

## *From the Kitchen*

11 August 2010



When travelling, borders can magically dissolve as can the boundaries we put around ourselves. I am in Queenstown, in the southern depths of the New Zealand south island. It sits on the edge of a large lake surrounded by majestic, snow-capped mountains.

This is starting to sound like a tourist brochure. That last word is an appropriate one to use, as I'm sitting in Les Alpes, a French restaurant, tucking into omelette soufflé and one of the best cups of coffee I've ever had. There I go again ...

Being a winter tourist town, it is full of young travellers with working holiday visas – from Canada, United States, Argentina, Ireland, Scotland, England, France, Germany, Spain ... even a few Aussies. They seem to outnumber the New Zealanders.

Probably because the majority of those walking through the shops, sitting in cafés, and those working to service them all, are foreigners, the most common greeting seems to be, "Where are you from?" Natural (or unnatural) reserve seems to disappear, as it also seems to around babies in prams and cute dogs waiting patiently for their humans to finish their lattes. Go ga-ga over the little creatures (human or canine) and the door easily opens to a conversation. It is not often a deep conversation but it exists and is sometimes remembered and recounted.

Because I myself am an outsider here, others ply me with questions about my home city and Australia generally – where to travel next and what is worth seeing and doing.

The doing is interesting. When in a 'foreign' place, I tend to do things I could do closer to home, but don't. Last time I was in Queenstown (five years ago) I allowed myself to be whisked along the Shotover Gorge at 80 Km/hr in a jet boat and I paraglided from the top of Coronet Peak. This afternoon I will be 'flying' over Lake Wakatipu at a height of 200 metres, hanging from a parachute towed by a power boat.

What is it that has me seek new experiences when away from home? It happens whether I'm on my own or travelling with my wife. When on holidays away from home, I am open even eager, to experience new things and to do things that are different.

I also find that I easily fall into a comfortable habit. Having discovered Les Alpes, why would I eat anywhere else? Last year, when on the Coromandel Peninsula, we 'discovered' a tiny eatery (Waiomu Café) where the coffee was superb and the eggs benedict even better. I'm sure there were other good places in the area, but we didn't go looking for them.

Otherness can be both exciting and threatening. We often go to foreign places in order to experience the thrill of that otherness. When the foreigners come to where we live, some locals experience the strangeness as a threat. There are people who would like to keep the country they live in 'pure', culturally and ethnically. However, they are quite prepared to take

their own impurity to other countries, for the very reason that those places are exotic. They would never see themselves as a threat to the locals.

Foreign travellers may be more welcomed than immigrants because they obviously contribute to the local economy and are not a threat to local jobs. It is curious, though, that it is often foreign travellers who end up doing jobs that the locals won't do – hospitality jobs, fruit picking, etc.

Spending a week in Queenstown, I can learn as much about South American and European countries as about New Zealand. I can learn, for instance, that Ireland has sunk from one of the most vibrant European economies to one of the most moribund and that many commodities and jobs are now difficult to obtain. I can listen to three Brazilian waiters debating the positives and negatives of replacing parts of the Amazon rain forest with soy farms, from their perspectives.

On the Emirates flight, I spoke for a while with a flight attendant who comes from Thailand and is now based in Dubai. She said that both countries had restrictive societies, although restrictive in very different ways, especially for women. That was between movies, between borders

Borders can be natural, as those defining Australia and New Zealand are, or purely artificial, such as those around Belgium or Iraq or Israël. In either case they can hem in a diversity of peoples, who may or may not be able to coexist happily. I wonder whether the sense of threat from outsiders is in any way relates to how well those inside get on with each other.