

In the Land of OZ

Travel

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I got from the Fijian islands to a mega metropolis somehow in spite of myself (if you know what I mean). It seemed to me that I had spent an unhealthy amount of time in airports lately. I remembered how much I used to enjoy being in an airport, let's say, ten years ago. There seemed to be something magical about each flight. Now, it seemed to be a kind of necessary evil. I was terribly hungry after having spent five hours in the Nadi airport, and, as I had also had to wait a lot in the plane, I was horrified at the thought that my stomach would feel hollow by the time I got to Sydney, especially because my stomach walls were extremely dilated after the Fijian meals. I was swinging from one extreme to the other again and I was wondering how long it was going to last.

Eventually, we took off, and I fell asleep instantly, as I had woken up at 5 a.m., Fijian time, whatever it might be, for my clock and I seemed incapable of coping with the multiple time zone changes anymore. I was definitely beginning to feel that I needed to stay somewhere else for a while. I woke up during the turbulence-stricken flight, and I tried to find comfort in watching a BBC documentary on the tiny screen attached to the chair in the multi-levelled plane in which we were swinging like some windblown jellies. We were passing through an area of atmospheric turbulence when I was being served the midday breakfast, and I felt that the walls of my digestive organ began to shrink even more, as I was losing my appetite by ten thousand km per hour, probably the speed of the plane flying on its way to the biggest Australian city.

In spite of having heard a lot of things about Sydney, I did not really know anything about it. Once in the airport, I was waiting for my luggage till I almost came to the end of my tether, and eventually I picked up my mammoth suitcase full of mountain clothing, which I will probably never wear during this trip, but which on no account could I get rid of. I could not bring myself to throw away my Salewa padded coat and other shabby winter clothes which had once saved my life. It was enough for me that I had left my tent in Auckland, although for a noble cause, taking into consideration that I had left it in the strong, good hands of the mountaineers. Nevertheless, it was hard for me to understand that I had to better learn to detach myself



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from things. And even from creations. For on that camping-like morning, somewhere in the biggest canyon in the world, I was violently struck by the thought that I had left behind my book of drawings from Chile and Argentina somewhere in a prison-hotel in Sydney.

As it was Sydney that I was talking about, I think that the most beautiful moments were a cloudburst somewhere in the harbour near the famous Opera House, my chocolate meeting with a woman from Cluj, and the rainy mornings in a café provided with Internet access and cappuccino, plus a banana bread in the morning of the first sunny day. As for the rest, however impressive their museums of contemporary art, and native history and culture might have been, we were looking forward to leaving Sydney. Life was hectic and the city too big. And as we had been living in the central area, I felt it began to oppress me. Sydney was the King Cross area, with hippies waiting in line to sell vans (cheap light trucks by which travelling people wander through Australia), with the chic restaurants and the welcoming cafés, with the waiters who were all anything but Aussie, with the supermarkets where my BRD card never worked. There were also these tiny but expensive rooms, with porthole-shaped windows on the ceiling, which made me feel I was trapped for life in a cell, the four-person dorms, with a Brazilian who barely spoke English and a Montenegrin who would work and party every night (dirty socks, ballpoint pens, and eyeglasses kept falling from his bed to mine, where I would hide every night wearing ear plugs and eye pads that I had received during the longest flight between Chile and New Zealand).

However, I was safe there, along with my sleeping bag which protected me from the outside world. Nevertheless, the bright side of the dorms (or backpackers' hostels, that is 'cheap' hotels for low-budget travellers) is the fact that they make you go out. And, as the Original Backpackers Lodge on Victoria Street was full of backpackers, although it cost 30 dollars per person, and as we had to huddle together in the kitchen, you really had no choice. But I should not be hypocritical. I like this style. It gives me a sense of community, and it reminds me of the fact that my home, my small flat with the piano I miss so much, was once inhabited by four of us all together. I missed that student hostel spirit I had never truly had. Only that a strange phenomenon was happening in Sydney. As much as I was somewhat afraid that we should have to interact with the tonnes of travellers in the hostel, telling them the same story over and over again, I realised that this phobia was no longer needed, as people seemed not to interact with each other unnecessarily. You could sit down at the same table with anyone and need not exchange glances, which could not have happened in Fiji, where you somehow felt you had to take notice of your table companion. This phenomenon, which develops when you have been travelling long, is so strange. Although you are in the mood to socialise, you wish you did not have to speak to anyone, lest they should ask you, 'So, where from and whereabouts?'. From this point of view, it was perfect, although you had to chat a little with your room-mates. Luckily, the Brazilian hardly knew any English, and my



Portuguese was not worth a fig after the three weeks spent in Rio which now seemed so far away. So there was not much communication after all, just a big smile and the mutual agreement that we should all mind our own business. And this is what we did on Saturday night, when none of us was in the mood for anything, and so we found ourselves reading just like before the term exams, while the neighbourhood resounded with party noise and other amusements.

