

The

Student's Desk

ON LOCATION

Hello from Alice Springs,

I arrived on Saturday after some long drives across the desert – a thoroughly unique and enjoyable experience. What amazed me was the variety in which the scenery changed. Sure it was much the same for long distances, but when it did change, it did so dramatically. I was disappointed not to see anything marking my first entry into South Australia. If it weren't for my GPS, I would not have known I had crossed the border. The way was dotted with strange little towns like Olary. I assume such towns appear as travellers rests before the advent of motor cars and aeroplanes. By the way, if anyone's interested, Olary Pub is up for lease. I must admit I was glad to see the Spencer Gulf. From here, it a quick refuel and restock at Port Augusta before venturing into the desert again. On that point, the desert kind of never stopped. I expected to see a lush fertile strip, or maybe even a rainforest. But no. The desert goes all the way to the water.

I journeyed another 61km before arriving at Rangers View rest area. I had arrived just in time to be treated to a spectacular sunset reflecting off the ranges to the east. Of course, there was a sign saying that camping was not permitted. But I reckon if any law enforcement officer was going to take on 5 caravaners, 2 cyclists, and 1 crazy man with an out-of-town van, they would've been a brave person. The sign went on to say the area was only to be used by fatigued drivers. I thought, "well, I'm fatigued, I'm entitled to use it."

Cooper Pedy was a very interesting place. If Navarna does exist, it's on the way to Cooper Pedy. It's surrounded by absolutely NOTHING! There is NOTHING but rocks and dust. A lawn mower business would go very broke very quickly in Cooper Pedy. There's not a blade of grass to be found. It's the kind of place you'd expect Mad Max to come thundering down the street in his supercharged V8. Most of the streets are dirt, but the streets that are sealed are covered in dust anyway.

I visited an underground home and an underground museum. While I enjoyed the novelty of being underground, the effects of claustrophobia could be felt. Not that I experienced anxiety, but felt a little light headed which left me tired for the rest of the day.

While travelling out there I tried imagining what it must have been like for the first explorers and pioneers. I don't know if these men were courageous, or just undiagnosed madmen. I was somewhat bewildered by the way Cooper Pedy was established. It began by people hoping to strike it rich with opals. That people would come out here against the harshest of conditions to make a buck is staggering. Perhaps what is even more staggering is what people will pay for what in essence is a rock. Sure, I found the opal to be an object of beauty and wonder, but its value is purely aesthetic and has no practical value. And for this, you will easily pay \$90 for an uncut opal, or over \$600 for a ring. It speaks volumes for the human condition.

I stayed in the tourist park, perhaps for the last time. I can now understand why some people can't stand tourist parks, excepted for different reasons. It was cheap enough, and I didn't mind the people. But I was surrounded by a fence, as if I had done something wrong, and the outback I had come to experience was on the other side. I didn't like it.

I stopped again for the night at Kulgura Road House. While the accommodation was cheap enough at \$6.50 including a hot shower, diesel was something else again at \$1.72. It's \$1.419 in Alice Springs.

I found Alice Springs to be a very strange town in geography, people, and culture. The first thing I noticed was the geography. The town is surrounded by steep ridges. It makes sense that in WWII, Alice Springs was a major military base. The base would have naturally fortified by the geography.

I found the AIM centre and was a little thrown by an industrial looking building with an old bus parked in the yard. I thought surely no one lives here! But David, who's standing in for Norm and Lola with his wife, Jenny, and family, found me, and this indeed was there home. And the old bus in the yard? Yep, that was someone else's home too who likes to wander around.

Within a few hours, I quickly came face to face with some of the Aboriginal issues. A parishioner wanted a ride to a nearby camp. Camps are a little difficult to explain to people who haven't seen them before. Entry to the camps is not permitted unless you've been invited. I was asked if I wanted to come for the ride. They're open lots of land with around half-a-dozen large concrete blocks as houses which the aboriginals share. However, the amount of rubbish lying around is what's disturbing. Beer and soft drink cans, chip wrappers, bits of cars, burnt out and trashed cars, dogs roaming about. Now, before some goodie-two-shoes or desperate politician tries to make an agenda of Indigenous Australians being forced to live in third world conditions, this is actually their preference to other, more "civilised", forms of accommodation available to them.

This wasn't too difficult for me to understand to a large extent. For the past 6 years, I have occasionally asked why must I live in a flat filled with junk I hardly use as dictated by my western culture. I'd happily live out of my van to no end (although, at the end of 3 months, I'm sure I'll be glad to see my flat again!). This became clear when I rode down to Kangaroo Valley from Gosford. All I needed to live, food, clothes and shelter, was right there on my bike. It didn't make sense why I should have any more. True, I wasn't all that comfortable. Granted, my demands for comfort have increased substantially since that time. But the principal is still the same. Since my arrival in Alice Springs, I've been living out of the Hotel Royal and a corrugated iron shed come Sunday School room, come my kitchen. So, if I a white-fella feels this way, how could a nomadic people all of a sudden be expected live in houses as the white fella does?

