

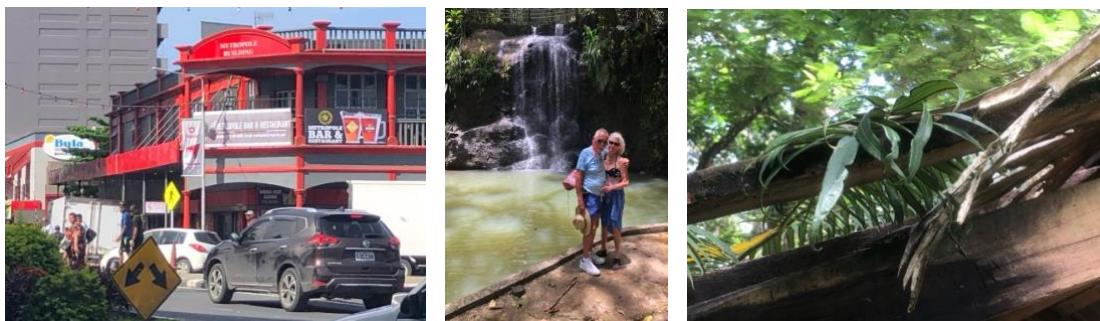
EPISODE IV - Down Under

American SAMOA

Had to bypass, not exactly sure why. Scuttlebutt says insufficient fuel available.

Here's a bit more of Suva, Fiji

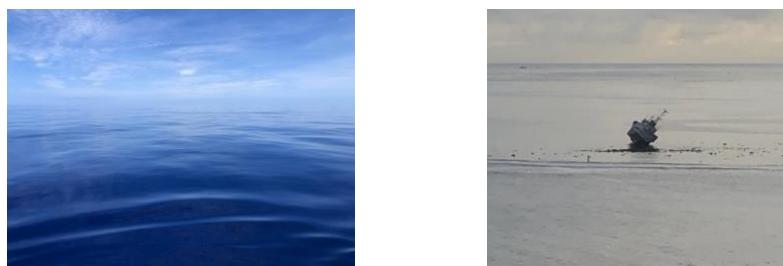
The islands had a festival feeling. We were among the first to disembark. We got directions to city-center, hustled over the bridge and walked. The usual supply of tours hawkers were a-plenty but we were on a quick mission to find a birthday card and post office to mail it to grandson Tyler. The Post office had no cards, neither did the subsequent 3 stores, but we did find some offerings at a shop with a few selections: all for under the age of 14, pictures of things an 18 year old would sneer at but, hey, whatchagonnado. Back to store with P.O. in the back, paid the proper coinage, waited while clerk double-checked content(s) for whatever, made sure it was glued shut, and off we went back-tracking to ship. Along our course we managed to a-friend a local who wanted to show us shops that he felt we needed to see, eventually offered him some money for his "tour guiding" and moseyed to a sidewalk coconut water seller. 'Berta gave her a large bill, for which she got no change ... that was the "tip."



BULA! Greetings, looking for card/postage. Ready for a dip? Along the trail.

We had scheduled an excursion for the afternoon – waterfalls hike at Pamanua Rain Forest Reserve. A bumpy ride, enroute we saw a very large jail that housed men and women, and there were different levels of institution as they progressed through their penal assignments. For example, visible from the road were clotheslines full of washing, signs of homemaking around back doors of square concrete domiciles. There were also many graves on this Queen's Road. Decorations gave easy clues to who was buried within, so we were told. There was also a special facility for mental ill patients. The American Embassy used to be located somewhere along this road as well, but if so, it wasn't pointed out when we passed it.

Coloi-Suva Forest Park started out as an easy walk on dirt roads on this nice warm day, no rain. We meandered through hapu ferns and other vegetation similar to Hawaii's. Lots of birds similar to our Mynah. The trails were small rocks, dirt & reinforced with wood slats here and there and log railings that need constant up keep. The group was broken up into those who wanted the easy or more strenuous route. There were "guides" young men who accompanied all the geezers and offered their hands for lifts up or down. In our opinion, they should have been a little more selective on allowing participation. One woman had to practically be hand-held the entire trek, and we feared for her survival. Oh well. The Suva "guides" were very agreeable, interesting to talk to, and accommodating. The falls were a series of 4 or 5 & 8 feet tall. The largest & deepest pond was luscious. It felt so good to get in and swim.



