

TRIALS & TEA CEREMONIES

Misadventures in Far Away Places

By Basho

Sample Chapter: The Ghan train and finding Franco

Across the vastness of the Outback by rail, a chance meeting reminds us that genuine connection often arrives unannounced and sometimes uncontrollable.

The Outback is commonly called a part of Australia, but when I viewed it on the map we were given by the hostel in Alice Springs, it seemed much more to me that Australia was really just a small part of the Outback. Australia is already distorted on globes, showing as much smaller than it actually is on the most common "Mercator projection", but - keeping in mind that it is the largest island in the world that so much of it is remote, vast, sparsely populated, bush lands was something of a revelation.

I also realised that calling it "sparsely populated" is also not really covering the truth of it, and the area is nearly 6 million square kilometres with a population of under seven hundred thousand. Having just come off a three-day adventure into the region, my biggest feeling driving through it on tarmacked roads stretching off into the almost infinite distance, was one of being in the domain of nature not of man. This was enhanced by sleeping out under the stars in "swags", a sort of army green canvas sleeping bag come mattress, which pulls down a cover over the head so that the group we camped with must have looked something akin to 20 body bags dumped in the desert. I was suitably nervous about sleeping in the wild but had been reassured that the time of year made a snake encounter very unlikely, and tarantulas stay away from the campfire. While individual swags are not the most inviting sleeping arrangements, the view of the night sky such remoteness afforded, absolved of any light pollution, is a true wonder to see. Nights in the desert, when the weather is being friendly, are clearer than anywhere else I have ever experienced. Stars don't just whirl overhead, but panoramically from horizon to horizon.

We returned to Alice proper, having enjoyed the tour, but I could already tell that tours were not going to be our "way" going forwards. Our entire trip was one where the only certainty in planning was the order of countries, our flights being booked entirely ahead of schedule. We could shift them- but not reorder them. Travelling this way, without an itinerary of any substance, is at first stressful with worrying about finding lodgings and being safe. However, one quickly reaches a mental point where you just stop worrying entirely and instead gain a sort of traveller consciousness and become very competent at finding somewhere to stay quickly. We decided to travel south and booked on the Ghan train the next day.

The Ghan train is one of the world's great train journeys. Just the name conjures images of

immense distances, red dust, the vast emptiness of central Australia. It also echoes those who opened up the Outback; the Afghan cameleers or "Ghans" were mainly Pashtu speaking camel riders who came from India and Pakistan in the times before the motor vehicle dominated travel. The naming of the train, I thought, justly recreates that spirit by connecting the far ends of the country in the same manner. This immense and singular transport starts off in Darwin, comes down through Alice Springs and crosses the desert heading south until finding its home in Adelaide.

Riding it is something of a backpacker rite of passage; the red dust famously glowing as the sun dips down, making the whole thing a romantic getaway coast to coast.

Our trip started less romantically, but more typically Aussie, maybe? An inauspicious start when the luggage truck ferrying backpackers' gear from Alice Springs was stolen, so our bags made the journey to the train platform in relays via the boot of one man's car. Leaving us standing, sweating under the midday sun, slathering on sun cream while folks heading back to Adelaide ribbed the locals about the laid-back pace up here.

Then we saw the gleaming train for the 19 hours stretching ahead to Adelaide. Being on a budget, we weren't in the posh premier carriages, naturally, but our red service attendant was friendly, the seats had plenty of legroom for those as tall as I, and there was promise of a lounge car and bar. As the train devoured the miles, announcements pointed out landmarks - the ancient Finke River formed by even older geological events 400 million years ago, which to me looked somewhat dried up from the vantage point of the train as it crossed the very long and low bridge. We also passed the human-looking abstract statue called the Iron Man, which the attendant told us was to commemorate the building of the railroad. Next, the all-important state border crossing blurred past as the light faded and I pressed my nose to the window.

Port Augusta marked the first real settlement, the first glimpse of water since Alice - the Gateway of Australia, where all routes seemed to converge. South of there, the landscape performed a startling quick-change act. One moment, the window framed nothing but infinite, ochre emptiness under a sky too vast to comprehend. Then, almost jarringly, the red bled away, replaced by rolling green hills startlingly familiar, the ghosts of English hedgerows flashing past, vineyards and wind turbines it felt, bizarrely, disconcertingly, like Somerset. Home, but not home.

We ended up in the lounge car the next morning, Cesca snapping photos of the unexpected greenery, me chatting to an elderly couple. Then a very loud man erupted into our quiet corner, loudly complaining about being mistaken for Doctor Death earlier. And just like that, our Adelaide plans took a sharp left turn.

This was the irrepressible Franco. Italian-Australian. Adelaide resident. And, hands down, the most continuously vocal human being I have ever encountered. He talked like he himself was a runaway train; a high-speed monologue careening through topics and rattling on endlessly.

It came out in a verbal stream of consciousness style that was more like being drowned in a fire hose of information that threatened to overwhelm my ability to keep up with the topic switching. He had just made the train, he explained, because he had been driving his old Corolla through the outback to visit some Aboriginal artist friends, but he had become comprehensively bogged down in red sand on the way back.

