

Meghan, Down Under

Good morning, my name is Meghan Fureymoore and last July I got to travel as a People to People Student Ambassador to Australia and New Zealand. It was the first time I'd been on an airplane, the first time I'd been out of the U. S., and the longest time I'd ever been away from home. My cousin had been a student ambassador, and she was right when she said it would be a life-changing experience!

People to People is a Student Ambassador program that sends delegations of American middle- or high-school students to many different countries all over the world. It was started by President Eisenhower, who thought that if the young people of the world tried to get along, the rest of the world would follow.

It took months to raise the money, to learn about the countries and prepare for the trip, but finally on July 11, we left.

I boarded the plane in Norfolk, where the carpet has little mermaids on it and I have no idea how long it took me to get there – we were all confused by the change of dates. We went from Norfolk to Dallas to Los Angeles to Auckland and when we got there, the flight attendant leaned over and said, "Would you like hot breakfast, Luv?" She was wearing a tie patterned with an aboriginal dot design. That was the wake-up moment for me – the start of the trip. Kia Ora! Welcome to New Zealand!

We landed and got herded onto a bus – it was still dark outside – the driver introduced himself to us and we drove and drove. The bus started to go uphill and the driver said he was driving us to the top of Mount Eden, an extinct volcano, and when we got there he said, "Watch out for the big crater in the middle," which was about the size of the airport. The first morning of our first day we watched the sun rise over the whole city of Auckland from the top

of Mount Eden, in the middle of a New Zealand winter. On the mountain and before the sunrise it was below 40 degrees.

If you've ever seen Lord of the Rings you've seen what New Zealand looks like. It's a volcanic island. The land is very, very green and mountainous. The Maori name for New Zealand is "Aotearoa," which means "land of the long, white cloud," and the name fits perfectly because the mountains rise up into massive white clouds.

In Rotorua it's also very thin. You can be walking along and have a sinkhole open up in front of you. They use the steam from the geothermal activity for power. The crust of the earth at Rotorua is a mere 7 meters thick – compared with the crust here at 40 meters.

On our first night we stayed at Paparoa Marae and got to spend time with the Maori people. The Maori's stories say their ancestors came to New Zealand about 600 years ago in 7 canoes from a place called Hawaiiiki. The Maori oral history matches the archeological record. The Europeans only came about 200 years ago. Because the English came so late the Maori were not destroyed as other native peoples had been. In America, by the time people cared it was too late. In New Zealand by that time the Maori were still there and they still knew who they were. Maori and English are both national languages.

There are so many little things that made the trip important to me. There was seeing the kiwis, walking by the fish and chips shops, stepping outside my "comfort zone" to learn new things. There was my home stay and the visit to Parliament and buying the British version of Harry Potter at Whitcoul's in Wellington. This was the first time I have ever been in a group of "normal" teenagers – I am home-schooled and all the others go to school and I thought I'd be all alone on the trip. The others formed into little cliques. Everybody else sat at the back of the bus, talked about school,

gossiped about others, played their rock music and ignored everything around them. But there were 5 people who sat in front of the bus, watched and listened and took pictures of the mountains, all sort of as strange as I was. Ask about them later – I will have stories to tell!

On to Australia! Wallabies everywhere! I saw the weirdest animals I've ever seen in my life! That's when I called home, the first night in Australia. I wasn't homesick for my home, but I missed my pet rats and my church!

Australia has the funkiest animals in the world. Since the land mass broke off and they evolved to their own drummer, this is the country of kangaroos, koalas, wombats and wallabies, echidnas, frilled lizards, kookaburras, dingoes, emus, crocodiles, platypuses, and the most poisonous land snake in the world – the taipan.

We saw these in The Lone Pine Koala sanctuary, where we got to hold the koalas! We also saw some of these animals in the wild. We stayed at resorts twice, and they are overrun with wallabies. And I once saw a bandicoot.

One picture I will never forget is driving down a dusty red road in our bus, and looking out over the fields of sugar cane, and seeing a kookaburra perched on a telephone line. And I thought, "We are really in Australia! It's real!"