Even the most tranquil Pacific seas ... can lead to disaster.

New Zealand

Auckland:

Aotearoa (Long white cloud), aka New Zealand to the colonizers, is a land in recovery. After over two hundred years of sometimes brutal, and always intimidating foreign rule, the Māori are emerging from their status as second-class citizens, if they were recognized as citizens at all. Language, dance, cultural practice are all being assimilated into the government and general population's awareness.

The city of Auckland, our first stop on the north island, exhibits little of the national indigenous peoples awareness of changes, other than a few pieces of art and interpretive displays. We got a far more reflective vision of the pre-contact Māori civilization from the expressive dance and song by the troupe that performed onboard the Island Princess, they did some of the best hakas we've ever seen.

Arrival into this city was beautiful in the early morning. We don't always get up early enough to go up-deck to watch all the action of escort boats, sunrise, docking alongside "piers", getting gang planks aligned, and a myriad of maritime activity. We did have a welcome day on shore with an extended walkabout in the city that included the extensive walk along the ocean front, up Queen's St (all the main super chic stores), wandering down adjoining.



Queen St. Māori sculpture 'Sky Cit' tower JUMP! Marina pedestrian drawbridge - open

streets, waterfront, parks, and the heart of the business district with its (now as a major city, almost compulsory) 'tower'. It is the tallest man-made structure in New Zealand and the Southern hemisphere. This concept was conceived by locals, of course, who wanted to bring their city up to something to be proud of. Now, "Sky City" in the middle of Auckland City is a destination to JUMP. It's a little different than a bungee jump but it still is a very long way down, even if you are harnessed, strapped in, etc. This version has a 'bungee jump' from the upper tower deck to the street level. Joe aka 'Jose' Wheeler, one of the Castaways, did the jump, but it wasn't a real bungee dump, rather a contained open-air drop that was braked to a gentle stop at the bottom, but the "rush" must be a good one as Joe wanted to immediately go again. We wandered along streets that intercepted pocket parks and one huge soccer/rugby/cricket park with fields for all the sports laid out and surrounded by old trees that provided welcome shade during the mid-day sun. Heading back toward the cruise ship pier we stopped at a marina walkway bar for a burger/beer/chips (fries to you Yanks) lunch. The marina is huge, as Kiwi's are noted for their excellent yacht sailing abilities and all the harbors are filled with millions of dollars' worth of boats. One must learn a little about their Ancestral Maunga, another volcano, like Mauna Kea. It stands tall, shrouded in history with legends to be heard of a time before mankind. Given the extent of the city, there wasn't time to visit the countryside within the time constraints of the one-day-in-port schedule of our ship, so a stroll back landed us in our stateroom with time for a nap before the evening 'what did you do today' Castaway Happy Hour exchange in our favorite haunt, the 'Explorers Lounge'.

As we left port, we found ourselves watching for a green flash at sunset. We never realized how many islands comprise New Zealand and how mountainous it all is until we watched the land passing by as we threaded our way between islands. The inter-island coastal waters are clear and calm, and the foliage comes right down to the water's edge with few beaches. There are huge scars on the mountainsides, the results of extensive timber clear-cutting for export.

New Plymouth

We booked a private tour to sample some notably great wines at three local wineries. Unfortunately, not much of this great wine is exported. As our guide commented, "We keep the good stuff"- The vineyards are well balanced with the climate, dirt, rain fall, etc. Plus, we stopped at a chocolate shop where Whittaker's famous chocolate with caramel* was being made. Fancy decorations, glassed in production line, and artistic designer packaging, it was like a miniature version of Hilo's Big Island Candy Company plunked in the middle of hundreds of acres of vineyards. As we headed back to the port we stopped at a last small winery, 'Johanneshof', founded by a German family, where we purchased a small supply to take back to the ship.



The wine excursion, chocolate stop, and guard sheep

To complete our classic New Zealand experience, there was a friendly sheep keeping guard over the tasting tables. We all sipped wine and ate chocolates, what a grand day. We'd hired a driver so the 10 of us had no worries, although there was a brief scare when we pulled out of the drive directly into the path of an oncoming car ... honking of horns, rude hand gestures, and perhaps a call to the home office judging by the driver's reaction when his cell phone rang. In fairness to our driver, the car was speeding well over the limit, so distance judgment was iffy.