The following days, while waiting to see if we could get the light truck by which we were supposed to travel north, we moved to another area, a little closer to the centre, within a stone's throw from the Australian Museum, which we eventually got to visit. However, in Sydney we did not feel the same as in Auckland. It was too big, the people were too business-ish, the restaurants too close to one another, the buildings too towering, the biggest-in-the-world IMAX screens too big, the opera too commercial, the contemporary art too ostentatiously environmentalist. Nevertheless, this idea of a living museum in the Museum of Contemporary Art seemed interesting to me: the device by means of which every plant received water through a pipe from another plant which had extra resources reminded me of a balanced system. Here, however, we were dealing with plants, not humans, but the idea was the same. The message was clear: you could get a balanced mechanism not by isolating yourself but by sharing the surplus with the others. This could be the architecture of utopia. But it is a long way to it, if there is any such way. For history, which seems to be almost the same everywhere in the world, tell us about losers and conquerors, about native populations and strong populations who have the technology to bend any will. The struggle for territory exists at both micro and macro level, let alone the struggle for vital space, which is waged starting at the level of a room and building up to that of a country. This was a kind of parallel to Australian history, with its natives who were, to put it mildly, erased from the face of the earth once the British colonisers had arrived. In spite of their Commonwealth, the British can be accused of many things, not that the same had not happened in the Spanish colonies as well. Anyway, the fact that the Australian government apologised to the native population says a lot and nothing. For what is left of the native population, at least on the face of it, is a minority of alcoholics and drug addicts. This is really unfortunate, as their art is superb, with their dots and lines that gave my hope for my own naive art.

But some time has passed since I left Sydney, and the images become more and more blurry. What remains is a vibration from the city with gorgeous architecture, like a perfect sketch, in which the artist struggled to combine, as elegantly as possible, nature with the glass and concrete giants, and luxury yachts with huge bridges. What I still remember from the visit to the famous Sydney opera house is a digital piano, handled by a famous Australian jazz musician, who was playing by himself. I was like a child brought to the Philharmonic for the first time, while the hordes of tourists



were waiting in a huge line just to get into that famous space where opera expressed itself through various concerts, acrobatics, ballet performances, or percussion workshops. Luckily, we had booked for 10 a.m. on Sunday, while it was pouring in the famous harbour near the even more famous opera house. They were commercial in their approach, trying to promote classical music and mainly opera music, but this was not disturbing. My visit had been a must in Sydney, and taking into consideration that it was at the other end of the world, it did not hurt so bad. Anyway, I am now too lazy to describe the Sydney Opera House. I can only say that I was impressed by the fact that a Danish architect had envisioned something so futuristic in the fifties, which eventually helped him win the contest. For ten years were needed to inaugurate the cultural building on whose stage every renowned artist must have stepped at least once in their lives. Anyway, after so much rain and culture for beginners, I took off straight to the biggest IMAX screen in the world, where *Hubble 3D* was on, a 40-minute educational short documentary about the Universe and a space mission, plus an emotional song about the rainbow. The images had been intense, the screen huge, and Leonardo di Caprio's voice like a balm on my numb brain. The world was beautiful seen from out space. We were mere dots in the great plan of the Universe. But my stomach existed too, almost on its own, and it was demanding its rights, however uplifting the ideas of space, void, and miracle of being might have been. And at this point I resumed the cycle of life without work, eventually wondering whether what I was at that moment was called a parasite of society or not. But I got over it fast, once I had to face the extremely expensive reality of Sydney. And thus, we hurried to find a light truck to take us out of the increasingly suffocating metropolis as quickly as possible. This inspired some short stories. Here is one of them:...

(To be continued)

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