

TRAVEL

Youthful traveler loves visit to Down Under

BY SARAH WESTRICK
SPECIAL WRITER

Sarah Westrick of Livonia is a ninth grader at Churchill High School in Livonia. This is her account of a trip she took earlier this summer.

From June 29 to July 16, I had the privilege of going on a trip to Australia with 40 of my peers. I went with an organization called People to People Student Ambassadors.

President Dwight Eisenhower founded People to People in 1956. He believed that individuals reaching out in friendship to people of other countries could contribute significantly to world peace. The program's goal is to have students return home with a better understanding of world affairs and a genuine respect for their country.

Delegations from all over the United States and Canada travel to various places around the world. This year, the Wayne-Oakland County delegation traveled to Australia.

During my three-week trip, we made our way down the east coast from Cairns to Sydney.

From Michigan, we flew to Los Angeles, and after a two-hour layover, we had a 14-hour flight to Sydney. To complete the very long journey, our last flight was from Sydney to Cairns.

We arrived in Cairns in the afternoon. Outside the airport, we were greeted by waving palm trees and mountains covered with lush green trees. It was very beautiful. The rest of the day, nothing else was planned, so I rested. At night, we went to the beach to see the sunset.

For the next few days, we were very busy. We took a gondola sky-ride over the rain forests. From up there, you can see all of Cairns and the coastline. On the other side of the mountain, there was a small Australian cultural center. There we saw Aborigines perform traditional aboriginal dances. They also demonstrated how to throw a boomerang and a spear and how to play a didgeridoo, a musical instrument made from a long, hollowed-out piece of timber. You play a didgeridoo by blowing through it. At the center, called Rainforestation, we got to hold koalas. The marsupials, which look like small bears, were cute, but they smelled strongly of eucalyptus leaves.

The very next day, we headed



Billabong: A standing pool of water in the Australian outback near the town of Charter Towers. The typical Australian billabong involves an intermittent river that flows only after heavy rains.



Koala encounter: Sarah Westrick of Livonia visits the animals at Billabong Sanctuary just outside of Townsville, Australia.

miles of bush and a couple of stray trees.

We went to Billabong Sanctuary outside of Townsville. It was a small zoo with all kinds of animals native to Australia. We saw kangaroos, koalas, wombats, kookaburras. We got to hand-feed the kangaroos, too.

While we were traveling to South Molle Island, we stopped in a city called Ayr. There we met with government officials from the Burdekin Shire Council and received an official civic welcome.

For two nights, we stayed at South Island, which is part of the Whitsunday Islands. It was a tropical paradise. We climbed to the highest point on the island, and we had a 360-degree view of the whole place.

Next we stopped in a small town called Yeppoon for a night. Yeppoon is home to Olsen's Capricorn Caverns. The caverns are a large chain of open caves. We took a tour, and I learned lots of things about caves.

That night, we visited a crocodile farm. The crocs were huge. For dinner there, you could try some crocodile soup. I decided to try a little... it tasted a bit like chicken but chewy. Later on, while it was dark, we tried to spot crocs' eyes with flashlights.

I had fun that night even though I jumped a few times.

In the final week, we split up,

for the Great Barrier Reef. We took a large boat out to a huge floating dock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Once I changed into my bathing suit and collected my mask, snorkel and flippers, I was ready to go.

After I jumped in, I was in awe over how spectacular it was down there. I saw a lot of colorful fish, some as small as my pinkie finger and others that were 50 pounds or more. There was such a variety of colors, shapes and sizes.

The coral was exactly the same - such a variety. It was filled with many colors like blues, greens, yellows, browns and pinks. All were unique, with a definite shape. For example, staghorn coral looks like deer antlers, and brain coral really looks like a brain. That is an experience I will never forget.

Over the second week, we went to the outback on a farm stay in Charter Towers. There isn't much out there, just miles and

and each person in my group stayed the weekend with an Australian family in Gladstone. It was a good way to learn about the everyday life of a family there.

Another girl in our group and I stayed with the Davie family. They had a daughter my age, Jemma. While staying with Jemma, we went to a dance at her school. We also visited the Tropic of Capricorn, went to an Australian mall and a McDonald's, which was very much like our McDonald's here in Michigan.

On our travels from Gladstone to Sydney, we visited the Cape Byron Lighthouse in Byron Bay and also Rainbow Beach, famous for its variety of colored sands.

The last couple of days we spent in Sydney. It's a beautiful city. We went to the Visitor Center where the Sydney 2000 Olympic complex is being built. We toured the famous Sydney Opera House, viewed the Harbour Bridge and also spent an evening at Planet Hollywood.

Our trip came to an end in Sydney, and we flew from there to Los Angeles and then home to Michigan.

This whole experience was educational and rewarding, and I am proud to have had the opportunity to represent our country as a People to People Student Ambassador.



Sydney: One of the many new structures being prepared for the 2000 Olympics.



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