*We saved the bulk of our chocolate hoard from here, along with later procurements from Cape Town, SA, but alas we forgot it all in the on-board refrigerator when we debarked at Civitavecchia ... I hope Ron, our long-suffering cabin steward enjoyed them.

Picton

A sunny day in a small town. As with all the small town harbors we visited there are acres of cut logs, and huge piles of wood chips and sawdust, all bound to Japan, China, and other Asian countries to provide for paper and compressed wood products. We perused the local beach, a fantastic Museum, chatted with locals, including the rector of the main church in town. It was situated directly across the street from the museum, which chronicled the establishment of the main island colonies. When we raved about the museum (which has been there for years), he admitted that he had never visited it ... how does anybody do that? We walked around a bit more, sampled the local brew and pizza, and jumped on the complimentary cruise shuttle in plenty of time for all-aboard.



Port after port, stacks of thousands of logs

Interior of first church in south NZ

Port Chalmers/Dunedin

Chalmers is a small port town, several kilometers from the city of Dunedin, a Scottish founded colony city. We limited ourselves to a central walkabout in a chilly drizzle, looking for featured contemporary wall art. The main train station

is a beautiful Edwardian building with some clever period stained glass windows. The rail line offers a several-hour excursion train that would have been fun, but it wasn't running on our port day. A lot of our shipmates would have ridden the tour, and better coordination would have given the activity a big revenue boost had they planned for our ship day. There was also a planned Chinese New Year celebration in town, and it appeared that they were starting to set up for festivities despite the rain, but everything was scheduled too late for ship passengers to stay.



Dunedin train station



Chalmers port sunrise



Found wall art



Waiting out the rain in Chinatown

It took us four sea days to round the southern tip of South Island and sail direct to Sydney, OZ, and we started to get into some of the heaviest seas on the trip to date as we entered the 'roaring forties', famous for stormy conditions. Our itinerary was supposed to include sailing along the Fjordland coast, but heavy swells caused us to divert direct to Sydney.

Australia

Sydney

Sydney Harbor is always exciting as it has its famous Opera House 'Sails' and the Sydney Harbor Bridge that take up the panorama. Our ship is too large to dock at the available port, anchored away into the harbor, and we were transported by tender to a dock at the Opera House plaza. From there a walk path through shops and eateries filled with "memoranda" squares commemorating something special leads to the streets of the district. The one memoranda that most interested Roberta was an aboriginal writer, Kate Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), who was a writer, educator and political activist who encouraged more rights for the aboriginal people. Her history is much like the American Indians. With much help from Fran, our Aussie expert, she led us to the exit & into the OZ world of taxi's, hustle & bustle.



The obligatory Sydney Harbor Bridge and Opera House photos. Harbor tender to shore, walkway historical plaque.

We hustled a cab and headed to the Vaucluse district to rendezvous with R's friends of 60 yrs. ago in Gordon and Marg's beautiful Mediterranean style home. Gordon, David, and Jim had a good reminiscence of the friendships shared over the many years. A couple pictures were even delved up out of the archives. And, Chula, we wished you could have been there. We had a fantastic seafood lunch by the sea, full of reminiscing, catch-ups, and being OZ, and beer before we caught the ferry back to the ship. Berta even saw where she worked when she immigrated to OZ for a couple of years in the late 1960's. There were many tales, and attempts to remember, what-who-where-when after over 50 years of time passing. The whys are lost to history, except to say it was the 1960s. Gordon's firm 'Marr Contracting' is into its third generation as a family business, and provides specialized engineering, contracting, and project management for heavy lifting cranes worldwide, including building the world's longest clear span bridge in Istanbul, Turkiye. Gordon transported us on a sightseeing ride around Sydney neighborhoods and the harbor in a showroom perfect 18-year-old Bentley (only 30,000 miles) that he drove through Sydney's narrow lanes like Mad Max!



Gordon & Marg Marr's world – Marr lifts, their beautiful home, and the spectacular Bentley.



