

Charmaine's Diary

7th June 2010

Monday

New Zealand. The last stop of a six week trip visiting some of the International Rose Centres, with my childhood friend Nicola in tow. I absolutely love travelling, but I have to say that, there are occasions when I do feel homesick, like when I miss out on important birthdays of special people in my life. Today is one of those days. Nevertheless, we try to make the most of being this side of the world and between Rose events we explore what's on offer. We base ourselves in a small town called Te Anau for a couple of days. On the agenda today is a boat trip on Doubtful Sound, the second largest of 14 fiords in Fiordland National Park. Remote, wild and imposing, it is unsurprising that this is a designated World Heritage Area. A mind boggling 430metres at its maximum depth with mountains each side reaching almost 2km high, this place is spectacularly beautiful. Doubtful Sound is also home to a pod of around 60 bottlenose dolphins. We spot a couple in the distance who swim towards us and ride the bow waves of our boat. Apparently these dolphins are among the largest of their species - they are certainly the biggest dolphins we've ever seen. Their playfulness creates quite the excitement on the boat.

Tuesday

Today we venture to see another, more popular fiord, Milford Sound but this time from a different perspective - by kayak. Turns out that this more active sightseeing is much more our style. Being out in the open air soaking up the magnificent surroundings is invigorating. Our guide tells us that we're unlikely to see much wildlife save for a couple of seals lying on the rocks, maybe a few ducks and some other birds. To her surprise and to our absolute delight a pod of dolphins visit the fiord as we are paddling. Our guide tells us that, as a rule of thumb, for every dolphin spotted, there are another three. At this estimation, we are kayaking with one hundred dolphins. It is so perfectly beautiful to see them so close to us yet so wild and free. Very exciting.

Wednesday

An early start as we take the near five hour bus journey from Te Anau to Dunedin. On arrival we quickly abandon our bags and get ready to explore. Jump on a bus out to the suburbs of the city and check out Baldwin Street, which is, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, the world's steepest residential street. Perhaps a gradient of 19 degrees doesn't sound very steep but we have to lean crazily forward to remain upright. Resist the temptation to knock on residents' doors to check out their calf muscles. Next is a tour out to the rugged Otago Peninsula where we are on a mission to see some penguins. We visit the Yellow-eyed penguin conservation reserve where they have replanted the penguins' breeding grounds, built nesting sites, cared for sick and injured birds and trapped predators. We have close-up views of the penguins returning home from a day's hunting as we hide in a system of disguised trenches so that the penguins don't feel threatened. Fabulously cute creatures. Our rather

short stint in Dunedin (only 7 hours) comes to an end as we board a flight to Christchurch where we bunk down for the night before we begin our mammoth journey to London the next day.

Thursday

Christchurch to Sydney, Sydney to Bangkok, Bangkok to Dubai, Dubai to London. Remain in a zombie like state for most of the journey – watching too many chick flicks, listening to too much sappy music and eating too much junk food. The one thing not in excess is sleep.

Friday

Arrive into London 38 hours later, less of a weasel than I thought I would be after such a long journey. As I travel into the city on the tube I get the lonely pang in my tummy for London life, as I do every time I have visited London this year. Take a snooze in the afternoon to try to catch up on some z's and I am glad to be horizontal for a while.

Saturday

Bright as a button at 6am. Staying in the Crown Moran Hotel in Cricklewood, I don't think I have ever been at a hotel breakfast so early. It is hard to believe that this time last year I was in the exact same position as the eleven London finalists in this year's Rose of Tralee search. I feel their excitement, their nerves, their anticipation. Brilliant to see the familiar faces of Shilagh McCarthy, chief organiser of the London Rose of Tralee Centre, Noel O'Sullivan and the rest of the London gang. Also in attendance is the 2007 International Rose of Tralee, Lisa Murtagh, makes up part of the judging panel. I surprise myself at how emotional I find it to be back at the point where the whole Rose of Tralee experience really started to take off for me. I have serious chats in my head to stay composed for the night. One of the finalists is a girl from my hometown of Athy and with whom I used to play tennis as a child. Funny how our paths are now crossing in this way after so many years. At midnight, I am no longer the London Rose, and my successor is declared to be none other than the aforementioned Athy woman, Clare Kambamettu. What a fabulous coincidence!

Sunday

Catch up with some friends in London before flying into Dublin. Collect my car at the Carlton Dublin Airport Hotel and drive home to Athy. Delighted to see Mum and Dad and stay up chatting until the early hours.