

## **Awestruck in Australia**

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With my very limited trip preparation, I expected Australia to be like the American Wild West with an Australian accent and wildlife. What I found was something much more...

At the end of May to early June, Australia transitions from autumn to their winter season. This meant that Sydney greeted us with cloudy skies and rainy sights. While it's true what they say about Australian weather being completely unpredictable by any forecast, we planned for the chillier, rainy conditions of autumn/winter season in Sydney.

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Impossible to plan for was the sheer magnitude of difference between our destination and our origin. From the start of our trip in chilly Sydney to our next stop in tropical Cairns/Queensland, throughout the unbelievable same-country climate switch, one constant remained: the locals were genuinely the kindest, most welcoming hosts. They did not put up a cold front like in the northern United States or hide judgment behind a nice facade as is common in the South... the Aussies are just good, honest, friendly people, always down to drop what they are doing to lend a hand, give a recommendation, or gladly walk/drive a visitor to the place they are looking for.

Australian locals of the animal kingdom also differ from their United States counterparts, especially so in tropical Cairns. In the majority of the states, it is common to drive by groups of deer, geese, and ducks on highways. Cairns brings whole new players to the game, swapping familiar deer for wallabies, smaller relatives of kangaroos, and the standard goose for majestic flocks of yellow-crested cockatoos, often in a fluffier frenzy of long white feathers.

Not lucky enough to see wildlife in the wild? Australian zoos have got you covered! Having been to quite a few zoos around the world, I wasn't sure that I would see much that I hadn't already seen... but that was before I stepped foot in the Sydney Zoo and, later, the Kuranda Koala Gardens. Their revolutionary concept lets visitors fully immerse themselves in each animal's environment, allowing them to respectfully get up close and personal with each fascinating creature as opposed to observing through a glass wall. The animals are free to roam a larger territory and, thanks to a solid foundation of trusting relationships with zookeepers, feel a sense of comfort and trust in visitors as well. This immense mutual respect in every habitat zone fostered a zoo experience truly unlike any other.