



# New Zealand & Australia 2008

From the civil union in Wellington to Mardi Gras in Sydney

The favour of a reply is requested  
by the 9 January 2008

Mr. Blatt & Mr. Caldwell

Accepts with pleasure

Declines with regrets

## Detailed Results

<b>Tracking number</b>	862340074173	<b>Delivered to</b>	Receptionist/Front Desk
<b>Signed for by</b>	P.VPERRY	<b>Service type</b>	Priority Pak
<b>Ship date</b>	Jan 31, 2008	<b>Weight</b>	3.0 lbs.
<b>Delivery date</b>	Feb 1, 2008 10:40 AM		
<b>Status</b>	Delivered		
<b>Signature image available</b>	<a href="#">Yes</a>		

Date/Time	Activity	Location	Details
Feb 1, 2008	10:40 AM	<b>Delivered</b>	
	9:52 AM	On FedEx vehicle for delivery	WASHINGTON, DC
	9:11 AM	At local FedEx facility	WASHINGTON, DC
	8:17 AM	At dest sort facility	DULLES, VA
	4:47 AM	Departed FedEx location	MEMPHIS, TN
	3:33 AM	In transit	MEMPHIS, TN
Jan 31, 2008	1:45 AM	Arrived at FedEx location	MEMPHIS, TN
	9:12 PM	Shipment exception	ONTARIO, CA
	5:24 PM	Left origin	PALM SPRINGS, CA
	4:37 PM	Picked up	PALM SPRINGS, CA

## Getting Ready

Friday, February 1, 2008

[Washington, DC - Rob]

After a couple weeks of concern, all the documentation we need arrived via FedEx this morning. The trip is a go: we fly to LA tomorrow then Wellington on Sunday (through Tuesday). Wish us luck!



## All's Well in Wellington

Tuesday, February 5, 2008

[Wellington, NZ - Rob]

I can hardly believe we have just spent our first night in New Zealand. So much has happened... where to begin? Saturday's flight to LA was pleasantly uneventful. There were about 100 obnoxious high school kid on the flight, but Ugly Betty distracted us just fine.

Landing in LA, we rented a car and headed to our hotel on Santa Monica Boulevard. The next day was a bit dreary, but we took a little driving tour of Hollywood, then stopped in Beverly Hills for lunch before returning to the airport.

The Tom Bradley terminal was fairly busy. Again, disorganized youth was the biggest disruption of an otherwise calm process. We have been having a bit of trouble getting Bill on board the flights, since the travel agent decided he was William Baltt instead of Blatt. We allotted extra time for the longer security process. No body cavity searches were required. Yet.

Once on the Qantas flight to Auckland, our ever-so-attractive flight attendant Adam lit up when he heard we were together and made sure we were well cared for. Extra servings of wine made dinner a breeze. My absolute favorite part of the flight was the personalized entertainment center at every seat. You could make phone calls, send text messages, play video games or choose from a selection of hundreds of songs, TV shows or movies. Bill and I fell asleep watching Ratatouille.

The next morning, Adam served us breakfast, then it was about time to land. The 12-hour flight only seemed to take about four hours. The customs agents in Auckland were surprisingly efficient and pleasant considering they had to greet a Boeing 747-400 full of people at 6am. We moved through Immigration then walked to the domestic terminal for our flight to Wellington. The kiwi morning greeted us with a beautiful floral fragrance, and interesting trees that look like sculpted pine topiaries. (Please add comments if you know what kind of tree it might be!)

Upon arrival in Wellington, our host for the next week, Burt, meet us at the gate. I miss the days when I could meet Bill at the gate in the U.S. Burt drove us to his condo downtown before he had to leave for work. Bill napped while I showered and unpacked. The condo is amazing, you'll have to see the photos later. Jamie and Phillip took time out of their busy day to take us to a great lunch at the Matterhorn on Cuba Street.

As DC residents, Bill and I are used to a walking city where most shops, restaurants and entertainment are close by. Wellington's location among steep hills forces it to be even more compact. We are no more than a few blocks from Phillip's & Jamie's apartment, the Te Papa Museum, and Cuba Street. I'm told all of the civil union activities from the welcome dinner to the reception are within walking distance.









## Getting to know you

Wednesday, February 6, 2008

[Wellington, NZ - Rob]

The last entry was written over scrambled eggs with cheese and sausage with my first flat white (cafe au lait) at a breakfast place called Mr. Bun. I later discovered Mr. Bun is held in low regard by the locals, akin to a Waffle House in the States. (We're being very international and calling our home country "the States" now.) This morning, I am trying to recover my reputation by having breakfast at a chic little place called The Lido. We'll see how well I did later.

Tuesday evening, we had a chance to meet Marcos, Burt's partner of about a year. He works in the technology department at the national telecomm, so he and I hit it off right away. The four of us chatted for a bit after dinner, then Bill and I had to turn in for our first night's sleep overseas.

Wednesday morning, Bill and I had breakfast with our hosts before heading out to soak up the sights. We walked down to the shore and through the civic center. As we passed the shipping docks, we hear our names shouted from behind us. Two friends, Stephen and Jeffrey, from Philly were hailing us. They had arrived this morning and were touring the city as well. We joined them on a trip to the botanical gardens.

In 1904, a cable car was installed in the city to provide service to Victoria University and the local botanical garden. At the top was the cable car museum where we learned that over 400 personal cable cars are in use in New Zealand to provide individuals a fast way to descend from their homes down to their parked car at the bottom of the hill. Outside the museum, we admired the beautiful view of Wellington. A short trip through part of the gardens, then Stephen and Jeffrey had to head back to their hotel for a nap before dinner.

There was a small wedding party meet-and-greet scheduled for 7pm. Burt was nice enough to whip up a little dinner before we left. His idea of a little dinner puts Bill and my already-sad typical dinner to shame. Rotisserie chicken, chef salad, pasta salad, potato salad and fresh corn on the cob. I have discovered my new favorite food... corn on the cob. I probably ate six pieces. After dinner, we marched out to catch up with the crowd at Motel, a trendy pub.

Since today was the national holiday Waitangi Day, many stores and bars were closed. After a little confusion about location, we met the gang. This was not the grown-up parent crowd, but the loud, gay/hip crowd. It was great to put faces to names Jamie and Phillip have been referring to for years. Jan and Dougal stood out of the crowd because they've been the in-country event coordinators for most of the week's arrangements. Jann (occasionally known as Matilda) doesn't like to be photographed so when she discovered my camera had difficulty at close range, she wouldn't leave my side. Dougal used to work with Phillip back in the day. He was hysterical and like most New Zealanders we've met, quite charming. Many other names and faces will hopefully become familiar as the days go by.







## Together in Civil Union

Saturday, February 9, 2008

[Wellington, NZ - Bill]

On Thursday, February 7, we joined Steven and Jeffrey for a driving tour around Wellington and over “the Hill” into the Wairarapa region. We met the boys at the Visitor Center where they were busily conversing with a clerk about our route. She enthusiastically recommended a restaurant called the Chocolate Fish for lunch and circled areas on the map where we could see blue penguins and sea lions. We piled into Steven and Jeffrey’s rental car and had a lovely time seeing the southern tip of New Zealand’s North Island. The recommended restaurant had gone out of business and there were neither blue penguins nor sea lions to be seen but Rob did get a pet a horse. We later discovered we had blundered into the local minimum-security jail and Rob petted a prison horse but the scenery was breathtaking nonetheless.

