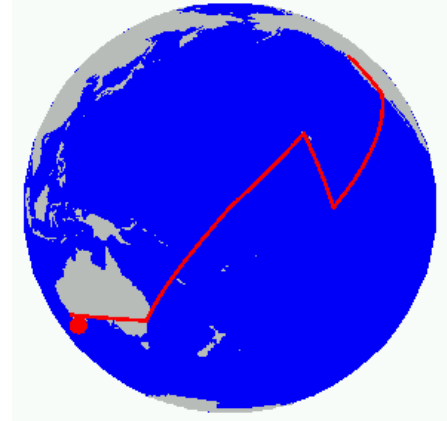


Kayaking Down Under

**Another Excellent Adventure,
This Time in III Parts**

**By Curt Mobley
with photos by Curt and Grace**



Part I: The Flight from Hell

In most of my trip reports I describe only the good stuff, but for this adventure getting there was the interesting part of the trip. I'll eat a bowl of witchetti grubs (just google it) if a single word of this horror story is not true. On the advice of my attorney, I omit the name of the airline.

My flight boarded on time for the 13 hour overnight flight from Los Angeles to Sydney. They promised us a dinner as soon as we took off, then a midnight snack, and then breakfast just before we landed in Sydney at 6 AM. However, as soon as every seat of the 747 was filled and the door was shut, the pilot said, "We're trying to locate a leak in one of the fuel tanks. We'll keep you posted on the takeoff time." So these greedy capitalist scum knew before we boarded that we would not be taking off on schedule, but they boarded us anyway so that people could not reschedule flights or change airlines. Four hours later we were still sitting on the runway. Then the genius mechanics decided that if they drained the fuel out of the tank, it wouldn't leak any more. Makes sense, I guess, but doesn't inspire a lot of confidence in the mechanics. They drained the tank and we finally took off five hours late.

As soon as we were airborne the pilot said, "Now that we're drained one fuel tank, we don't have enough fuel to reach Sydney, so we're going to stop in Fiji to refuel. No problem, though, since that will add only another hour or two to the flight." Dinner was finally served about 7 hours late, making this the longest time I have ever gone without food.

Need I say that I was in a middle seat between two porkers who were way overdue for their stomach staplings, and that my knees were touching the seat in front, so that I couldn't even stretch my legs out straight? Not since the close-packed slave ships of two centuries ago has anyone been crammed into such a small volume. Unable to sleep, I read two books during the next few hours. I then noticed that the sun was rising over the right wing tip. Not a good sign, I thought, since fifth-grade geography had left me with the impression that Australia was somewhere southwest of the US. I was about to suggest that the navigator check the compass when the pilot came on again. "Good morning. We got half way to Fiji when an elderly lady began having heart problems, so we're taking her to Honolulu. No problem, though, since it will take only another four hours to reach Hawaii."

I offered to garrote the old hag with my shoelaces and get us back on course. However, the spineless pilot declined my generous offer of mercy (both to the woman and to the other passengers) on the grounds that it could cause unnecessary legal problems related to whether the investigation into her untimely demise would be governed by international law (since we were over the Pacific Ocean), U.S. law (since the airline was a U.S. carrier), Fijian law (where we would first touch down), or Australian law (where we would finally dump the corpse).

We finally landed in Honolulu, at which time the pilot said, “The crew and I are now off duty. I hope they can find another crew to take you onward to Sydney. Oh, by the way, you can’t leave the airplane because of Customs Regulations. Have a nice day.” As I recall from fifth-grade geography, both California and Hawaii are US states and we had not stopped anywhere, so it wasn’t clear to me why U.S. Customs would forbid us from getting off of the plane and the crew refused to say. I think they were simply lying to keep us on the plane and maximize our misery.

After a couple of hours a new crew was located, the plane was refueled (except for the leaking tank), and we took off for the 9.5 hour flight from Honolulu to Sydney. Then they served the breakfast that was originally intended for when we had almost reached Sydney. It consisted of an small dab of an egg-like substance, now at least two days old. We next learned that they had not loaded any more food or drinks in Honolulu, so we would get to do the next 9 hours without so much as a diet Pepsi to drink. An hour before landing in Sydney, they finally served the small sandwich that was to have been the midnight snack. It was so disgusting that I would not have thrown it on the ground for fear that a stray dog might choke on it.

We finally landed in Sydney nine hours late, after having been onboard for 22 hours. Christopher Reeve would not have been as happy to walk again as I was to get off of that cattle car and stretch my legs. Only an Iraqi in Abu Ghraib prison or a factory-farmed chicken could understand. At least 150 people had missed connecting flights, and the airline had a total of one agent on duty to help everyone reschedule flights. I finally reached Perth about 12 hours late. When I got home two weeks later there was a letter from the airline apologizing for “any possible inconvenience that I might have experienced on the flight.” I suppose an “inconvenience” might include starvation, dehydration, sleep deprivation, and being crippled for life. The only reason I was using this sorry excuse of a bankrupt airline was that my trip was paid for by the Navy, which required me to fly on a US carrier. Next time, I’ll pay my own way and fly Qantas. Grand total: 35 hours from Seattle to Perth.

Part II: The Conference in Fremantle

Fremantle is a beautiful town with well preserved Victorian buildings. For the next week I paid my dues there to the Navy by giving two talks and two poster sessions, and schmoozing the appropriate program managers. Enough said.

