

Sunday 11 March – Sydney & Balmain Peninsula 24° – Sunny and partly cloudy



Lovely weather again and today we met up with Robert and Claire and took the harbour ferry (11 aus\$ return) to Balmain Peninsula. In the last 20 years Robert has worked and lived in England, Los Angeles, France and for the last five years in Australia. They have three teenage daughters and although Rick has caught up with Robert a few times I hadn't seen him for ages and we have never met Claire before. The houses in Balmain were originally built in Victorian times for the workers and now they are quite sought after, there was a lovely relaxed atmosphere. We had lunch in a pub and then popped into see one of Claire's friend's who was holding an art exhibition in The Balmain Watch House. The house was interesting as it was used as a local lock-up until 1925. Robert and Rick did quite a bit of reminiscing and we remembered the time in Munich when in a fancy restaurant we were brought a selection of starters in little dishes. Robert and I were the only brave ones to try the bowl of green jelly. I gagged as it was absolutely disgusting and then a few minutes later the waiter came and set light to it!!! Claire and Robert haven't found it particularly easy to find permanent jobs in Australia but are now sorted and the girls are settled in their schools. They are not sure where they will end up, they didn't like Los Angeles, France was okay but they couldn't see themselves living there long term even though their daughters went to school there but they think Australia is a good country for children to grow up in. After we said goodbye to them we walked the long way back through the Botanical Gardens. Rick is fascinated by the birds, there are Ibis with their long curved beaks everywhere especially in the rubbish bins and we did manage to see some of the fruit bats hanging upside down in the trees. Back at Springfield Lodge I skyped the family and had a long chat to Jen, the birthday girl. Oh yes, we have decided to upgrade our hotel to one with a window you can see out of so this is our last night here.



Monday 12 March – “Somewhere Unique” in the Hunter Valley 24° – Sunny and partly cloudy



Lorne and Carolyn have treated us to a luxury break in the Hunter Valley. Incidentally, the area that their house backs onto is not called a wood but is the “bush” that leads down to a creek which runs into the River Hawksbury that we crossed on the way. Wollombi general stores and post office couldn't have changed much since it opened. It's very much like the one street towns we found on our Rolute 66 trip. The post office has pigeon holes for each house and bric-a-brac is displayed alongside the tins of spaghetti. A hearty burger lunch washed down with a glass of Dr Jurd's Jungle Juice (brandy and port) was had at the pub. I don't think I have ever seen a menu with so many variations of burger.



“Somewhere Unique” is two retreats some distance apart, very much in the style of an upmarket Centrepark, in the middle of the countryside. Most of the outside was glass to enable you to enjoy the wonderful views. It was eco friendly as far as possible with solar panels and rainwater collected in huge containers. The bed was enormous, the mattress and pillows wonderfully comfortable and the sheets were luxurious thick cotton, would we ever want to get up. There was soft background music playing and candles everywhere. Caroline had organised the fridge to be stocked with enough food to keep us going, all of which was produced locally. It's mostly used for honeymoon couples and it was fully stocked with board games, dvd's, cd's and books. The bathroom was amazing and the products all used locally grown lavender and the towels were so thick you almost needed two hands to lift them. They had even left seed to feed the colourful, noisy birds. We did a couple of trips on the bicycles but I fell off trying to negotiate our steep drive. Such a change from our Arcadia cabin and a million miles apart from The Springfield Hotel, although that hotel did have some good points. We would never have seen so much or walked so far if we had stayed in the centre. However, after staying there I never realised how much difference having a lot of light makes.



We were so greedy and it's a good job we were only there for two nights as we ate and drank loads. Rick has had to give his gin to Lorne because even though we are down to the amount we could take back legally we are going to be well overweight and it's £60 a kilo excess luggage. Lorne and Carolyn are keen on fine wines and food and the next day we went wine tasting at Hungerford Hill vineyard. The girl was most generous and informative and I explained that I didn't like Chardonnay. She said that most of her friends are “ABC”, Anything but Chardonnay, and that is because they have only tasted the ones stored in oak. She had a fantastic chart that showed the different types of grape and the change in taste after being stored for different periods or in different ways. Rick thought that the bottle Lorne bought tasted of dead mouse! We've been on kangaroo watch and it was first to spot one. We all shouted together as we saw two sitting in a garden then we all realised at the same time that they weren't real ones but we did get to see about four in five in a field on the way back to the retreat. Even though we had a full breakfast, cereal, yoghurt, eggs, bacon the lot we decided that the restaurant looked very inviting. The meal was



amazing, the standard of cooking in Australia is very high.

A few hours later we had steaks on the barbecue with salad and more and more really good wines. Lorne tried out the gin and tonic but Carolyn stuck to wine. After another big breakfast we stopped at Brooklyn on the Hawksbury River on the way back. There's a little island called Dangar just offshore where the inhabitants have to use a small boat to get to and fro the mainland. We had lunch at a favourite little fish restaurant of Carolyn and Lorne's. Fresh creamy oysters, locally caught prawns and fish with hand made chips and salad. It's going to take me months to get all this weight off!!!

For our last two days we have booked into The Mercure in Potts Point, we have decided it's worth paying twice as much as The Springfield Lodge. Everything in Australia is a lot more expensive than at home but it's all relative as our minimum wage is £6.08 whereas the Australian minimum wage is approx £10.80. I'm thinking it's better to have shorter more luxurious breaks rather than these long periods away where we have scrimp all the time.

Thursday 15 March – Sydney and Manly 26° – Sunny and partly cloudy



Can't believe we've been so lucky with the weather, it's going to be wet again from tomorrow and today is our last full day. Even though we have doubled the cost of our accommodation it still is in backbacker land and faces various nightclubs, however, we are comfortable and have plenty of space. The internet connection is a bit dodgy and Rick is having to hold his mobile above his head and near the window. This is especially important as he has discovered Facebook and needs to reply to the many requests for him to be friends. Took the ferry to the seaside resort of Manly, it has lots of 1930's buildings. Once again we are very surprised that they don't have much shade on the beach although this time there were umbrellas to rent. The sea was cold and difficult to swim in as it is more suited to surfing. Had our last Aussie fish and chip lunch.

Well this is it, we have to now try and get our luggage down to 20kgs each, I'll have to leave some of my old clothes although they don't actually weigh that much. Before we go we must check where Arcadia is and send our best wishes to Hilly, Stu, David and Lisa. We also have to thank Lorne and Carolyn for giving us such a special few days. We hope to visit Australia again in about three to four years time and do a trip up the Gold Coast in a motorhome. We have been away for 67 nights and I suppose we are just about ready to go home again. There is lots to look forward to but especially catching up family and friends and seeing all the spring flowers. Hope you have enjoyed cruising with us.