Friday began with a visit to Te Papa, the national museum of New Zealand. It’s an amazing museum and tries to serve the same function as the Smithsonian, but all within one building. The natural history exhibits were great but Rob and I were most taken with the traditional Maori meetinghouses and sacred spaces. It was too pretty a day to stay inside so we left Te Papa and walked along the waterfront to Cuba Street for a little jewelry shopping. We bought each other carved greenstone pendants and had yet another lovely conversation with a local. I don’t know if it’s due to genetics or the environment but it’s tough to find a Kiwi who’s anything less than completely charming. There’s quite a ritual involved in acquiring greenstone jewelry but more on that later.

The first official wedding event took place Friday evening. Jamie and Phillip hosted a welcome dinner at the Martin Bosley Yacht Club for all the out-of-towners. There are close to 60 wedding guests from outside New Zealand so it was quite a large and festive gathering. It was nice to see folks we knew from Washington, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Tucson and all over the world. Dinner went late and conversation could have gone even later but everyone had an important engagement scheduled the next day at 12:45pm and went home to press their formal clothes.

Saturday, February 9: the big day. I woke up several times during the night thinking about the speech I needed to write for the afternoon reception and I did finally manage to write down some coherent thoughts before we needed to leave. We made it to the venue by 12:50 (late taxi – not our fault) and Phillip and Jamie’s ceremony began a little after 1:00. The text of the ceremony was simple, elegant and extremely moving. I certainly teared up a bit and I saw many of the 100+ other guests doing the same.

Trays of canapés and champagne made their way through the crowd and we all toasted, nibbled and chatted while the newlyweds worked the crowd and sat for wedding portraits. Around 2:00, curtains were thrown open with a flourish (this is a gay wedding, after all) and we were invited into the next room for lunch. Thanks to heroic baking efforts by the Wellington-based guests, we were greeted by that charming but odd Pittsburgh wedding custom known as the “cookie table.” Several of the bakers were seated at our table and I feel obliged to report they baked nearly 1000 cookies during the hottest few days of the summer.

The lunch was quite good (I had the lamb because when in Rome...) and between the main course and dessert, there were speeches from a number of people representing different aspects of Jamie’s and Phillip’s lives. I talked for a couple minutes about my memories of when Jamie and Phillip met and became a serious couple and how much they both mean to Rob and me. I’m pretty happy with how my speech turned out and a number of people (most importantly Jamie and Phillip) later complimented me on it.

Returning to the story of our greenstone pendants, tradition dictates that you shouldn’t buy yourself greenstone but rather be given it by someone who cares about you. Before giving it to you, they should also warm the greenstone (usually by wearing it) and bless it by dipping it in the sea. Rob and I wore each other’s pendants to the civil union and stopped after the reception to wet the necklaces in Wellington Harbor before placing them around each other’s necks. We couldn’t think of a more appropriate way to infuse the pendants with good energy and have a truly meaningful symbol of the event, the trip and our relationship.



CROSSING  
RAILWAY

BELLS  
OFF  
10-30 PM TO  
7 AM

TR

4398



Phillip Anderson

MARTIN  BOSLEY'S

PHILLIP & JAMIE

Friday 8th February  
2008























Phillip Anderson

and Jamie Jacobs

invite you to join them in celebrating

their civil union

Saturday, the ninth of February

at half past twelve,

Shed 5, Queens Wharf

Wellington, New Zealand

Luncheon immediately following the ceremony



















## My speaking points for Jamie & Phillip's reception 2/9/08

- Met at Jacobs family wedding - 5 mile drive from home
- Moved to DC, became dear friends
- When they met, we heard a lot about Phillip. Much more angst than we normally heard from Jamie (and we normally heard a fair degree of angst) before they became <sup>official</sup>
- From selfish perspective, can be tough to share your friends w/ their new BF
- Getting to know Phillip, became clear how well they ~~complemented~~ <sup>suited</sup> each other &
- ~~Each can look the other in the eye~~ we knew we were gaining another wonderful friend.
- Couple months into their relationship, Phillip was away & Jamie was telling me how this relationship felt different from any other. Less work, less anxiety when they were apart, more happiness when together. Jamie didn't understand why. "You're falling in love, you idiot."
- Can't think of a couple who complement one another more and who ought to be together.
- While we had to travel ~8000 miles this time, we're so happy to be here in celebration of their relationship.
- Wish them every joy in the future & every blessing. Mazel tov!

















**LOTUS**  
room









## **Ferries and buses and trains, oh my!**

Monday, February 11, 2008

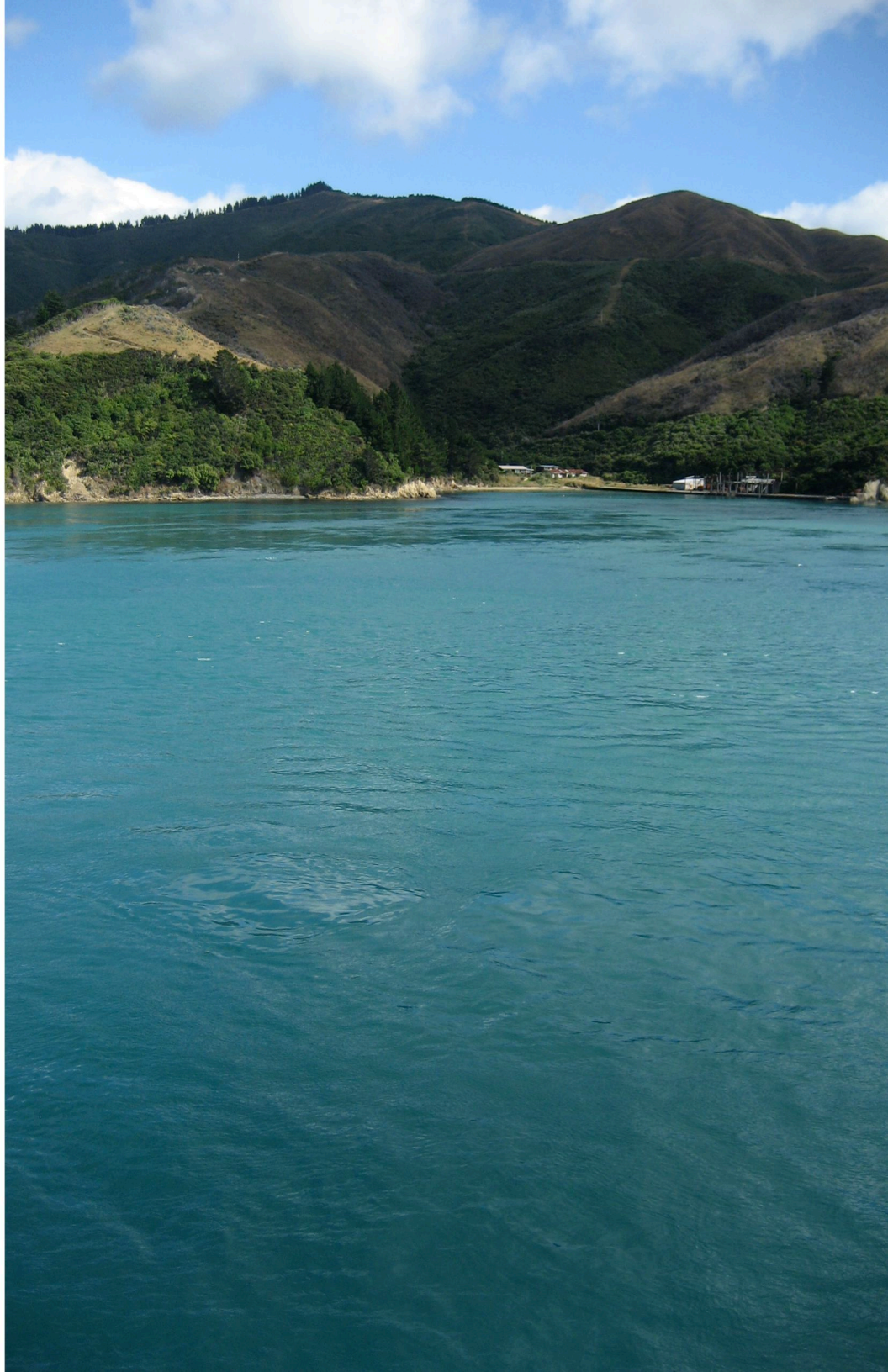
[Christchurch, NZ - Bill]