Fremantle architecture



Part III: Fun at Last

Ann had instructed me to check out Western Australia for possible post-retirement kayaking action. I therefore persuaded my lovely young colleagues Grace, Wendy, Amanda, and Karen that a few days on the water would help them recover from a week of conference presentations. The invited males all turned me down because they “had too much work to do.” Typical Y chromosome problems. We hired a local kayaking guide, Lydia, who both spoke Australian and wasn’t afraid to drive on the left side of the road, and we all headed for Broke Inlet in d’Entregasteau National Park on the southwest coast.

The southwest corner of Australia is similar to the green, rolling hills of Virginia, except for the five-foot-tall emus mixed in with the grazing cattle and the kangaroos bouncing through the lush forest, but you already knew that from fifth-grade geography. Along the way, we stopped to check out a most amazing tree. Some bloke had hammered two-foot-long pieces of 3/4 inch rebar into the tree to make a spiral ladder all the way to the top, about 160 feet up. The photo shows Grace and Amanda about 50 feet up the ladder. Their mothers do not know they did this. Interestingly, the two rock climbers, Wendy and Curt, declined this opportunity to die. After another couple of tourist stops, we finally reached Broke Inlet in late afternoon and made camp on the beach.

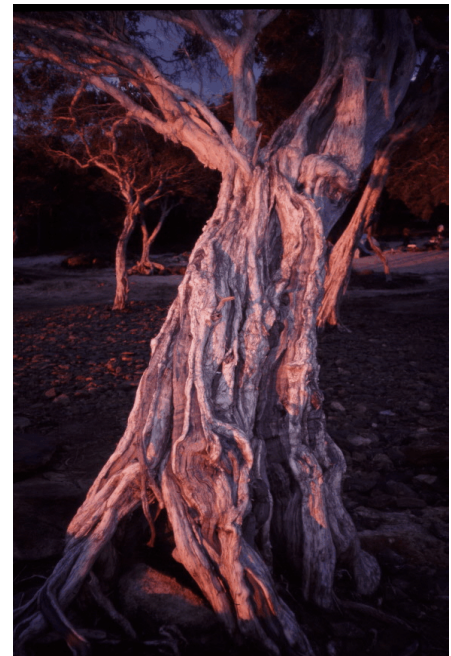


The amazing tree climb



Sunset at Camp 1 on Broke Inlet

The gnarled white trunk of a paperbark tree glowing pink in the last light of the day



Broke Inlet is about 10 miles long and 5 wide, and connects to the Southern Ocean by a narrow channel about two miles long. At the ocean end, a sand bar periodically closes the channel and the inlet fills up with fresh river water to a level about six feet above sea level. Then the lake/inlet cuts through the sand bar and drains back to sea level. The huge ocean waves then reform the bar and the process repeats.

The next morning we paddled across the lake/inlet and set up camp on a lovely 'roo-tracked beach on the channel, a mile from the ocean. We then paddled to the bar at the end of the inlet to take a stroll on the beach. My hopes for a game of nude beach volleyball and some body surfing were put on ice, literally, by the cold winter wind blowing north from Antarctica, which lies only a few miles to the south.



Packing the boats on morning two



The Black Tiger Snake. Photo by Grace.

No sooner had we started our beach walk than we ran across a five-foot-long Black Tiger Snake (*Notechis ater occidentalis*), who was also beachcombing. Australians are quite proud of their snakes and other critters, which are among the world's most deadly. The aggressive BTS, for example, has a 45% fatality rate for untreated bites. However, if you check the statistics, you find that on average only 1.6 people per year are killed in Australia by snake bites, compared to 10 by bees and 21 by horses. I'll take my chances with the snakes in the wilderness, and stay away from farms. Aussie hype notwithstanding, though, I deemed it prudent not to pet this elusive elapid, since we were many hours of paddling and driving from the nearest hospital. I allowed fearless Grace to do the up-close and personal photography work.

After a day on the beach, we headed back to camp and dinner. I was hoping for bush tucker (lizards, witchetti grubs, 'roo tails, etc.), but we had a vegetarian on the trip, which prevented sampling the true Aussie cuisine. Most interestingly, we cooked all of our meals on driftwood fires. This would be unheard of in the US, where most wilderness areas are overrun with people and would soon be stripped bare if people were allowed to build fires. However, Western Australia is one million square miles (about one third the size of the lower 48 US states) but has a population of only 1.6 million people. This low population density allows the luxury of a campfire.



Amanda helping stir the pot.



The next morning we had a hard paddle into rain and a cold headwind, with waves large enough to break over the double kayaks. We spent the afternoon checking out a fabulous virgin forest of jarrah and karri trees (species of eucalyptus) up to 10 or 12 feet in diameter and 300 feet tall. There was even a really cool metal sidewalk through the tree tops, about 125 feet up, that gave us a parrot's eye view of the forest canopy.

The sky walk through the tree tops.



Then it was time to head home and return to the depressing reality of Dubya's election. (A poll in Australia showed 88 percent of the respondents favoring Kerry, which is about the same percentage Kerry got in Seattle.) We missed seeing any penguins on the beach at Broke Inlet, but we did see some on a previous day kayak trip to Penguin Island south of Fremantle. These little fellers sure are cute, and they're a good reason to return to Australia for more kayaking as soon as possible.

Good on 'ya, mates!!

Blue or Fairy Penguin, about 15 inches tall. Photo by Grace.