

A tour down under inspired by a popular novel

Travel writers Richard and Mary Magruder of Atlanta recently toured the outback of Australia on a Thorn Birds Tour, designed by author Colleen McCullough to lead travelers through the settings of her novel, "The Thorn Birds." This was an inaugural tour sponsored by the Australian Travel Service and Qantas Airways.

By RICHARD and MARY MAGRUDER

Who better than writer Colleen McCullough to show American visitors around much of the vast Australian outback, setting of her best-selling novel, "The Thorn Birds." The successful author has written a vivid brochure describing the itinerary.

Most brochure writers indulge themselves with such hackneyed clichés as "land of contrast," "hide-away retreat." Not so Colleen McCullough, who recounts the sites and sights, the places and genuine panoramas of the outback of New South Wales and Queensland and far north to the Great Barrier Reef. She is writing of the land of her childhood, the settings of her sweeping novel.

Our tour started in Sydney, where we boarded the comfortable Central West Express train. It's 300 miles to the town of Orange, and another 45 to Dubbo, in central New South Wales.

Following the approximate route of the Cleary family in "The Thorn Birds," the fully modernized train tracks through magnificent canyon country and the Great Dividing Range, Australia's rugged, eastern continental divide.

The Sydney suburbs give way to open country. Hills soon become real mountains. The train winds through the New South Wales sheep country, cutting through vast sheep stations, sprawling ranches devoted almost entirely to wool production and the raising of sheep.

At Orange, we boarded a bus, our steed for the next full week of wandering.

LATE THE FIRST afternoon in the outback, we took a cross-country safari on the boundless sheep station of Ian Lyons, our truck jockey and loquacious host. As sunset approached, we topped a barren hillock overlooking the rolling New South Wales plains, and stood transfixed as mobs of kangaroos bounded around below our station.

That night we put up at the Country Club Motel in Dubbo, and joined a coterie of local dignitaries at the Returned Servicemen's League (RSL) Clubhouse.



The RSL clubs, nationwide, often provide the nucleus of community life. Most have good-to-excellent restaurants, regular parties and dances, slot machines for diversion, occasional jackpots, and numerous athletic programs and facilities.

The country inns and small-town hotels in Australia all provide coffee and tea for the making in each room, along with individual toasters and irons, and prefer that guests order meals through room service.

First full day in the outback, or group visited nearby sheep stations, shearing sheds, auctions and wool factories around Dubbo, breaking the day's strenuous activities with a sumptuous barbecue luncheon in an open-air pavilion at the Western Plains Zoo.

From Dubbo, we motored west along the McQuarie River, passing great, galloping flock of emus (Australia's gangling cousin to the ostrich) and more kangaroos, to fetch up at the tiny town of Narromine, in west-central New South Wales.

We spent a couple of delightful hours at the lovely homestead called Mungeribar, very possibly the model for Ms. McCullough's Drogheda in her book. During the first week of the journey, we had tea or lunch as the guests of families in the outback. We visited other sheep or cattle stations and mining encampments.

NO VISIT was more warming and pleasurable than the morning spent on the 15,000-acre spread of Charley and Mandi Onus, the gracious homestead Wilgabah. In their mid-20s, these young people are the personification of the hardy, generous pioneers

who populate the outback of New South Wales and Queensland.

Mandi Onus is a Sydney city girl and Charley a city-educated boy, once a professional rugby player, born at Wilgabah and now running the entire spread with help only from Mandi and three or four visiting sheep dogs. The Onuses somehow manage to run 5,000 sheep and 500 head of cattle by themselves.

The deeper we penetrated the bush, the more foreign and unfamiliar became the landscapes and the ever-more-isolated places. The names were now pure aboriginal, or derived from aborigine places: Mungindi, Gilgandra, Eumungerie, Goondiwindi.

Then, without warning or preparation, up popped Lightning Ridge. Wedged into the far northwestern corner of New South Wales, it is a raw, hardnosed, brawling frontier town whose sole industry is the digging out, classifying, often shaping and mounting and selling of opals.

One of Australia's two main opal mining communities (the other is Coober Pedy, a thousand miles south), Lightning Ridge is as rough as its name sounds, a scraggly little outpost surrounded by the vast, punctured opal fields and their residue.