We said a sad goodbye to our Wellington hosts Burt and Marcos in the wee hours of the morning (7:30) and headed over to the ferry terminal to meet Amy and Alex for our trip to the South Island. I can't say I've ever seen a ferry quite as large as the one we took: 10 decks overall, 3 vehicle decks holding something like 600 cars, a movie theater, a playland for the kids, a food court and so on. All in all, it was a very pleasant way to pass three hours. Only about 15km of the trip are across open water while the rest is weaving around the islands and peninsulas of the New Zealand coast. The scenery was just breathtaking.

We docked at Picton and waited about 90 minutes for our bus to Christchurch. (Amy and Alex were smart enough to book ahead and had train tickets between Picton and Christchurch.) The bus was a bit late and we learned there had been a breakdown in Kaikura but a substitute bus was on the way. We soon got underway and while Rob fell asleep, I enjoyed the view of huge mountains (a prelude to the Southern Alps), beautiful rugged coastline and even a herd/flock/gang/whatever of seals playing in the surf. The bus stopped at Kaikura and that's where things started to go south. (Ha!)

They had us switch to another bus -- a very warm bus. The driver never said a word the whole time but we quickly deduced that we were now on the recently broken-down bus. Our major clues were the vehicle's almost total lack of air conditioning, its average speed of less than 30mph and a rather frightening tendency to stall out when going uphill. For those that aren't familiar with the local geography, the South Island is quite mountainous and that meant we were on the bus from hell. The windows fogged over and we plodded forward through the rain (and for a little while, sleet) until we finally arrived in Christchurch an hour late. We were tired, wet, hungry and cranky but the situation improved with a few drinks, a great dinner and a warm hotel room.

We later found out that Amy and Alex shared their train journey with a load of drunken Kiwi soccer moms. The moms apparently had a strong tendency to sing John Denver songs whenever the train entered one of the many tunnels along the route so A+A can probably make a legitimate claim to having survived the train from hell. As you might have guessed, both couples quickly booked plane tickets for the rest of our in-country trips.







## Operation Kiwi Hunt

Tuesday, February 12, 2008

[Christchurch, NZ - Bill]

Today's big goal: see a real, live kiwi. The bird, not the local residents or the fruit. Or the fruity local residents. In the Christchurch visitor guide, we found a place called the Southern Encounter, featuring exotic sea life and real live kiwi birds. We strolled with purpose toward Cathedral Square in the center of town, about five minutes from our hotel. We stopped for an early lunch at a little cafe located at the edge of a big glassed-in atrium. All of a sudden, two giant glass doors swung open right next to the cafe and a streetcar rolled by about 8 feet from our table. We were sitting next the Christchurch Tram roundhouse and the doors opened for another streetcar every 5-10 minutes. Best... Lunch... Ever! Lawrence and all other train geeks we know, eat your hearts out.

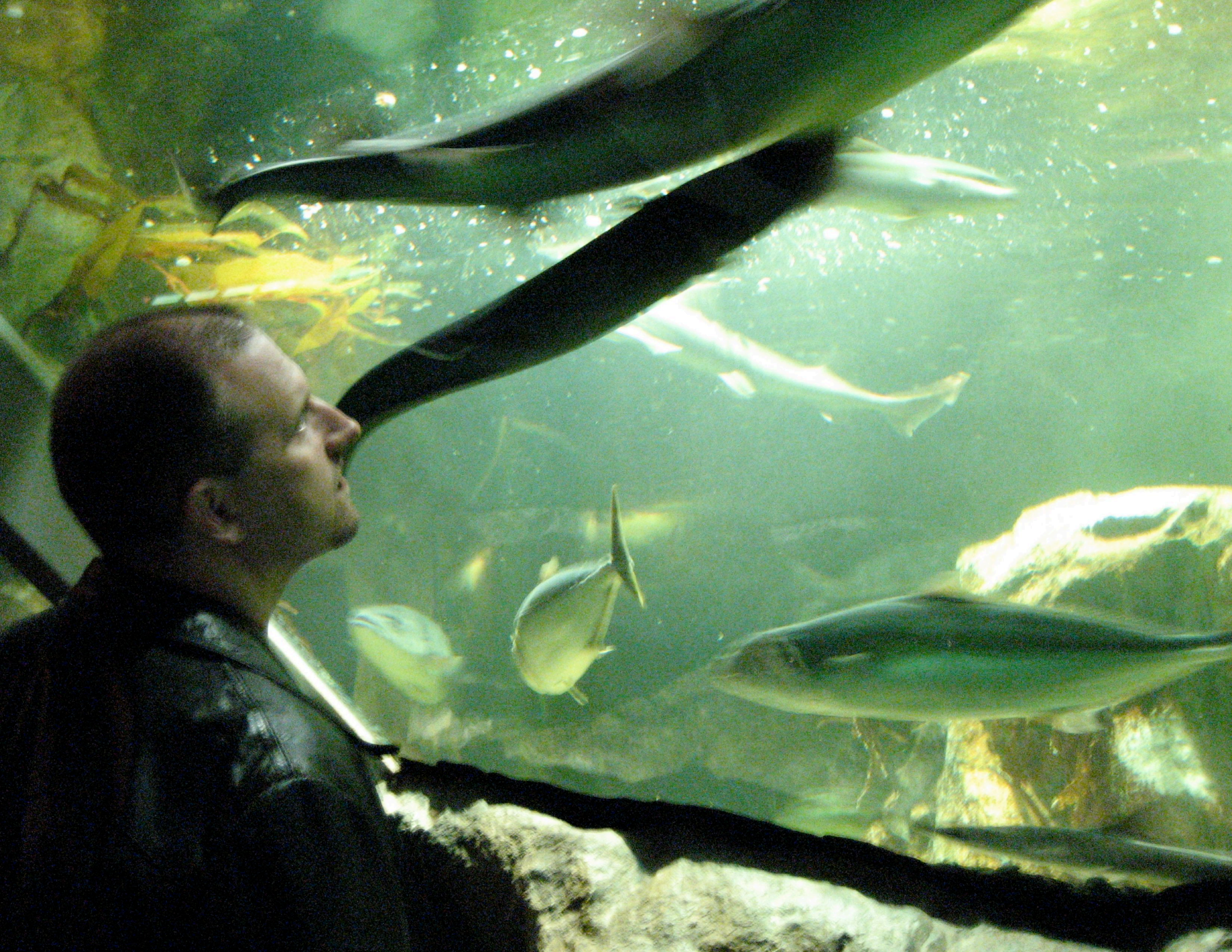
After getting our fill of lunch and trains, we followed the tracks to Cathedral Square and headed into the Southern Encounter. We spent about a half hour admiring the fish, eels and sharks and especially a large manta ray. The front glass of that particular tank was angled so the manta was actually swimming above us at times. Rob took at least 100 pictures. We then headed over for our kiwi meet-and-greet. Kiwis are nocturnal and extremely timid so we entered the darkened room in small groups and were asked not to speak or take any photographs. It was feeding time and both kiwis were very close to the glass. They're about the size of small chickens and while you probably couldn't call them beautiful, there's something about the birds that makes them very captivating. Aside from them being nocturnal, endangered and afraid of just about everything, it might be fun to have your very own pet kiwi. Bird, that is.

