun times that were had in Tralee last August. I sometimes think that the family and friends of the Roses have more fun during the Festival in Tralee than the Roses themselves. We take a quick wander through a nearby museum which houses beautiful Aboriginal art and a famous stuffed Crocodile named Sweetheart. We drive out of the city to get up close and personal with the real thing on the Spectacular Jumping Crocodile Cruise – we are taken on a boat down the crocodile infested Adelaide River, the tour guides dangle lumps of meat from the side of the boat and the crocs skulk over before taking a big jump for their dinner. These animals are some operators and fascinating to watch. With all limbs intact we ramble through the Window on the Wetlands Visitor Centre which has fabulous views over the Adelaide River floodplain. On the way back into the centre of Darwin we stop off at the Humpty Doo Hotel, a watering hole that Anne insists is VERY outback. End a perfect day by going to the Deckchair Cinema, an outdoor cinema with the stars above our heads, the occasional bird flying across the projector casting their shadow onto the screen and the sounds of crickets in the nearby bush. A very novel setting. We watch a movie called *The Last Wave* – which according to the blurb was about a white Australian lawyer whose life is disrupted after he takes on a murder case for Aboriginal defendants – but truthfully we came out not knowing what the movie was about. A very arty film that was beyond me!

Saturday

A minor reality check hits. This morning I understand what it means to have agreed to participate in a number of charity fun runs over the summer and, as per my usual, training just isn't a word in my daily vocab. So we decide what better way to see a bit of Darwin than go for a run along the Esplanade. It fast becomes clear that we are not locals. At near 40 degrees, we are only ding dongs who would even consider running in that heat. Our face colour changes from white to rosy to purple in just a couple of minutes. We agree to leave all other running til the next cooler destination on our trip – New Zealand. Later in the evening attend the 2010 Darwin Rose of Tralee Ball where the Ambassador to Australia, Máirtín Ó Fainín, and a 200-strong representation from the Darwin Irish community are in attendance. Fabulous night – great food, great music, great company, with Valerie O'Halloran being selected as the Darwin ambassador to participate in this year's festival in Tralee.

Sunday

The Darwin Rose committee kindly organises that we be taken out on a speedboat to see another perspective of Darwin. We feel like Bond girls as we cut through the waves with hair blowing, two strong Aussies driving the boat and beautiful scenery as the backdrop. Super fun. The blast of sea air works up a healthy appetite and we go for a nice meal. Unrelentless in her hospitality Anne drops us to the airport. Our visit to Darwin has been made very special by the opportunity to hang out with Anne and her parents and get to know them better. Their generosity, kindness and hospitality towards us has been overwhelming. And as we take to the skies again I think of all the people who have been so extraordinarily supportive and helpful during the past nine months of my reign as Rose of Tralee.