Here we scrambled about, looking for our own opals, clambering down into working mine shafts and underground burrows, some fitted out with jewelry stores, motion picture theaters and snack bars.

Heading now almost due east after eight days in the outback, we veered into southern Queensland, glad for the pioneer experience, grateful to Ms. McCullough for exposing this uncut diamond, yet

happy enough to end that ninth day in Brisbane. Brisbane is the third largest city in Australia and a prosperous port a few miles inland from the Pacific.

Nearby Lone Pine Animal Sanctuary is a haven for the largest exhibits of koalas and kangaroos in the world, and for dozens of other exotic creatures found only in the Australia/New Zealand and South Pacific latitudes.

In Brisbane, we boarded a Trans Australia Airlines jet for the thousand-mile flight north to the tropics (remember, Australia has its seasons on backwards, as well as its latitudes), to Cairns.

During our three nights up north, we visited a Great Barrier Reef island, similar to the one Meg Cleary retreated to in "The Thorn Birds," cruised the edges of the Reef, inspected the vast fishing fleet that calls Cairns home and took an all-day train trip several thousand feet up onto the Atherton Tableland.

En route, we chugged through some of the most luxuriant stands of sugarcane in the world, rode beneath thunderous, wondrous waterfalls, and saw one of Australia's most beautiful and scenic highland regions.

Sydney is a stunning place to have begun and, now, to end a most uncommon and captivating tour, down under and outback.



travel log
Iris Jones
contributing travel editor

Keep abreast of the options

Whenever a reader asks my advice, I learn something new about travel. Sometimes it is an ordinary piece of information the reader thought I already knew. Sometimes I learn that I have some readily available information that other people don't know about. Either way, we both win.

A Birmingham reader called me this week about traveling from Detroit to Montreal. He flies there at least once a week about from Metropolitan airport, with a two-hour layover in Toronto.

It had never occurred to him that he could fly from Windsor. I suggested he call Air Canada, and sure enough, there is one flight a day directly from Windsor to Montreal.

It doesn't take much longer to get to the Windsor airport than it does to drive to Metropolitan, so he ended up saving a lot of time.

Since I travel in Canada a lot, I took it for granted that everybody knew of the flight.

On the other hand, I am not as experienced as some of my readers in Caribbean cruises. When a reader from Livonia called to ask me about a specific cruise, I told her how to find the information although I did not personally have it at my fingertips.

In the course of our conversation, I learned that tourists can visit cruise ships lined up at the dock in Miami on any Saturday night while the cruise ships are boarding.

You don't need a reservation and it doesn't cost you any money. Just climb aboard, have a cocktail and a canape, and look over the accommodations. The cruise ships sell a lot of passages that way and the customers are glad to have the preview.

A Farmington reader, who wanted to fly to California, rent a car, and drive up the coast and into Nevada called me about finding the cheapest flight west. I told her to call two airlines and then two travel agents before making a decision.

Today she learned about what are called open-jaw flights. She booked a cut-rate flight to Las Vegas with a return flight from Reno. Open-jaw means that she can use the return portion of her cut-rate ticket in Reno because it is still in the state of Nevada.

She can also apply the same different-destination in-state thinking to a rental car. If she rented a car, drove to California and dropped it off there, she would be charged an extra \$100 to cover the cost of having the rental car driven back across the mountains and the desert.

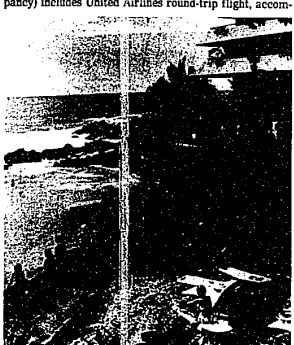
This way, she will rent the car in Las Vegas, drive it in California, drive it back across the mountains to Reno and fly home, saving the \$100-across-the-desert rental fee.

The islands are beckoning again

Snorkeling in the bay where Captain James Cook anchored his ship, it's easy to understand why Hawaiians treasure their islands.

It's harder to understand why they're willing to share it so abundantly with tourists. But share it they do with an abundance of cheer and pineapples.