Left - the Aussie gang Majorca, SP late 1960's ('Berta lower right) Right – Sydney, AU, now

Having only a few hours in a single day in which to experience a vibrant Sydney harbor and city exposes the primary flaw in 'cruising'. You spend days of gazing (or rather staring) at an empty sea, and then have only a few hours at your destination. The operators attempt to ameliorate the ennui by making up silly games, 'intellectual' activities, entertainment, and far too much food and alcohol.

Melbourne

Two days at sea landed us in Melbourne, our Aussie guide Fran's home town. This city had changed from a casual city with a laid-back style to a hustle & bustle go-go action. It's convenient, friendly, economic, train that putzed through the streets now did not function all that well and had to share its space with trams. One had to be extra cautious when crossing any of the streets. However much the city may offer, our stay was overshadowed by a monster concert by Taylor Swift which had the entire downtown swarming with giddy teenage girls drenched in glittering costumes, outrageous sunglasses, and combat boots. The entire city was one giant two day long street party, even the tram routes were changed to accommodate the throng. Despite the crush you couldn't help but be caught up in the outright joy of the crowd.

We did have a couple of missions to accomplish: 1) obtain a diagnosis of a skin condition Kapalili got from a hot tub soak. With Fran's help we got into a walk-in clinic that had a dermatologist on duty and available for an exam and consultation. She was able to suss it out, recommend an Rx, which got promptly filled at the pharmacy next door. 2) Smitty loves the Aussie work shorts, King Gee 'tradies', which are available only in OZ. Found LOD Work Wear at 35 Crockford St, Port Melbourne, open 8-5:30. Bingo. You can even buy them online; for you guys who might be interested: allish@lodpromotions.com. Before heading into the city proper we chanced upon a couple of 'thrifties' while looking for some unique clothing, and 'Berta found a couple of small items, and while we were walking a distance to accomplish these tasks, we stepped in for some lunch in a pub-type restaurant for a taste of local brew before the long haul back to the ship.

After wandering in the general direction of downtown, we caught the port-to-city tram and entered the downtown 'holiday spirit' throng on our way looking for the Melbourne library a 'must see' ordered by Fran. The only comparison we have is the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. We wondered around and looked at several exhibits related to archeological (particularly Egyptian) and cultural projects conducted under library supervision and had a fun exchange with a Korean mom and daughter as we all crammed into a busy lift.



Harbor park, wall art (aka graffiti) St George protecting the library from the dragon, library gallery & tomfoolery.

Before long it was time to find our way back to the return tram, our ship, and, once again, the open ocean for a few days, heading toward Perth.

Freemantle (Perth), Rottnest Island

With our adjusted itinerary, we've been dropped from Hobart, Tasmania, and are steaming direct across the bottom of Australia, around, and up to Fremantle Port, Perth five days at sea. OZ is a big country, projected on a map, it's the same size as the mainland US. We're sailing the equivalent of traveling direct from NYC to LA, at approx. 25 kts, without ever leaving Australian waters.

Capt. Cook* showed up on the East Coast in 1770 and noted in his journal of the fertile soil. George Vancouver showed up 1799 and claimed the island for England, which promptly decided that Australia was a wonderful place to dump undesirables from Mother England. The resulting population gleaned from prisons and press gangs became the basis for today's Australia. It's been said, *"Australia was founded by prisoners expelled from England, and America was founded by religious pilgrims seeking to establish God's kingdom on Earth. Australia got the better deal!"* James Sterling showed up in early 1800 and started Swan River Colony in West Australia. Western OZ took some years to be developed, and one of the first structures to be built was the Fremantle Prison, started in 1855 with the old style round house and cannons. The prison today is the largest convict-built structure (Leave it to the Pommies to arrest and imprison someone, ship them more than halfway around the world, force them to build a prison, and then lock them up inside it.) in western Australia and the most intact convict establishment in the nation. But I digress ...

*When the ship first landed on what would become Australia, a lone Aborigine observed the white men, and his first utterance was recorded phonetically. It wasn't until recently that the actual statement was parsed out of the notes of the encounter. He said, "Go away!" 3.1% of the population are Abos.

Freemantle is a busy harbor, and the town is busy with art centers, Maritime Shipwreck Museum, War Memorial, statues, brewery, restaurants and beaches. It is also known for its "street art". We actually didn't even go into Freemantle town but limited our excursions hiking across the port to the Rottnest Island ferry and return to the ship.



