

Heron Island

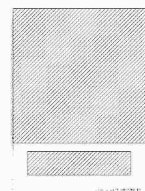
TRAVELS

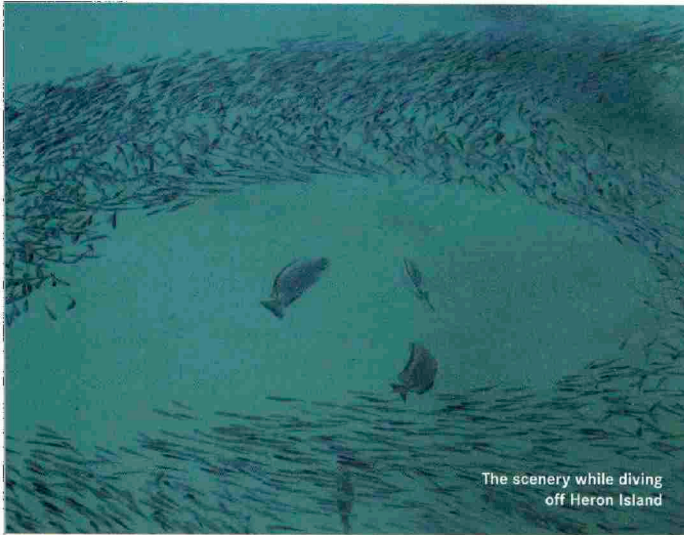
The author crisscrosses Australia in search of the perfect job, encountering a real-life Crocodile Dundee and a vastly beautiful and diverse country

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL FINK

Mermaid for Hire

THE AUSTRALIAN TOURIST BOARD recently concluded a global competition to fill the "best job in the world" — caretaker of a beautiful island on the Great Barrier Reef. Thousands applied, and one lucky soul won the job. But after traveling from Australia's jungles to the beaches, to the mountains and below the sea, I discovered there are "heaps" of people (as Aussies would say) convinced *they* have the greatest job in the world. A sampling:





The scenery while diving off Heron Island



Touring the back country

The Professional Mermaid

"My name is Marlin," says the 20-year old blonde at the Voyages Heron Island resort on the Great Barrier Reef. "I am from Sweden. I am a scuba instructor. I am a fish." Her daily life consists of diving into some of the world's most beautiful waters, guiding guests and relaxing at night in the hotel bar while sipping fruity cocktails and watching beautiful sunsets. "So what do you do on your days off?" I ask. She looks at me as if I'm stupid. "Go diving, of course."

During my visit, I make like a marlin and dive around the reefs, swimming through rainbow schools of fish and exploring neon cathedrals of coral. On the helicopter ride back to the mainland, the pilot angles the chopper over psychedelically blue reef formations to reveal schools of giant turtles, manta rays and palm-fringed atolls.

Real-Life Crocodile Dundee

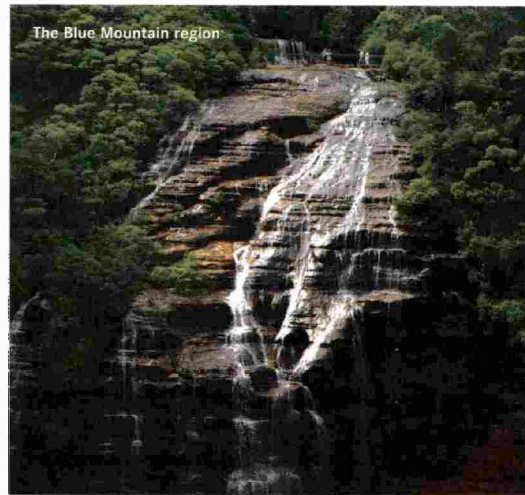
"When someone told me I could make money doing this, I would have fallen out of my chair . . . if I owned one," says Brian Rooke, a back-country tour guide in the Northern Territory, a real-life Crocodile Dundee. "Back in the day, I was unemployed and pretty much unemployable," he says as our jacked-up Toyota Land Cruiser

splashes through flooded roads. "I'd just go on a walkabout into the country, camping for a week or three. Then operators started bringing tourists to the outback and told me they'd pay me to come along." He laughs at the absurdity of the notion.

As we walk through the bush, Rooke points out edible plants and perilous areas populated by snakes and crocodiles. "It's no joke, mate, the crocs just took an 11-year-old girl and some drunk bogan [Australian for "redneck"—or someone dumb enough to swim in an area marked DANGER! CROCODILES!] this week."

