

LIVING IN LONDON

Jessica Michaels

Been there! Done that! Well at least that is probably what many of you are thinking when you start reading this story. You're right too. There is nothing that original about an Australian heading to the United Kingdom (UK) and making it their base for work and European travel. In fact every year thousands of Australians make the 24-hour cramped seat, dehydrating, and somewhat disorientating pilgrimage to the UK. They cram onto over-crowded long-haul flights, for reasons that most are not fully aware of. However as they hug and kiss their siblings, parents, boyfriends and girlfriends goodbye at the various Australian international airports, they all have one thing in common...they want to know more!

Australia is the 'lucky country'. This being a term I only fully appreciated after my travels took me to less fortunate, overpopulated, polluted countries in South America and Europe. Australia is wildly beautiful, the climate is amazing, people are friendly and the quality of life is one of the best in the world. Plus, it is a reassuringly long way away from many of the world's worries. However, that's just it. It is such a long way from everything and everyone else that I for one, couldn't contemplate my future life in Australia until I had seen enough of the rest of the world to satisfy my wander-lust.

So, on the 5th of May 1999, I packed my backpack, hugged my family, kissed my boyfriend goodbye and mumbled something about being back within 6 months. As I flew out over the ocean watching the Australian mainland melt away into the distance, I said goodbye for the first time to the county that I was fortunate enough to grow up in, and one that I hope I will eventually grow old in.

My reason for leaving Australia was to gain life-education. As contrived as that may sound, it is the truth. After spending my entire life, to date, in educational institutions, I too wanted to know more. I wanted to actually see the paintings I had been studying, go to the places I had seen in films. I wanted to meet different, interesting people, and learn another language. I wanted to sing in a smoky, dark, underground bar in Paris. I wanted to eat exotic food, go surfing in Spain and drink Sangria whilst watching the sun set on one side of the world knowing it was rising on a new day in Australia. More importantly, yet somewhat selfishly, I wanted to find out more about me. What did I really want out of life? Something told me that the answers to that question lay beyond the borders of my country.

So after a brief stint in the United States, the land of all things big and delicious, I arrived at London Heathrow airport; relaxed, excited but up to this point, relatively unchanged. My backpack was a little dirtier, but also lighter, as I had quickly realized that high-heels, a cocktail dress, and a massive amount of lingerie, were not after all essential backpacker's items.

I jumped on the 'tube' and headed directly to my good friend Rachel's house in Pimlico, where I was going to stay while I set myself up in London. My first impressions of London and its inhabitants have strangely enough not changed in the slightest during the last four years. The only difference is that now, I too, have taken on many of these 'London-isms'. I say London as opposed to the UK, as London is so different to the rest of the UK that I feel I am qualified only to comment on the city that I spent the majority of my time in.

Londoners walk fast. They have an urgency to their gait that is unmatched anywhere else in the world. They like to queue, are very polite when they bump into you on the street and even apologise when you bump into them. They accept the fact that you may have to sniff a complete stranger's armpit in the overcrowded tube on the way to work. Lunchtime sandwich choices vary between prawn and mayonnaise, chicken and mayo, egg / cress and mayo or if you are hung-over a bacon butty with lashings of HP sauce is the order of the day.

Their selection of crisps, chips being the Australian translation, is unmatched anywhere else in the world. It is traditional to have a packet of crisps with lunch and you can now buy flavours such as Worcester sauce, baked beans, and salsa mesquite. The list is mouth-wateringly endless.

Unfortunately, the above foods and plethora of alcoholic beverages also cause what Australians in London fondly call the 'Heathrow Injection'! That is, very few of us have managed to live in London for any length of time without putting on a few extra kilograms. There always seems to be a little more 'weight' checked in on the flight back home to Australia.

When I finally arrived at Victoria Station I made my way on foot towards Pimlico. I quickly became overwhelmed by the row upon row of townhouses that all looked exactly the same. Rachel had said her house was a white terrace house, with a black door and gold door knock. However, every house in sight fitted the above description perfectly. So I felt that the only way I would find her street, let alone her house, was to ask at the local pub.

