

## JOTTINGS FROM DOWN UNDER — 1972

*Eric Arnison*

I started to write a description for the Journal of climbing the highest mountain in Australia — all 7,316 feet of it, but the expedition was so dull (merely a slow slog for six hours in the face of a cold wind, up a gently angled snow slope), that it obviously had no entertainment value for anyone; it was even a poor 71st birthday present to myself. Well, perhaps not much entertainment value, except that Tim and I were ill provided with gear, not even a pair of long-johns (see *Fell and Rock Journal*, 1970), nor had we any food. The former we overcame by wearing all our summer shirts (three of 'em), topped off with a cagoule and windproof trousers. We had hoped to pick up some food at Higgins Hole, but this Australian Ski Resort was completely devoid of life at its off-season time; so we begged what we could from the occupants of two parked cars, with some success, and we proceeded at the rate of one very dry cream cracker each half-hour, and two very passé iced cakes for afters. The stone-built refuge hut, two hours before the summit, showed that the last occupants had been three Roman Catholic priests doing a long distance ski tour. We had five minutes for a cracker and then progressed to the Summit for no view whatsoever.

So, we'll switch to bears: the first type because of the press account from an alert young reporter who heard me telling a Police Superintendent-naturalist-pal, after the Court was over, the following incident which took place earlier in the holiday, which included a stop over in California.

'I was never so frightened in my life, as when going to get my climbing boots out of the back of the car at Ahwahnee Lodge, prior to a climb near the famed El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, I saw a damned great bear snuffling about amongst the stones beside the car park. 'I raised my eyebrows, made suggestions of defensive tactics, but I shot back into the Hotel, with no heroics.'

Well, the Reporter made it into a grizzly bear, which it was not; and I was credibly assured, later on, that it was a brown bear, and harmless too.

The next type of bear was the koala. Like my grizzly they

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are a bit of a swindle as they are not bears at all, despite their appearance of being cuddly dwarf bears; no! they are marsupials carrying their young in a pouch in accordance with the popular Australian habit. Our friends at Toowoomba had a colony around their house. The beasties live only on the tender tips of young eucalyptus trees, and the dim witted creatures do not move as their food grows less, they prefer to starve to death. At Toowoomba they had a thriving colony (plenty of tips) of about forty, and I was able to get some good photographs of the attractive looking creatures.

The other 'Bares' were the very attractive and beautiful bronzed girls on the Manly and Bondi beaches; they all wore bikinis, but these were most demure garments, quite unrevealing. The reason? There are Beach Inspectors who have authority to turn them off the golden sands if their costumes are too provocative to male eyes. This is related somehow, but I cannot quite work it out, to the egg laying mammals, the spiny anteater and duck billed platypus, both unique to Australia. We saw both in their wild state.

From the cool of the Pacific Ocean beaches, we took our self-drive acreage of metal, provided by Mr. Hertz, to a cattle ranch on the Darling Downs, where Andy McWilliams runs his herds of Aberdeen Angus steers in bunches of five hundred, and visits some of his outlying lands in his private Cessna. And then on to the Opal Mines at Lightning Ridge near the Victoria border. Here the dust was really trying, especially to the distaff side. By playing on the kindly feelings and thirst of a miner called Val, I spent some hours underground — descending by a swinging ladder strangely like Bar Pot — hoping to dig a super gem. Val dismissed any hard won efforts as 'trash', but I was able to buy a few opals at reasonable prices, and have since had them made up into rings for my girls. Lightning Ridge was like a film set for the Westerns — clap board shacks and primitive camps for the miners and one each of Church, Police Station, Cemetery and Pub (I even saw opals being traded in for drinks).

We retraced our steps, stopping on the way back to Sydney. We descended a well lighted and cool cavern — 'organ pipes', 'wedding veil' and 'angel wings', it had the lot; we also had a splendid day's walk in the National Park forest of Warrombungle with its curious 'breadknife' 500 foot rock pinnacle, complete with awful warnings about not climbing it — although it looked extremely interesting I was law abiding.



Moreover the 'Wineries' of the Barossa Valley called. A great area, this fertile valley near Adelaide, where a Doctor Penfold founded the wine growing industry more than a century ago (old by Australian standards). The firm of his name still flourishes and dispenses free wine at 'tastings'. Many of the growers, as we also noticed in the Californian wine fields, are of German and Austrian origin — dare one suggest that those countries must have had convicts too! The small 'Wineries' — one thousand bottle jobs — were probably the most interesting, as the producers are still experimenting with their types of wine, and liked to have one's views on their products. Visions of lip licking fellow members.

If you bring yourself to ask people who are interested, really interested, about their jobs, they will usually tell you lots of interesting things. I had fished all day near Launceston in Tasmania, caught nothing and finally gave it best, seeking consolation in a milkshake supplied by a little garage man. Opposite was a *wild life park*, so I wandered into it and presently asked a chap who was feeding the animals about some dingos. He turned out to be the boss, and was properly proud of the wild animals he had successfully bred in captivity, not the least being the Tasmanian devils, a cross in appearance between a black bull terrier and a huge rat, with villainous inset teeth. The devil's method of killing his victim, is to take hold of a tender protruding appendage with these locking teeth and hang on until death does them part.

The zoo man explained how the kangaroos bring up their young, an exciting procedure for all concerned. The few weeks old embryo makes its way over land and fur from the seat of birth to the pouch where it fastens onto a nipple small enough to match itself! it hangs on and grows in size until it is big enough to pop out of the pouch and feed off the grass — popping back again to sleep and rest and perhaps take a mouthful of milk. Meantime, another small 'Joey' has been awaiting his turn and by the same method of progression takes over the small so far unused teat. It is a continuous process for the female kangaroo. No wonder she goes hopping mad at times.

We came home in one continuous flight of 33 hours — a method not to be recommended, particularly being pitchforked from brilliant sunshine into slush and snow; moreover, 'jet lag' almost prevented my writing these jottings, perhaps it would have been better if it had.