

From the Kitchen

13 October 2010



This should be called ‘From the Galley’, as I am sitting twixt two of those on a Boeing 777 somewhere over the Timor Sea, on the way to Kuala Lumpur, on the way to Europe. Close to twenty-four hours stuck in an aeroplane to spend two weeks on the other side of the world.

It makes me think of those thousands of people who travelled the same distance in the other direction, over two hundred years ago, and they were stuck in cramped conditions for some eight months, surrounded by filth and illness and unsure if they would be landed alive or dead in what is now called Port Jackson. Many had no choice about taking the journey but there were those who travelled to make a new life for themselves, some with the hope of new wealth. They had little information about where they were going and were often misled about the conditions they would meet when they arrived.

I feel I was misled by expected conditions. UK immigration officers are on strike and the baggage carousel is stuck. No baggage – yet. It continues to amaze me that so many people will stand in the aisle of the plane as soon as it has landed, and stand and stand and wait for the doors to open so they can get to immigration and baggage claim. These same people now are standing with hands in pockets and muttering at the stationary carousel.

Much of London (all of tourist London) can be accessed easily by underground train and bus, *and* they have a plastic card that works on the whole system. ‘Works’ is the operative word. The Oyster card (London) is bought at any train station for a £3 deposit. One can put as much credit on it as one wishes at any station and they all have ticket offices open to help you and there are real, friendly people on duty at the entrances to assist. The best part is that, when I leave in a fortnight, I can take the underground to the airport and hand in my Oyster card at the station ticket office where I will receive, in cash, a refund on any unused credit and my original deposit. Melbourne, I am sure you could do it if you tried!

As I expected, from living here for over two years, London was overcast and occasionally drizzly. What I had not expected was the difficulty we had getting our electronic communications to work. After two hours, we gave up on local SIM cards for our mobiles and on mobile internet access for my laptop. Oh well, maybe, with all the pigeons around, we can find alternative ways of getting messages to Australia.

Another way of seeing London up close is on foot. Our four feet took us from where Paddington Bear sits eternally in bronze asking to “please take care of this bear”, to Kensington Gardens, Kensington Palace and the Orangery, thence to the Natural History Museum. In the gardens we saw our first squirrels, alive and mostly not shy. At the museum

we came face to face with whales, dinosaurs, beetles – all long or more recently dead. At the palace it was dead monarchs, other royalty and nobility. The streets were teeming with resolutely live humans and traffic in the hands of more of the same. I had forgotten how many buses there are in London – they seem to outnumber the cars, but not the black (and now also multi-hued) iconic cabs. London even still has bobbies on bicycles, two by two; and paramedics on bicycles, who can get to the needy faster than an ambulance.

This part of London seems chaotic, as do parts of Sydney, yet it all seems to work. Maybe the ubiquitous CCTV cameras have something to do with it – London is reputed to have more cameras per square kilometre than any other place on earth. Our perambulation has probably been recorded on banks of memory chips or hard drives somewhere in the bowels of whatever authority is responsible for security and the handing out of traffic infringement notices. Hopefully we are of no interest to anyone.

At around five in the evening we started thinking about accommodation. No room at the inn; at least not at the Youth Hostel in Holland Park. However *they* found two bunks for us at a hostel in South London in the trendy docks area. Two changes of underground train and a bus ride and we happily, if tiredly, took possession of keys to a six-bunk room. Another week of this in London and Amsterdam. May it all happen in such interesting ways.