We met up again with Amy and Alex for dinner. They outdid us, having fit in both a Southern Encounter and an Antarctic Experience. (Christchurch is the jumping-off point for most Antarctic expeditions, it turns out.) We were jealous that they got to see penguins so we'll have to make a point to see them while we're in Auckland. The four of us ended up having dinner at a sushi-go-round and a good time was had by all. Next stop: Queenstown, the Adventure Capital of the World!



Touching on Taxonomy

THE KIWI Recovery Programme







## **Valentine's in Milford Sound**

Thursday, February 14, 2008

[Queenstown, NZ - Rob]

Wednesday's flight to Queenstown with Amy & Alex was thankfully uneventful. After our sweltering bus ride from Picton to Christchurch, the bar was set pretty low. The four of us shared an airport van to our respective hotels. Bill and I decided to spend the afternoon on the Skyline gondolas. We rode to the top of Bob's Peak to get an amazing view of the city. We kept the day's activities simple in preparation for tomorrow's big trip to Milford Sound.

Thursday, we woke at 5:30am for a quick breakfast and hopped on a bus (against our better judgment). Our driver, Junior, was entertaining and informative. The bus (Moby Dick, according to Junior) had working AC and made it up hills with ease, thankfully. The four-hour drive went by fairly quickly. Most of the ride, we were able to see the original Red Beech forests that used to cover all of New Zealand. These trees are the scientific link used to explain Gondwana. Along the way, we stopped at Mirror Lakes where the calm water lived up to its name. The next stop, the Chasm, was an awesome display of roaring rapids cutting amazing shapes out of the surrounding rocks.

Finally, we arrived at Milford Sound. Buffet lunch was served right away so we could spend as much time as possible gazing at the fiord. It had rained earlier in the day, so dozens of waterfalls were running. The sun was out and set the mountain sides glistening like giant diamonds. There was no shore to be found. Granite monoliths sprung straight up from the water, soaring up to 4,000 feet into the sky. We saw seals sunning and dolphins swimming. It lived up to our every expectation. This was a great way to spend Valentine's Day together.







Pride of MILFORD

MILFORD SOUND  
RED BOAT  
CRUISES

MSEA NO. 00380

4















### Steamboat Billy

Friday, February 15, 2008

[Queenstown, NZ - Rob]

Friday was an easy day. We took a ride on the TSS Earnslaw steamboat. This ship is a true original. It makes six trips a day between downtown Queenstown and Walter Peak Farm across Lake Wakatipu, burning one ton of coal each way. That's 12 tons of coal per day, all shoveled into the boilers by hand. It was quite a contrast to see the pristine glacial snow obscured by the dark black cloud of the steam ship. Given the rarity of such ships, this was not considered an environmental issue.

That evening, we met up with the crowd from the civil union who ended up in Queenstown. There were about 15 people (including Jamie and Phillip) who met at FINZ restaurant for dinner. Consisting entirely of visitors here from the U.S., we were all able to catch up on each others' goings on since the union. Many were starting or finishing the Milford Track, a 53 km (about 33 miles) walk from Lake Te Anu to Milford Sound. As a Boy Scout, I expected a grueling march through rough territory. Alas, we are wealthy adults with no time for such matters. This was a clothes-on-your-back hike from lodge to lodge with full sleeping and plumbing facilities. It may not be roughing it, but it certainly sounded like fun without the need to pitch a tent.





## From Queenstown to Auckland

Sunday, February 17, 2008

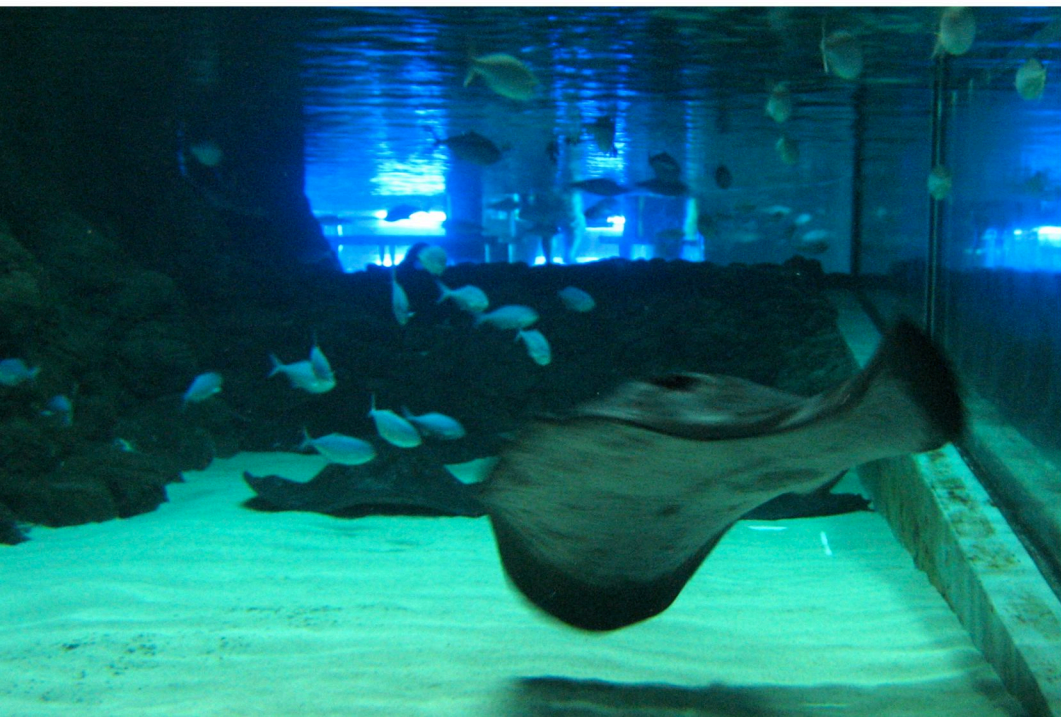
[Auckland, NZ - Rob]

Saturday was a busy day for our last day in Queenstown. We got up early so we could make our bus to the Dart River jet boat tour. Bill was bound and determined to ride a jet boat before we left "the Adventure Capital of the World." The bus delivered us to a van, the van to the boat. Chris, our guide, gave us quick safety instructions, and we were off. The jet boat certainly delivered: 40 kilometers upstream in around 30 minutes, sometimes in as few as 4 inches of water. With a twirl of his finger, Chris warned us to brace ourselves for a 360 degree spin before stopping. It was completely exhilarating! (Note: our carbon footprint is huge. We feel appropriately guilty and will plant trees accordingly.)