We also got to spend a day in an Australian school – St. Joseph's, which is a private Catholic school in Toowoomba. And for the record none of the students like Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter, since all the Americans come and ask them to say, "Crikey!"

That was the closest I got to experiencing Australian life because I talked to the students, got to sit in at their classes, got to have morning tea – in Australia, you have morning tea and lunch.

Morning "tea" was an egg roll, a sausage roll and a little meat pie, and orange juice.

I should tell you about the food in Australia: We would wake up in the hotel and go down to a buffet breakfast containing orange canned spaghetti, soggy scrambled eggs, grilled tomatoes, and toast on which you could spread Vegemite. I don't believe Vegemite can be classified as a food item. It's not just Americans who can't stand it. The Japanese exchange student at St. Joseph's recoiled in horror when his classmate brought out Vegemite sandwiches to shared with him at lunch.

For fast food, every place would have Chinese food, fish & chips, and burgers. The burgers – if you ordered them with everything – came with a nice thick slice of beet.

At the Dreamtime Cultural Centre, where we studied Aboriginal culture, we learned about The Dreaming and about Aboriginal history, how to throw a boomerang, heard a didgeridoo performance, and got to taste crocodile and kangaroo nuggets. The kangaroo was very gamy, but the crocodile did taste just like chicken!

The Dreamtime stories were interesting. We were told about Lake Nugga Nugga, which to Aborigines is the home of the Rainbow Serpent, who is one of the most important dreamtime spirits. I think the Dreamtime is to them the time that the world started and everything was a spirit and they all interacted in ways that formed the way the world is. A lot of the aboriginal art you see are pictures of dreaming spirits or dreaming tracks, which is the way the spirits moved around, and the Aborigines tell stories about what the spirits did in the Dreamtime.

WE got to see more of Australia's wild life when we went snorkelling in the Great Barrier Reef off the Whitsunday Islands.

That was another strange experience, especially putting my head underwater seeing the reef and the empty blue water behind it, and hearing nothing but the parrotfish crunching on the coral. There were other fish – clown fish and wrasses, some of which were bigger than a couch cushion. One of them was named Wally – they named him because he was so big! I got to pet him.

We ended our trip in Sydney. In one day we climbed to the top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and toured the Sydney Opera House.

Sydney Harbour Bridge is a steel arch bridge 134 meters high, soaring over 8 lanes of traffic and train tracks. It was the longest bridge of its kind until we – Americans – built one 2 feet longer. It's still the largest. The climb was absolutely terrifying but at the top of it you can see the entire city of Sydney – including the Opera House, Darling Harbour and the Prime Minister's House, so it was worth it.

At the Opera House we went into the largest theatre where we got to hear a guy practicing the organ for that evening's concert. We also went into the newest theatre, which was set up for smaller performances such as the Aboriginal Dance Troupe that was performing that night. Unfortunately, although several of us would have much preferred to see a performance, we were scheduled to go on a party cruise that evening. It was worth it, though, to see the Opera House because it is definitely a beautiful building and it's easy to see why it has become a symbol of Australia.

On the day we left, we managed to fit in one more activity, and went to the Sydney Aquarium, where we found Nemo! They had a whole tank full of characters from the movie, *Finding Nemo* such as clownfish and blue tangs (Dori).

Then we started for home: Qantas to Delta, mobile phones to cellular telephones and a VERY, *VERY* long Saturday. The twelve

hours stuck in the airplane weren't actually all that bad, and the roll in the airline dinner was actually warm!

We changed planes again and again and suddenly we were looking down over the rivers and mountains and forests of the United States. I got off the plane for the last time and walked back down the hallway with the little mermaids on the carpet.

My cousin was definitely right when she said travelling is a life changing experience. Since July I have started to realize how my life has changed. The experience of travelling and being in a different country and a different culture and a different part of the world has broadened my view of the world and made me want to experience more. Thank you so much for your support, not only for your money donations but for giving me an environment which encourages me to want to learn things, to want to travel and to want to learn things for myself. Thank you.