I look over the blanket of green stretching to the horizon and say, "Wow, there's a whole lot of nothing out here," intending to compliment the peaceful scene. Instead, Rooke is insulted.

"What? Absolutely not! Everywhere you look is just teeming with life . . . my God, the variety of plants, not to mention the birds,



The Blue Mountain region

snakes, critters, billabongs—oh, mate, it's pretty far from nothing."

In Kakadu National Park, Rooke shows me thousand-year-old aboriginal paintings on the sheltered underside of a cliff formation. With a view overlooking thousands of acres of pristine wilderness, Rooke says, "They had it right. Where else would you want to be but right here?"

Darwin's Apprentice

"Oh, you little ripper! You're a beauty, yeah, I got ya," shouts our guide to a mushroom. He had stopped suddenly and squatted beside the trail, doing it so quickly I thought he'd been bitten by one of Australia's innumerable venomous snakes. We're hiking through a temperate rain forest high in the Blue Mountains, a few hours outside Sydney.

The Blue Mountain region is so rich in biodiversity, Charles Darwin raved about it when he visited nearly 200 years ago. The area resembles the Grand Canyon, except it's filled with trees, waterfalls and plenty of fungi. Guide Tim Tranter is in a competition with his mates to find and photograph the greatest variety of 'shrooms and moss, explaining, "Lichen is nature's art, you see."

Tranter is convinced he has the best job, every hike a pleasure cruise through one of the most beautiful areas of the world. While cable cars take legions of Korean tourists to packed viewing platforms, we walk undisturbed to hidden pools and mountain

streams. What seems like a homogenous forest opens, through our guide's explanation, into a scene as wild and varied as a dozen circuses. For one short afternoon, I feel like I've signed on as shipmate on the *Beagle*, Darwin's vessel of discovery, and am sailing on foot through a new world of green.

Captain Fantastic

"Over there you see Hyams Beach, with the whitest sands in the world," says Matt Cross, our ship's merry captain as he pilots our boatload of sightseers into Jervis Bay. "It's true, at least according to the *Guinness* folks." We're motoring on a 55-foot catamaran into the peaceful blue waters a couple of hours' drive south of Sydney.

"You know, Jervis Bay has the highest concentration of dolphins on the coast ... the biggest flock of fairy penguins ... the closest coastal appearance of humpback whales ... Where else in the world can you see this?" he challenges. Cross pauses occasionally from his list of superlatives to grab the microphone and banter with the tourists onboard. "Remember, everyone, this isn't a zoo, it's a marine park, so you'll have to work a little to spot the dolphins."

For Cross, it isn't the repetitive job of a bus driver following a prescribed route; he acts more like a proud homeowner showing off his yard to honored guests. Between effusive announcements ("A baby dolphin! Have you ever seen anything so cute?"), he gripes a little about the government forms he needs to complete to run his business. But when his eyes turn toward the sea, and his focus on the "job" at hand, he turns our chilly morning trawl into a jolly journey on the good ship lollipop. ■



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If You Go

Qantas Airlines operates daily direct flights from Los Angeles and San Francisco to Sydney. Flight time is about 14 hours. Visit Australia Tourism online at australia.com. The Great Barrier Reef (Heron Island) is about a three-and-a-half-hour flight from Sydney to Gladstone, followed by either a 45-minute helicopter ride or two-hour boat ride. Voyages Heron Island's Web site is heronisland.com. Darwin, the gateway city (and really only city) in the Northern Territory, is a four-hour flight from Sydney. For tour information, visit Brookes Australia Tours at brookesaustralia.com.au. If you're not camping in the outback, check out Feathers Sanctuary in Darwin (featherssanctuary.com), a combination upscale bed-and-breakfast/wildlife menagerie, with birds and varied creatures filling cages and walking the grounds of the retreat. The Blue Mountains are a two-hour drive from Sydney. To find out about tours, visit Tread Lightly Ecotours (treadlightly.com.au). There are plenty of standard motels in the area, but for a treat, check out the lavish Lillianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa (orient-express.com.au), an old English-style country estate transformed into a resort with spectacular views. Jervis Bay is a two-hour drive south of Sydney. For Dolphin Watch Cruises, visit dolphinwatch.com.au. The tented Paperbark Camp (paperbarkcamp.com.au) is modeled after a luxury African safari resort, with heated showers, comfy beds and wandering possum. Guests can canoe the nearby river, borrow bikes or get scared silly by bumping into a kangaroo in the night.