The Observer & Eccentric's two-week tour in November of four of the islands — Oahu, Kauai, Maui and Hawaii — can be as leisurely or as frenetic as you like. The tour package of \$1,268 per person (based on double occupancy) includes United Airlines round-trip flight, accom-



The tidal pool adjacent to the Kona Hilton on the big island of Hawaii offers some protection from the rough surf for those who want a salty taste of the ocean without the buffeting. The hotel also is the site of an end-of-the-tour luau, where roast pig is served fresh from an imu (earth oven). (Staff photo)

modations, inter-island jet transportation, all baggage handling and transfers.

But if you really want to make like a tourist, you can pop for as many as 20 optional sight-seeing ventures, varying in price, such as a tour of Pearl Harbor and/or nightclubbing on Oahu, the Haleakala volcano crater on Maui, or a visit to the black sand beaches on the Big Island.

All the information you'll need is available at the orientation briefing session on your first five days on Oahu, after your first night in the Hawaiian Hilton in Waikiki, the hub of Oahu action. Those first five days may be filled with touring, such as the Polynesian Cultural Center, shopping in the International Market Place or getting a start on a gorgeous tan.

THE PACE slows on Kauai, the "Garden Isle," where you'll spend three days at the Coco Palms, the scene of a legendary torch lighting ceremony every evening.

Scenes from "South Pacific" were filmed on Kauai, and the resort itself was built in the midst of an ancient coconut grove. Elvis is reputed to have slept in the honeymoon suite, where 17 windows overlook the lily-filled lagoons. If you exhausted yourself on Oahu, Kauai's the place to rest.

Three days scarcely are enough time to spend on Maui, where all those photos of glistening beaches were taken. Contrast marks the island, where you can shop in the old village of Lahaina, now a tourist center, or head out to the other side of the island where waterfalls dot the landscape and Charles Lindbergh got away from it all in Hana.

The final stop is Kona, the resort area of the big island of Hawaii, the newest island of the chain with lava-encrusted terrain testimony to the island's active volcano.

The Big Island is where you may take a coast cruise to Kealahou Bay, where Cook first landed, visit Volcano National Park (the site of Hawaii's most recent eruptions), or stretch out on the black sand beaches where the surf has pounded lava into final grains of black sand. The 420-foot drop of Akaka Falls is another don't miss.

Sponsored in conjunction with Hamilton, Miller, Hudson & Fayne Travel, the trip will leave from Metro Airport Nov. 1 and return to Detroit Nov. 16. For more information, call the travel desk of the Observer & Eccentric at 591-2300, ext. 244, during business hours.

tripping

Festival time in GR

• The 10th annual Grand Rapids arts festival, "Festival '80" will be held in Grand Rapids June 5-7. It begins with a 1,200-member massed band led by Dr. Leonard Smith of the Detroit Concert Band, at noon that Thursday on Calder Plaza.

Several dozen artists will work under a large circus tent during the three-day event to give festival-goers a hands-on art experience.

Activities are free, although artists will accept donations when applicable.

"The festival will include a variety of children's activities, including a paint-in and a glue-in.

Closing ceremonies will feature the Bethel Pentecostal Choir of Grand Rapids at 5 p.m. June 7 and will include "The March of the Chairs." Spectators will close the festival by carrying their own folding chair to a waiting truck, from where the borrowed chairs will be returned to their owners.

For more information, contact the Arts Council of Greater Grand Rapids, 17 Fountain St., Grand Rapids 49503, or call 1-616-454-9221.

• Timberline Race Race June 7 on the Saginaw River near Saginaw.

• The world's longest breakfast table, at which about 18,000 people are expected to sit, June 14 at Battle Creek's Michigan Mall. Part of the Cereal Festival there June 12-15.

• Voyageurs and Fur Traders Rendezvous July 4-6 at Fort Michilimackinac in Mackinac Island, Polk Festival July 4-6 in Muskegon.

• International Frisbee Tournament July 5-6 at Atlantic Mine, three miles south of Houghton in the UP.

• World's Second Largest Garage Sale July 19-20 in Royal Oak.

• Buffalo Barbecue, Mecosta Memorial Hospital fund-raising project, Aug. 8-10 in Stanwood.

• Magic Get Together Aug. 13-16 in Colon.

• Paw Paw Grape and Wine Festival is Sept. 12-14.