That evening, we flew to Auckland, the largest city in New Zealand. Our hotel was the Quadrant, a chic new boutique hotel downtown. Our room (as in many of our NZ hotels) was an apartment. Full kitchen amenities with a door to the bedroom. The best part was full wireless internet access, the kind we hadn't enjoyed since Burt and Marco's place almost a week ago. (Yes, I know I'm a geek but Bill liked it too.)

Sunday was kept simple, a 1.5 hour cruise around the Auckland harbor. We walked up Queen street to Sky City Metro Centre shopping plaza to see the rocket shaped elevators and funky abstract indoor spaces. We ended the day with room service which actually saved us some money.









## Learnin' Stuff

Tuesday, February 19, 2008

[Auckland, NZ - Rob & Bill]

Time to absorb all Auckland has to offer. We took the bus (I know!) to Kelly Tarlton's Underwater World and Antarctic Experience. Walking in, we were met by gigantic king penguins behind windows. Excited, we moved quickly through the educational portion discussing something about great explorers, harsh conditions, terrible deaths, blah blah blah. Now bring on the penguins! We boarded our enclosed Snow Cat and the ride jerked to a start. Through a tunnel and into the penguin habitat below the water level. Gentoo penguins moved fluidly through the water, swimming over occasionally to check us out. Up a small ramp, and we were eye to eye with the big boys. Flapping, chatting and sleeping, these birds covered the snowy terrain. Big ones, little ones, and scary dirty ones. The kings were easy to identify by their bright pearlescent chests leading to their yellow and orange necks. It was all very impressive.

After two rides through the penguins, we visited the giant manta rays swimming in a huge waist-deep tank. It was feeding time for these mysterious girls. The attendant in the tank was quickly surrounded by the huge wings of these affectionate monsters hungry for lunch. His small frame was no match for their mass. He could barely speak as they devoured every morsel in his hand and his bucket. On to the shark tank, a gazillion gallon aquarium with an arched walkway winding throughout the bottom. You could look up as the sharks, rays and other sea life passed overhead. Now that our sea adventure was complete, it was time to move to a land-based museum.

The Auckland Museum was the most popular museum in New Zealand until the Te Papa was built in Wellington. We thought it would be good to see the original. The first floor had a pretty varied collection of exhibits including a huge section of Maori artifacts. One of last war canoes ever carved was on display -- it was made from a single tree trunk and could hold 100 warriors. On the next floor, the focus was natural history. There was a fantastic room about volcanoes -- no surprise, given that New Zealand sits where two tectonic plates meet. Hello, Ring of Fire! The top floor of the museum was devoted mostly to New Zealand's role in various wars. Most of it was pretty somber but we enjoyed seeing the Japanese Zero and British Spitfire planes on display. As you might guess, the planes were each assembled before the gallery walls were built around them.

After a long day of broadening our minds, we decided to stop in the hotel lobby for a cocktail and a snack. I have to take this opportunity to mention how good the food in New Zealand has been. From simple dishes like grilled mushrooms, to a light snapper with prawns, baby carrots and baby potatoes all rich with butter, every flavor stood out as bold and complete. It has been quite an epicurean adventure.

On another non-reporting note, we want to thank everyone for posting comments on the blog. It's been a lot of fun to hear people's reactions to our adventures and to get little snippets of what's been going on back home. We might not directly respond to every comment (mostly because it's hard enough to find the time and energy to write our posts in the first place) but we both really enjoy and appreciate hearing from all of you.



PALAZZO VERSACE

PALAZZO VERSACE



### **Glitterati**

Thursday, February 21, 2008

[Gold Coast, AUS - Rob & Bill]

It's time to announce that we're not coming home. We have decided to live forever in the Palazzo Versace on Australia's Gold Coast. That's Versace as in "House of" and Donatella designed every little piece of this establishment. Each staff member has welcomed us with professionalism and without pretension. Every detail has been considered from the amazing chandelier in the lobby to the complementary fragrance bottles in our room. Since our reservation indicated two men were checking in, there were "his and his" bottles of Versace cologne in the bathroom of our room rather than the typical (I assume) "his and hers." Naturally, there's a Versace boutique off the lobby so we wandered through for a look. The dashing sales rep had Rob all dolled up in a \$1,400 Versace jacket. It certainly was a hot look, but no sale. :(

Our first night on the Gold Coast was a quick dinner at the Hog's Breath pub. On our way to over, we saw a huge bat fly out of a palm tree. The wingspan had to be at least a foot across. Wednesday was spent doing laundry in Surfer's Paradise (a neighborhood down the beach). The laundry part was boring, but the surfer part was paradise. Boys, boys, boys... We kept expecting Annette Funicello to wander by. Dinner was more respectable this time with a lovely seafood dinner at the marina next to our hotel. Today is a total rest day. The hotel provides a beautiful buffet breakfast. We headed back to our room for a quick change and to slather on some sunscreen for an afternoon by the pool (and to write this entry... and the previous two). Rob built sand castles while Bill dodge Rob's camera lens. The first waiter brought coladas (mango & strawberry) to our sun chairs. The second brought a club sandwich, sushi and two bloody marys for lunch. This is the life. We did take a moment to SMS some friends in the States just to evoke a bit of jealousy (it's snowing in DC) and complete the afternoon delights.















## **Donatella, we hardly knew ye**

Saturday, February 23, 2008

[Sydney, AUS - Bill]

We're finally in Sydney, the last stop on our whirlwind tour of Australia and New Zealand. We're here for nine nights so the trip's not exactly over but we're both enjoying the idea of staying in one place for a while.

Heading back in the story for a day or two, the day of relaxation on Thursday turned out to have less than perfect consequences. Both Rob and I got sunburned, me more than him. (Shut up -- it can happen!) We started to feel the effects before dinner and by morning, we were pretty sore. I rolled on to my stomach in bed and just putting that much pressure on my chest was painful enough to wake me. All those who remember the couple of years I spent working on a skin cancer prevention program in Tucson, you may now point and laugh.