He continued that he has only survived the 18 hours (or was it three days? The story seemed fluid) through sheer willpower, meditation, and careful rationing before being rescued. It was a purely rhetorical story, which listening to felt like trying to catch butterflies in a hurricane. The man didn't seem to pause for breath. Politics, the stock market, the price of tomatoes at the grocer it all flowed out in an unstoppable torrent.

"Yes," he said, "I only survived because of the deep meditation skills I gained when I was a monk!"

"A monk?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, "I became a Catholic monk, when I walked across Europe dressed as Charlie Chaplin for peace."

"Dressed as-"

"Yes!" he interrupted, "I walk all the way from England to the Vatican!"

"Right ... and you became a monk ..."

"Yes! I arrived at the Vatican and stood upon the step and asked for an audience with the Pope."

"The ... Pope ..."

"Yes! And when the Pope came down to the steps to meet me"

My turn to interrupt, and I admit some incredulity crept into my voice at that point, "Oh! When the Pope came down-"

But Franco was on autopilot and simply continued nodding vigorously. "Yes! He came down and he said I should go to a monastery on a nearby hill and become a monk."

"Of course..."

"And they taught me the deep meditation skills, which I used to survive when I was bogged down in the desert and here we are!"

The clicking camera grabbed my attention and I glanced at Cesca; her eyes were wide, a faint smile playing on her lips - the look she gets when faced with magnificent absurdity.

Somewhere amidst this verbal flood, after learning where we were vaguely headed in Adelaide, came the invitation. "Hey, why don't you guys come stay with me?" he beamed, oblivious to the stunned silence he often left in his wake. "I'll show you around! Just, you know," a slight, almost imperceptible pause in the flow, "need a little hand... garden's a bit much for me. Perhaps," he beamed, "you could... mow the lawn?"

The offer hung in the air, absurd and strangely appealing. I looked again at Cesca. Was this guy for real? She caught my eye, held it for a second, then gave the tiniest, almost imperceptible lift of her chin, her lips twitching. The 'he's harmless, let's do it' signal. My own scepticism warred with exhaustion and the undeniable pull of a good story.

So, the next morning, after a night in a hostel, Franco collected us, his car still proudly wearing a thick coat of red outback dust. He deposited us in his living room in a leafy suburb, the monologue barely missing a beat, when suddenly the phone rang.

Still talking continuously he walked down the hall, picked it up and continued his sentence directly into the phone. This conversation went on for about only 30 seconds then he hung up unceremoniously, and still talking, came back to see us.

He handed us a key and explained he had to dash off for a few hours "This Aboriginal bloke in prison, he's freaked out, and won't come down from the roof. I have gotta go!" - and he then just upped and walked out, leaving two complete strangers alone in his very nice house. Extraordinary openness. Or perhaps just Franco being Franco.

We paused, both actually enjoying the silence.

"You know," I said to Cesca eventually, surveying the comfortable chaos of his living room, "your trustworthy face is remarkable. We really should consider a life of crime. Do you believe half of that he told us?"

She laughed. "Go look at the garden. Oh, and check the sideboard," she pointed.

I walked over and looked. My eyes snagged on a small, framed photo half-hidden behind a stack of books. I leaned closer. Franco, decades younger perhaps, but unmistakably him, dressed head-to-toe as Charlie Chaplin, standing on the steps of the Vatican, deep in conversation with Pope John Paul II.

The world tilted slightly. Okay. Maybe the monk story wasn't entirely fabricated. Right. Okay then. Lesson learned: never judge a book by its extremely talkative cover.

Franco, true to his word, gave us the grand tour of Adelaide later that day. A lovely city, actually planned by Colonel William Light with a controversial but ultimately successful grid layout, wide streets, civic squares, and a unique, expansive green belt surrounding the centre.

The next day was payback time: garden reclamation. Armed with what felt like forestry equipment, I began hacking paths through the deeply overgrown lawn, almost waist high and eventually uncovering not just grass but a forgotten pathway and the scattered bricks of a fallen barbecue. Cesca joined the fray, weeding the veggie patch with gusto. And Franco? He of course, provided continuous, enthusiastic, multilingual commentary on life, the universe, and compost heaps.

It was while clearing the barbecue rubble that it happened. Half-listening to Franco, reaching for another brick, a flash of warning colour under my hand. I froze. Looked down. It was a Redback spider. Small, glossy black, but with that unmistakable, bright scarlet stripe down its back. Poised.

"Franco!" I called out, trying to sound calmer than I felt.

He ambled over, peered down. "Oh yeah," he said, utterly unfazed. "Garden's full of 'em."

And then, before I could even process that terrifyingly casual statement, he nonchalantly pinched the spider between thumb and forefinger and flicked it dismissively over the fence. Like flicking away a woodlouse. Cesca and I just gasped at each other. What is it with Australians and things that can kill you?

Our stay with Franco was wonderful, truly. He's a fascinating man passionate, deeply compassionate, juggling university lecturing with Aboriginal advocacy and apparently, papal audiences. Someone who consciously chose a path less ordinary, valuing connection and experience over conventional success.

Meeting Franco, a chance encounter to savour, was possible only because of our getting away from tours and overly planned itineraries. We both agreed that in order to have these genuine connections, we must strive to do things differently and most importantly trust our own judgements. The world was not going to be a ride, but an adventure.

Enjoyed the sample? Buy the full book here:

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