

**Australia and Fiji
Vacation of a Lifetime
June 14 – July 6, 2014**

Wow! This was a great trip! We had one part of our vacation in a ‘winter’ spot, another one in a ‘summer’ spot, and the last part of the vacation in the tropics! Unique, splendid, and probably never to be experienced this way again. I am in love with Australia, and even more in love with Fiji.

Sydney, Australia



Sydney Opera House from across the bay

First we flew from L.A. to Sydney. It was a very long flight, but we went first class and may never again be able to fly economy again! Sydney is the metropolitan capital of Australia. This is one sophisticated city with quite sophisticated people too. Yes, it has that gorgeous **2007 World Heritage Site Opera House** which is on many pictures and postcards you see of the Australian continent. But there is much more to Sydney than just that gorgeous Opera House. There is the 958 acre **Royal National Park**...right in the middle of the city. Then there is the **National Botanic Gardens** with over 45,000 different plants and birds singing galore—right in the middle of the city. There are walking and biking paths everywhere, along with views of the harbor from every location in the city. There are 30 beeches within the city limits of Sydney, and even though we were there during their winter months, we just had to visit the world-famous **Bondi Beach**.



Bonnie on Bondi Beach

Bruce and I stayed in an area along the water called “The Rocks”, which is where in 1788 over 800 ships landed, completely filled with English convicts (all the first settlers were convicts). But now the area is the business and cultural center of Sydney. Our hotel room overlooked the harbor and we had a perfect view of the **Sydney Opera House**. I would get up in the middle of the night (you can attribute that partially to jet lag) and stare at the harbor lights, the boats and that **Opera House**. Because of the way our suite was laid out, Bruce could get up at 4 AM and watch the *World Cup Soccer Matches* while I soundly slept away on the most comfortable hotel mattress I have ever had the pleasure of sleeping on. We had a corner room in our hotel so we could look at the city on the hill in one direction, and the yachts, barges, sail boats and the **Opera House** out the other windows. Despite the four million people who live in the city, no one every treated us with anything but respect (even when we looked the wrong way before crossing streets...these people do drive on the left-hand side of the street like all the other English colonial locations in this world!); we never heard a car use its horn (they told us they do not use horns unless a car accident is imminent); and no one seemed in a hurry ever. Why would you rush and push and get mad at others when you are driving around in continual beauty? And everyone seemed to walk, bike, or drive these little wee cars. I never fell in love with a city so much as I did Sydney.

OK. **The Opera House**. I thought my heart would burst. We heard *Emanuel Ax* at the piano playing *Beethoven's Emperor Concerto*; the acoustics were heart-stopping so it is no wonder the jammed-packed audience gave him almost 20 ovations. Hearing his concert was a gift of a lifetime.

We stayed almost a week in Sydney, and I almost cried when we had to leave. This is quite unlike me; I almost always prefer wilderness and few people. But this city is vibrant and culture-filled with plenty of outdoor activities to get that heart rate racing.

The Great Barrier Reef National Park, Daintree Rainforest National Park, and Cape Tribulation

We flew to **Cairns** before picking up our rental car to drive north to **Port Douglas** where we rented a large house with a swimming pool for the family—Troy and Seth, their wives, and the four grandkids, and us. Of course this was a very special time in our three+ week vacation.



The gathering of the clan in Australia

The scenery was glorious. But what made it special was having the kids and grandkids with us to share everything. Bruce and the boys were responsible for locating sites for us to visit, so we went swimming, crabbing, snorkeling, hiking, and birding. It was quite rural, so crowds were non-existent. That made it all the more wonderful. Many of the beaches, which stretched as far as the eye could see, we had all to ourselves! Of course many of the residents in this part of Australia were muscle-men, motorcycle riders, with beards and bellies to match.

In 1981 the United Nations designated the **Great Barrier Reef a World Heritage** site. Most of the reefs are just 40 miles off the mainland, but where we went was much further out in the ocean. I believe that **Agincourt Reef** is the further reef from shore, and the only way to get there is traveling on a 300-passanger boat for several hours. The size of the boat made traveling safe (although the water was very very choppy), but not exactly tourist-free. The **Great Barrier Reef Marine Park** covers an area larger than all of Great Britain, and forms the largest living feature on earth...you can see it from space. But the water was cold as an icicle. OK. Others did not see it that way, but I was lucky to stay in the water a total of 20 minutes before yelling 'uncle'. Cody stayed in longer than me, but this was one grandchild who felt the water temperature as I did...pretty much unbearably cold. Most of the family seemed to love swimming and snorkeling there for hours. The corals and fishes were stunning, so I was thrilled that Pauline, Bruce, and I also went in a submersible to view nature at its finest, and take some good pictures of a few of the 400 types of corals that exist there.