Friday, we walked down to breakfast and found a new centerpiece in the lobby. There was a black Lamborghini on display -- with a Versace trim package, naturally. Even in a place as high-end as the Palazzo Versace, the car was surrounded by velvet ropes to keep away the riff-raff. If you have to ask, you know you can't afford it but I looked at the price anyway: a cool million dollars (Australian). After a spending a few minutes drooling over the car, we breakfasted and made a plan for the day. Sea World is just down the street from the hotel so we decided to spend the day communing with the pinnepeds. After breakfast, we stopped by the Versace boutique again to find a souvenir of our visit. I quite liked the pillows used on just about every chair and sofa in the hotel but their price started at \$390 (each!) and went up from there. We bought a pair of Versace cufflinks instead. We're going to share them or if that doesn't work, split them. One cufflink apiece.

Oddly enough, the Gold Coast Sea World isn't affiliated with the similarly-named "SeaWorld" parks in the States. It's fairly similar with rides and marine mammal shows but Queensland's Sea World doesn't have Shamu or any other killer whales on display. We had fun riding the roller coaster and log flume rides and Rob was completely engrossed by the Shark Bay display. They got some big sharks in them thar tanks! We also saw our first dugong (a close relative of the manatee) and caught shows featuring sea lions, Pacific bottlenose dolphins and a pretty impressive waterskiing team. The biggest downside to the day was the temperature: around 33 degrees Centigrade (about 92 Fahrenheit). After showers and change of clothes, we ended the day with drinks in the lobby (gazing once more at the car) and dinner at Vie, one of the hotel's five restaurants.

This morning, we had the very sad task of checking out of the Palazzo (bye, Donatella!) and heading to the airport. No problems with the flight and we landed in Sydney early this afternoon. We booked the "VIP" Mardi Gras package so there was a car and driver waiting for us at baggage claim. When the driver led us outside to his Mercedes S-class, I started to feel a little underdressed in my t-shirt and shorts. We headed into town and checked into our hotel. Our room is on the 13th floor with a view of the Sydney skyline. Standing on the balcony and looking to the far right, we can see the Sydney Opera House. OK, it's the back of the Opera House but it's still cool. We're about one block from Oxford Street, one of the centers of gay life here. We had a late lunch on Oxford and it was packed with male couples strolling, shopping and flirting under the "Mardi Gras -- 30th Anniversary" banners hanging from every lightpole. I think we're going to like it here.

SYDNEY GAY AND LESBIAN MARDI GRAS  
**30th Anniversary**  
*Sol y Luna*  
**MARDI GRAS' HARBOUR PARTY**  
**SUNDAY 24 FEB**  
**3PM UNTIL 11PM**

presented in partnership with  
 gaydar.com.au

Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby

**FLEET STEPS, MRS MACQUARIES POINT**  
 DJS SCOTT PULLEN • KATE MONROE • JAYSON FORBES • ALEX TAYLOR • GI JODE  
 SHAKEDOWN FEAT. DAVE54 (DJ), CAM DOUGLAS (DRUMS) & TIMMY TRUMPET



### Harbour Party

Sunday, February 24, 2008

[Sydney, AUS - Rob]

Today we made some new friends. Standing out on our balcony, we heard shouts from above. Looking up we saw two angelic faces looking down on us. Tom and Jonathan from Chicago are staying in the room above ours. Jonathan (on the right) is a professional pianist and opera singer, while Tom (Chicago t-shirt) is a professional man about town. They joined us for a glass of wine before we all headed over to Ms. Macquaries Point for the legendary Harbour Party.

A quick taxi ride delivered us to the beautiful park location of the Harbour Party. From here, we had a great view of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House. Today was also the monumental final crossing of Cunard's brand new liner the Queen Victoria and the soon-to-be retired QE2. The party was great. We lasted until 9pm which isn't too bad considering the party only went to 11pm.



## Wildlife World

Monday, February 25, 2008

[Sydney, AUS - Rob]

Ever wanted to pet a koala? We certainly did, so today's mission was to pet a koala. We knew there would be several options available. Down the street at Darling Harbour was Sydney Wildlife World and the best option for us to complete our mission.

We entered the small shop front with low expectations. A lovely woman greeted us with her collection of giant beetles and venomous spiders. Bill's arachnophobia was in full force. She explained all her treasures and we moved quickly on.

Now entering the snake collection! Giant snakes, venomous snakes, giant venomous snakes, they were all here. Beautiful creatures, but I feared for what we may find next. On to the nocturnal creatures. Small rodents and spotted possums roamed dimly lit environments. The jackalope is alive and well in case you were wondering. At least it looked like a jackalope. Now, bring on the koalas!

Up a set of stairs, we rose from the darkness and into the light of a surprisingly large atrium shared by several animal environments. We were on the koala balcony overlooking about a quarter acre of other animals. Now this is what we came to see! There were four koalas on one side of the deck, and two more on the opposite side. Unfortunately, they were all asleep. Turns out that koala bears are only awake about four hours each day, generally for 15-20 minutes at a time. This is because their diet of eucalyptus leaves has so little nutrition. We left the koalas a tad disappointed but as we continued through the rest of the exhibits. An attendant was carting a huge collection of eucalyptus branches, figuring it was feeding time for our little bears, we raced back to the balcony only to find the branches were for another group of koalas. We decided pony up the \$20 AUD to have our photo taken next to a sleeping bear. IT WAS TOTALLY FUN!!! She took several photos of the three of us, then led us over to a different sleeping koala and let us pet it with the back of our fingers. They are so soft. We once again left the balcony, but this time with a great sense of satisfaction.

Down the stairs we came to the agile wallaby exhibit. Over a dozen of them were pigging out on carrot slices. They look like small kangaroo, but wallabies come in many even smaller sizes. Through a double walled chamber we moved into the bird atrium. Beautifully colored birds surrounded us. Chirping, sailing and diving, this was a very active group... perhaps a little too active.

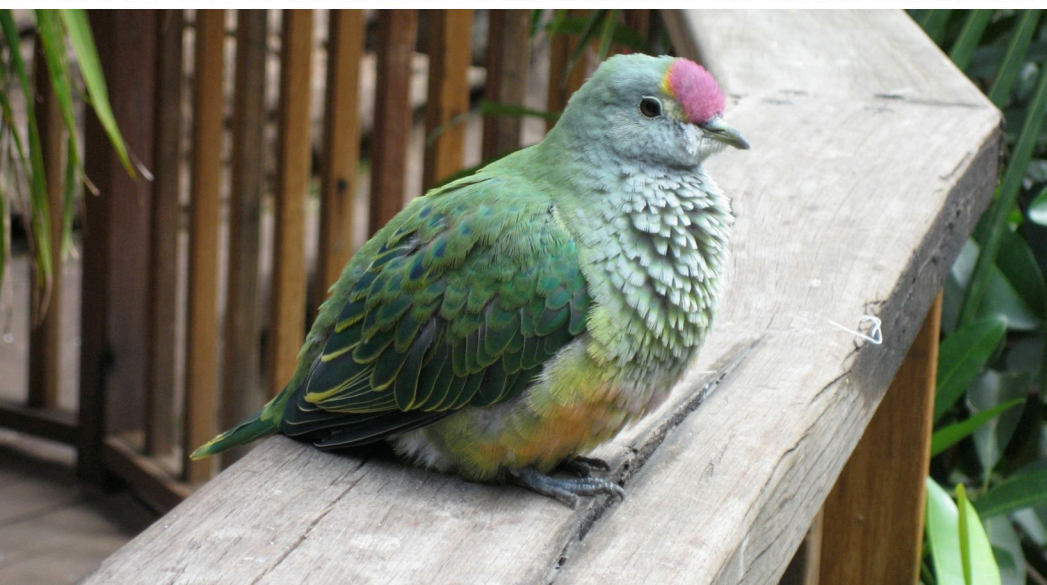
The final exhibit was the butterfly atrium. Beautiful examples of dark, light, or metallic colored butterflies fitted, flected and floated by. This group was even more restless than the birds. A sense of swarming tension rushed us through the mob and into the glass viewing area. Watching the show behind glass, the way God intended, was much better. We left Sydney Wildlife World with a much better understanding of the wonder and danger of Australia's animals.