Lots of marine stuff going on. All we saw of Fremantle was the Quakka quest, which took up the entire day.

Rottnest Island - Quakkas

Quakkas have been called 'the worlds cutest animal' and reside only on Rottnest Island, a Dutch name meaning Rat Nest Island. Smit was keen to see them, so we took a day trip on a ferry to see this cute little critter. We rented bicycles, grabbed some water and maps and off we went. Well, now these were not electric bikes, and our legs were not in any shape to maintain a pace to cover the hilly island. So, we hopped off often for a quick dip in the ocean to explore an old shipwreck, investigate and old relic or two, search for Quakkas which were to be under certain bushes, and to sample some beer. This appears to be a destination for a quick getaway for sun and sea, as soon as the weather turns warm--about now.



We did find the little beasties (left- webshot, center & right realtime), at least those that have become dependent on scavenging tourist dropped food. They are nocturnal, but more than willing to stay out in the daytime hanging around the restaurants. Actually, the Dutch were correct, they do really look like rats.

We never did go to Perth.

Port Louis, Mauritius

As a result of the redirect of the voyage due to the middle-east conflicts we headed off to South Africa, by way of the Indian Ocean. L-o-n-g haul across open sea ... eight days at sea from OZ to the island nation of Mauritius. Arrival at Port Louis in the early dawn revels a volcanic island. There are lots of Chinese fishing boats and industrial cranes for cargo handling. The island is an international cargo handling port, with ships off-loading regional cargo onto other ships going on further. There is no evidence of indigenous people ever occupying Mauritius. The Dutch discovered, claimed, and colonized the island with the intent to establish a port and to grow sugarcane. To that end they raided Africa, enslaved anyone they could grab, and dropped them into 'their' new colony. It didn't last and they pulled out leaving a bunch of displaced Africans behind. Along came the French, who happily put the idle transplanted slaves back to work as THEY attempted a colony until they were booted out by the English, who imported Chinese and Indian laborers as indentured servants. The Mauritians are quite happy with their mix, and the language and even the flag celebrate the uncommon mix of genes, languages, cultures, and religions.



The colors of the flag represent the multi-racial people. Chinese fishing boats in the harbor town & refueling.

More and more, tourism is replacing agriculture and small industrial output as the primary income driver, and the public waterfront appears rebuilt for the influx of tourists from boats. We were bussed from the boat and dropped off in an expansive structure of shops, eateries, and glitzy shops. At one section an array of Mary Poppin's umbrellas joined together crossways and lengthways to provide shade. Amidst all of this are some very old structures, cannons and lots of stone cannonballs, and a very old Post Office, which we ventured in and had quite an interesting experience---My letter had to be weighed; had to go to another desk with the correct scale; language communication was a bit of a problem; however, a retired man came to our rescue to explain the protocol, etc., and I would have to wait for about 5 to 10 more min. In the end we had an amusing chat about life in HI and Mauritius.



Hindu gods protect us from our driver! Searching for rum & stamps. Our floating gas station pulls up alongside.

We also wandered into the local marketplace (always interesting) to buy a T-shirt, pair of shoes, or find a toilet. Now here is a dilemma for us from HI, I don't know for sure about a lot of east coast states, but you must pay to use the toilette. If there is an attendant, they do not always have change. We have learned to riffle through all our change at the end of the day for the magic coin to meet the need @ the next port of call. We have a special coin purse for this valuable gem. We wanted to eat some Chinese food so off we went into the old section of the town, according to the map. BUT, it was pretty rough looking and we didn't have our Chinese friend with us to help us out so we scrapped the idea. Bought a bottle of the local brew (the island is famous for its rum) to try out back on the ship.

Leaving Port Louis, we face another weeklong open sea stretch on our way to Cape Town, South Africa, as we travel our unexpected voyage into fabled waters 'round the Horn', and up the west coast of Africa, compliments of the Houthi pirates in the Red Sea!

Somewhere along this segment I noticed a striking young woman crew member, Tina, from Spain. She is a ship's photographer who caught my eye because of her similarity to our oldest grandson, Rane. Turns out she is not only a opposite gender doppelganger, she has a shipmate who forms an almost perfect triad. Both were really excited to see Rane's photo on my phone.



Here ya go Rane ... if you ever wondered how you'd look transgender.