(Australian natives tease us visitors, saying that of the world's 10 most dangerous animals, 15 of them are in Australia. You will see why as you read further down this page).

Daintree Rainforest in **Daintree National Park** is one of the few continually surviving rainforests in the world, and is a biodiversity hotspot. It is a **World Heritage Wet Tropics Region**. This rainforest contains half of Australian's bird species. This is where we heard the alien-sound of the *Victoria's Riflebird*. Troy, Bruce and I, who were alone when we heard this bird, did not see the bird among the trees, but the sound was so other-worldly, and so like nothing I have ever heard, except on the movie screens with alien creatures, that hearing it was special enough.

Of course we took a **Daintree River** cruise to see crocodiles up close; crocodiles are the largest land animal in Australia. Most rivers have crocodiles, which is why people don't swim in their rivers. Many of these creatures live in the ocean so some beaches prove an unsafe place to catch a tan. On this river cruise we also saw the *Archer "jumping fish"*. This may sound silly, but these fish were so entertaining that none of us wanted to leave (I think this might have been Seth's favorite site). Food is placed on a rope connecting the shore to the boat. These fish spit water up to the food, which then falls into the water where they can grab it. It was like watching people toss freebees for dogs to catch: a funny and mesmerizing treat!

Cassowaries are huge flightless birds you can see on the TV nature channels. They are very dangerous and with their middle claws can rip a man's chest open, killing him on the spot. I didn't really want to see any of these creatures anymore than I wanted to see tons of crocodiles in the wild. But, when with family members, you must accommodate their idea of thrills and hide your own idea of death-by-clawing-from-a-flightless-bird. We saw these prehistoric birds twice!!! The ones we saw were not fully grown, and didn't chase us through the wilderness, but, still, it was a little unsettling. Sandy, Seth, Troy, and the grandkids loved it. I mean, they loved it. Sandy took a video of one of the birds...she was that close! The woman has courage!

Before we left **Port Douglas** Maya, Nora, and Ginger made a Harry-Potter-type one-half hour video which was hilarious and very creative. No one can worry about the next generation when you see this type of talent in kids who are just now beginning their teen-age years.

Fiji

We then flew from Australia to the middle of the **Pacific Ocean** to **Fiji**, and then took a boat to the island of **Malolo** where we stayed for eight nights at the **Likuliku Lagoon Resort**.



Picture of the pool overlooking the sea



Bruce fishing on the beach in Fiji

Bruce and I never thought we would like lying around every day for over a week: sea fishing; kayaking; hiking over island mountains top; eating gourmet meals morning, noon, and night; watching the ocean for hours at a time; and then going snorkeling at least once a day off the balcony of our *Bure* (which is an over-the-water-‘hotel suite’). Yes, we left the family in Australia, and took this part of the vacation alone. There were only 48 other couples at this resort. There was no motorized sports equipment, no children, no man-made roller-coasters or other Disney – like contraptions. It was pure island-living at its finest. And the natives here were amazing; they were the kindest, gentlest, most gracious, and happy people we ever met on any of our trips. We ate desserts twice a day and didn’t gain a pound because the fresh produce and fish probably had no preservatives or other chemical components. The resort was immaculate too.



Bonnie snorkeling below our bungalow balcony

I snorkeled pretty much alone in this huge lagoon, looking for examples of the 1200 varieties of reef fish and the 398 types of coral species. The water was close to bathtub luke-warm (probably not that warm but after the **Great Barrier Reef** this water felt “wonderfully-Bonnie-friendly”). I loved seeing brain-coral, cabbage-coral, digitate corals, staghorn and branching corals covering the bottom of this 1,000+ acre lagoon. **Fiji** has over 300 islands. We saw many of them as we traveled by boat around the area. What else can I say except we see another island snorkeling vacation in our future.

Bonnie Orkow
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