That evening, we had dinner with many of the rest of the U.S. visitors in our tour group at Yipiyiyo. We were able to meet a lot of great people like Felipe, David, Ted, Joe and Mandy at our table. Our travel agent, Kevin, hired a hilarious local comedienne to entertain us during dessert. It was a great way to finish our third day in Sydney.















## You're all beaches

Tuesday, February 26, 2008

[Sydney, AUS - Rob]

First of all, to my little brother: Happy Birthday Jim!

Today, a bunch of the boys were headed to the beaches, so we joined them for their frolic in the sun. I of course spent most of the time wrapped in my burka. We taxied over to Bondi Beach, world famous for it's surfers, sun worshipers and lifeguards. They were doing some minor filming for Bondi Rescue. We played in the surf for about an hour. The waves were huge and crushing. The water was officially closed, but that didn't stop anyone from wading in for a few minutes, only to walk out with pebbles embedded in their faces.

We grabbed our stuff and started walking south along the shore path. It was a beautiful walk covered with boulders and cliffs carved out by the powerful waves. We made it down to Tamarama Beach (aka Glamarama), unfurled our towels, and I finally decided to brave the water. Slowly, I inched my way forward. Waves advanced and receded, refreshingly cool. As I snuck deeper, the size of the waves became more looming. Finally, I was deep enough to guarantee the next wave would cover me. Here it comes, the base of the wave above my head, the crest two stories higher. A sense of panic, slightly too late. Down it comes with all the power Jamie described in his death-defying, glasses-losing experience here a couple of years ago. It was over in an instant. In reality, it was more exhilarating than death-defying. I retreated nonetheless. Back to the towel to dry and sun before leaving. It was delightful to return to the room for a shower.

That evening the tour led us to a wine shop for a tasting. A spicy Shiraz and a late harvest gold stood out. Bill met a couple from Hamilton, a town outside Boston and very close to his hometown, while I mingled with some of the tour organizers including Kevin, Dana and Marie. Perhaps a FileMaker assignment in Palm Springs is in my future? After the wine tasting, we went to Raquel's for a tapas dinner, then home for some much needed rest.















### Afternoon at Sea

Friday, February 29, 2008

[Sydney, AUS - Rob] It finally happened, after 3.5 weeks of being joined at the hip, Bill and I had to spend the day apart. On Wednesday, I stayed in our hotel room to watch Ugly Betty while Bill went to see the Princess Diana exhibit at the Powerhouse Museum. His favorite piece was the Strasburg clock, a 13 foot tall replica of the 60 foot original in France.

After our day off, it was time to spend the evening together with Frank-n-Furter at the Rocky Horror Picture Show. Our travel agent set us up with tickets to the live show at the Star Theatre downtown. After the show, we got to meet several members of the cast at a private reception. It was a great way to spend an otherwise rainy evening.

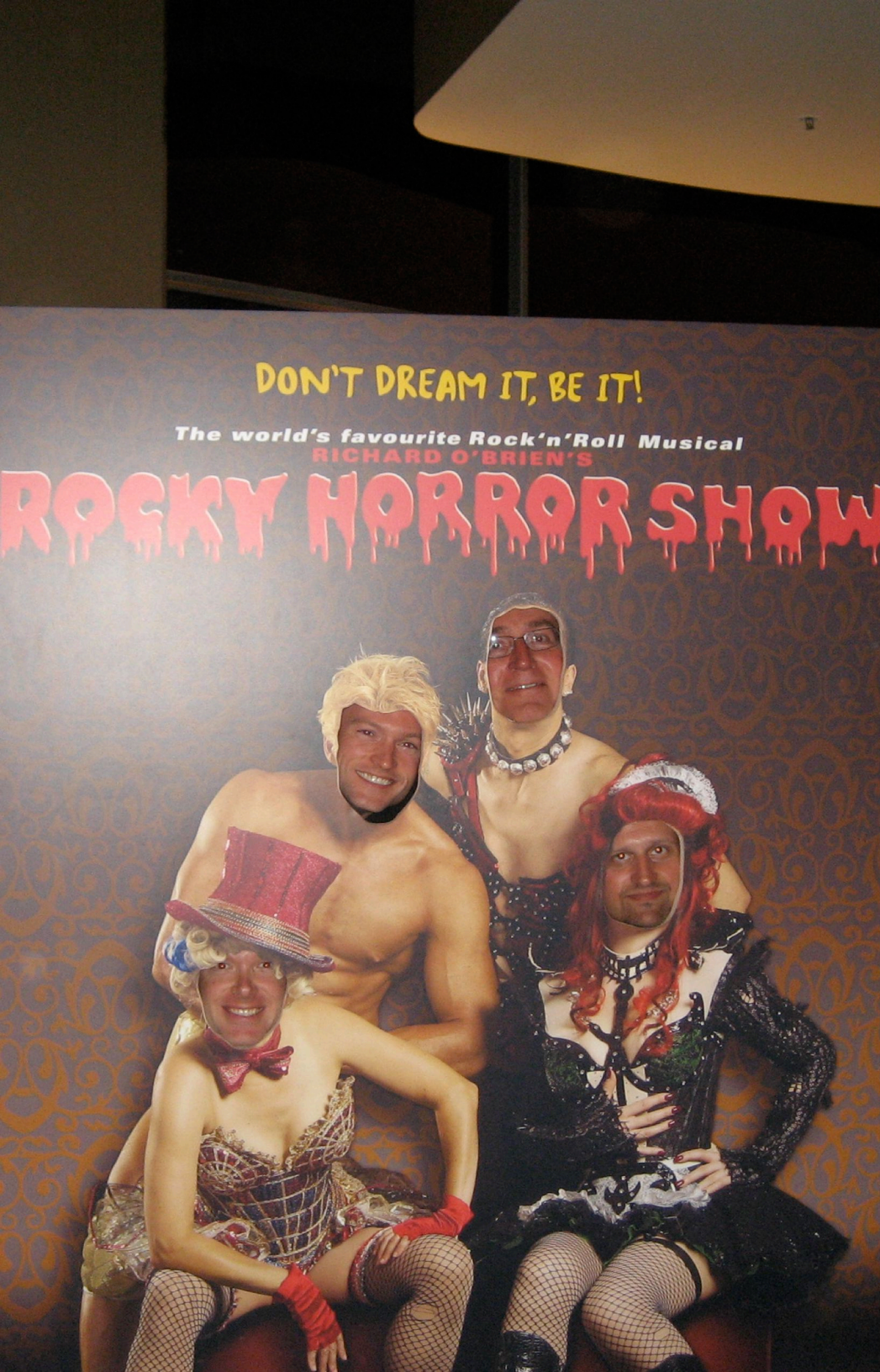
Yesterday, Tom and Jonathan from upstairs took us to the Lumiere Cafe for a lovely breakfast. It was their favorite cafe, they came every morning. After a day of shopping, it was time to clean up for the evening Diva Does Sydney champagne bus tour. Our hostess, Penny Traction, ushered everyone onboard to start a slightly abstract interpretation of this lovely city. The Opera House, Mrs. Macquaries Point, and Bondi Beach were all targets for her biting humor. We ended the tour on Oxford Street, had a few drinks and turned in for the evening.