What I could not understand was the amount of rubbish lying around. It was just senseless. The next day, I was privileged to go on the church bus to pick up people for church. Along the run, I was able to see a few more camps, and the story just got worse. Seeing rubbish on the ground is one thing. Seeing bits of bicycle along with other rubbish on house rooves – how on earth do you explain that?

I thought about this, and it seemed to be the people had no sense of looking after things. I wondered if this was because traditionally they were in a position of plenty – they could always get another of what they needed from the land. This is possible, although a better explanation may be is what ever they couldn't carry, the simply dispensed with. Also, as I recall from my reading, the measure of a man was how well he could hunt, not balance a cheque book, and maintain a house and 2 cars. It needs to be understood that the Aboriginal culture is very, very different from the European/Western culture. Both, however are similar in that they have some wisdom about them, and no shortage of folly.

I have been striving to understand the relationship between aboriginals and the land - a concept which is difficult for us white fellas to understand. From what I've been able to find out, Aboriginals derive their identity and value from genealogies. It is their belief that their ancestors created all that can be seen. (Although, I'm not sure how this fits in with the popular thesis that the current Australian Aborigines came from Asia, possibly where modern day India is. Support for this can even be found within Aboriginal tradition). So for them, the land speaks to them of their identity. So to remove the Aboriginal from the land is to remove them from their identity. This is difficult for what fellas to understand because our value and identity structures a completely different. From a young age, we're taught that having this or that toy will improve our social status. As adults, the object of our identity changes – cars, houses, boats, fashion, electronic gizmos – but the message is still the same – get this and your social status will improve. So for Aboriginals, possessions have no value. While as white

fellas, we may be incensed by the senseless trashing of all that's given them, it may be we've tried to help before we've understood.

Here's an interesting thing I've thought. While we may scoff at mythologies of ancestors creating the land, we send our kids to school to be taught they're a product of chance. That they're a mistake! Now I don't want to be advocating Aboriginal mythology as fact. But I really need to ask the question, which culture has the bigger identity crisis? Though false the Aboriginal identity may be, at least they have one!

As I went around on the bus, this strange town of Alice Springs became stranger. I would see a house with all the appearances of public housing, and just a few doors down would appear to be the usual affluent middle-class household. And despite Alice Springs being in the middle of nowhere, people still live on top of each other, and squash townhouses together in crowded neighbourhoods as they do in coastal cities. I found it quite strange.

The Sunday church services was interesting, and it reminded me allot of the services at the Allambie Heights Spastic Centre - people moving about, calling out, fidgeting. But it must be said, during the sermon, they hung on every word spoken. David did a good job of speaking to the mixed congregation constantly using terms like "white fella" and "black fella" as I have consciously done in this email. A point that stuck in my mind is grog, or drink, is an issue for both black fellas and white fellas. The only difference is, when the black fella drinks, it's done in the open so every one sees it. The white fella drinks behind closed doors so no one sees it.

Unfortunately I have not conversed with any Aboriginals yet, though not without opportunity. They occasionally come to the door unannounced. I wasn't sure about the situation, and so have kept my distance. David has encouraged me to sit and talk with them when they come saying my disability doesn't appear to be an issue for them. Though generally, they are a shy people and it takes a long time to build trust.

Walking around Todd Mall on Sunday afternoon was a unique experience. There were Aboriginal sitting everywhere. Some were selling paintings, but most were just sitting while dogs roamed the streets. It was as if they were still living by there traditional ways, and the white fella had built his shopping centre around their camp. Allot of the time you hear them speaking there own language. I knew there were still Aboriginal languages about, but expected them to be spoken in remote communities. For some, English is either there third or forth language after two or three separate aboriginal languages, not just variants of the same language.

Well, I have so much more to write, but I really must get this email off before leaving Alice Springs. My itinerary has been added to. Tomorrow I leave for the Devils Marbles then Canteen Creek, a remote Aboriginal community with an AIM centre. I'm a little hesitant in going as it is almost 200km off the highway, and a 4wd is recommended. But Richard is expecting me on Friday and will know where I am, and the road has recently been graded. All the roads are well marked on and are GPS. Then there are the 2 golden desert rules – plenty of fuel, plenty of water. From here, I'll go to Tennant Creek and visit the church which is led by Aboriginals before returning to Alice Springs. This will mark the end of the AIM section of the trip.

I hope to write more soon.

JASON