Friday required a bit of strong coffee to get started. The morning was damp and overcast, so we took it easy at the hotel. The weather cleared in time for our afternoon harbour cruise. We climbed aboard the sleek Matilda catamaran at Darling Harbour. The ship took us past beautiful views of the city, and not-so-beautiful views of the nude beach. Hors d'oeuvres were served by magical food fairies. Several America's Cup yachts were out practicing, providing a bit of excitement.

























TILDA  
REGUises



## 30 years of Sydney Mardi Gras

Saturday, March 1, 2008

[Sydney, AUS - Rob]

Saturday morning, Bill and I headed over to the Queen Victoria Building (QVB to the locals) for breakfast and an education in opals. The concierge directed us to Volle, a contemporary jewelry store upstairs. The delightful staff took time to give us an education in opals. Black, white, boulder, double or triplet, we learned it all. I bought myself a fantastic opal ring with bright blues, greens and yellows. Each of us picked up a little something for gifts as well.

Back to the room to prep for the big Mardi Gras parade. We had no costumes ourselves this year, but helped others get ready with as little or as much clothing as they needed. Once everyone was ready, we headed over to Flinders Street and our reserved seats in the Glamstand. We grabbed a bite and socialized a bit. The parade started as the sun began to set. According to the local paper, 300,000 supporters turned out to watch. This was the largest parade either of us had ever seen. The floats were all big and beautiful. No groups riding in their family sedans here. David and Felipe were able to get on the 'Come Out Australia' float #9. Our friends Tony & Carl were part of the 'Tassie Devils!' float #125. After float #150 passed, it was time to head back to the room for a shower before the big event.

This was the 30th anniversary for Sydney's Mardi Gras event, and they pulled no punches to celebrate. Around midnight, we entered the Royal Hall of Industries to see it done up as the Discotarium. Huge disco balls hung at each end of the space. In the center, a giant sphere shape composed of individually hung strips of clear colored plastic was carefully rotating and acting as a prism for all the light around it. The legendary lighting at these events is what Bill and I have been looking forward to for years. The Hordern Pavillion next door was set up as Neon Fusion with laser lights galore. Each of the seven spaces had its own theme, but we stuck with the Hall of Industries to see the shows.

At 3am, hometown girl Olivia Newton-John took the stage and performed Xanadu. It was a great way to energize the crowd. As morning drew closer, we considered heading back for sleep, but Mardi Gras is known for its big finales. This year Cyndi Lauper took time from her Australian tour to wow us with one new song, and closed the party with 'Girls Just Want to Have Fun!' Exhausted and exhilarated, we walked home in the drizzling rain.











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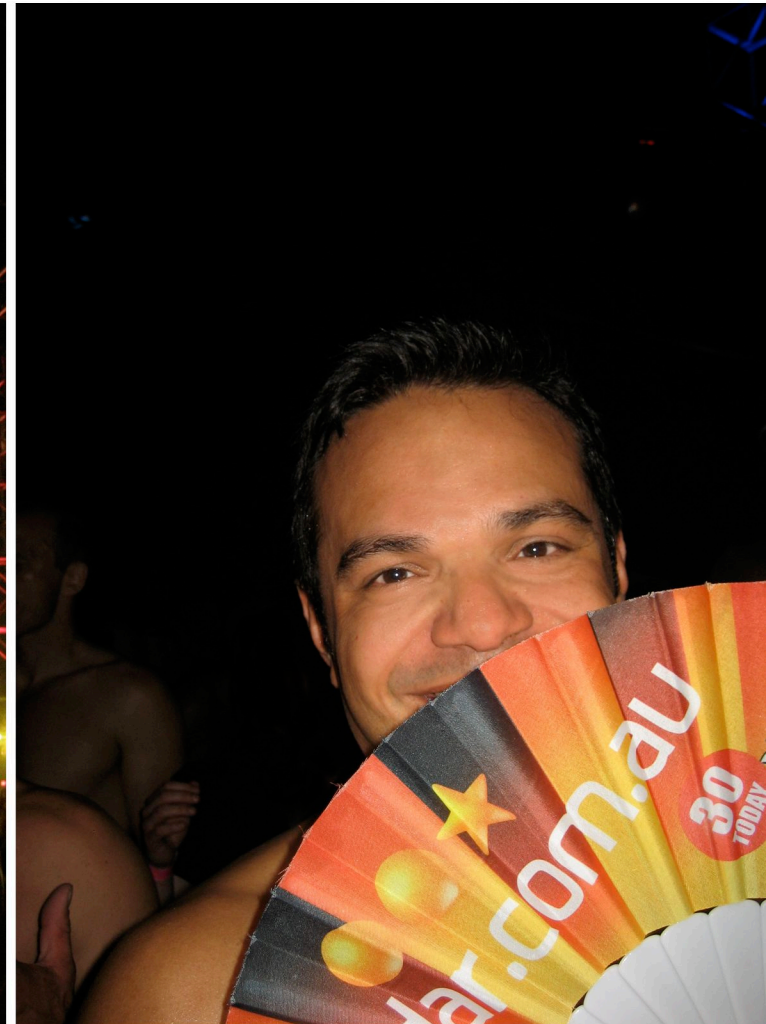
QUEEN













### **Farewell Oceania**

Monday, March 3, 2008

[Washington DC - Rob]

Sunday afternoon we spent some time saying goodbye to Tony and Carl. They were headed to Bali Monday morning. That evening, we had tickets to another event, but simply couldn't rally. Instead, we went with a bunch of our new friends (who also skipped the event) to have dinner at a greek restaurant on Oxford Street. It was sad to say goodbye, but it was great to have one last dinner together with the group we met our second night in Sydney.

Monday was an early morning. I had some cereal and we packed. We taxied to the airport and were able to move through immigration fairly quickly to make our noon flight. With a little time to spare, we had a little breakfast at the airport. Once on our Qantas flight, they served us lunch. We kept ourselves amused with the personal entertainment system in each chair. 'Enchanted' and 'Beowulf' were the movies of the day/night/whatever. After breakfast and some naps, we landed in LA around 6:30 Monday morning. Yes, we landed almost 6 hours before we took off. Hungry, we searched for a burger, but Burger King was only serving breakfast. If you are counting, this is breakfast #4, we're totally over breakfast now. The flight to Dullus was uneventful. By the time we got home at 6:30 Monday evening, we had been traveling for 26 hours.

This has certainly been the trip of a lifetime. With 3,000 photos, we will have memories to cherish for years to come (unless my hard drive crashes). Thanks to everyone who made this vacation so memorable!