I entered The Elusive Camel. My first pub experience in London. The guy behind the bar couldn't have been more helpful, and the old man next to me who had definitely had one too many, was kind enough to offer me a pint of lager. So I removed my backpack, which had by now become an extension of my body, and

revelled in my first pint, not schooner, of beer. I asked them both a variety of questions mainly the 'I'm lost, help me' variety. I was promptly told that if I am staying in London I would need an A-Z. Which for anyone else out there who is directionally challenged like myself, this is your Bible for London.

So we chatted about this and that and when my pint was finished, my belly had doubled in size but I thankfully also now knew where I was going. I did have one question left though. I asked the kindly drunk next to me what he thought of the 11pm pub closing time, as I knew that this law would cause riots on the streets of Sydney were it to be enforced. He shrugged his shoulders and responded with what has now become for me, a kind of mantra about the British ideology, *'It's tradition. It's always been that way. You get used to it.'*

He was right. I did get used to it. Not just the 11pm pub closing time, which I actually quite liked as it enforced a certain amount of discipline on my social life, thus allowing my work life to exist. I actually got used to all the parts of London life that had initially driven me quietly insane.

As an Australian living in London, I made a pact with myself not to constantly socialise with other Australians. After all, what was the point of moving to the other side of the world if you are only going to associate with people from the same background as yourself? So I got a job in a London based New Media agency where my colleagues and clients were mainly English, Indian, American, French, and Italian. I enjoyed the fact that I was different to everyone else. Without looking or doing anything particularly special, I was considered 'exotic' purely because Australia is on the other side of the world. I believe the fact that Australia is home to many of the world's deadliest animals is another reason for the 'exotic' label. Many of my English friends were visibly concerned for my safety, yet fascinated when I told them that my back yard in Sydney is home to various species of spiders that could potentially kill you.

However, along with the perks of being different came the constant reminder of where I was from and the stereotypes that my country and its countrymen and women are known for. Every morning I would arrive at work and my boss would begin his day by practicing his 'Aussie' accent with me...

'Morning Jiss. [Jess] Go throw another shrimp on the barbie mate? You little Aussie ripper!'. Etc

At first I actually found all this attention and the way people perceived my country and me quite amusing. However after a few months of this constant 'Aussie banter' I found myself forcing a polite smile and resisting the urge to slap my boss across the face and knock him out of his self-induced Australian fanaticism.

Unfortunately it wasn't just him that felt it his duty to tell me about my country. I have discovered that part of living overseas is that many of the people you meet have something to say about his or her perceptions of Australia and in particular our Australian accent.

Conversations would often sound something like this...

British Individual: *'That's a New Zealand accent right?'*

Me: *'No. I'm from Australia actually.'*

British Individual: *'Ahhhh...downunder huh? What part of the 'colony' do you come from eh? Ha ha!'*

Me: *'Sydney'*

British Individual: *'Sydney! The Olympic City! Do you know Alf and Alicia from Home and Away? You flaming gallah...ha ha ha!'*

Me: *'umm.... You do realise that Australia is quite a big place right?'*

British Individual: [ignoring my question] *'So what the hell are you doing in this grim country?'*

Me: *'Right now' [mainly due to this conversation] 'I'm not quite sure'*

British Individual: *'Oh...'* [Confused look]

Thus, my initial aversion to 'hanging out' with other Australians became less of a priority. As after many conversations of this nature, you really appreciate when another Australian comes along who, not only sounds the same as you, but doesn't mention anything about the 'colonies' and understands what you are talking about when you mention thongs, soccer, doona's, ug boots, and Tim Tams.

Samantha was one of those people that came along at the perfect time. She was Australian, and had come to London, for similar reasons to me. To work, travel, see the world, experience new and exciting things and ultimately shared my ideal of one-day heading home to our 'lucky country'.

We experienced London together. We loved and loathed London for all the same reasons. However, we made sure we grasped every opportunity that came our way, and would compare notes at every turn. Sam was a HR Director in an international bank and she worked typically long London hours. I was by this stage, Promotions Manager for the London subsidiary of a French fashion and cosmetics house and worked a similarly long week. The two of us would regularly finish work late and meet for a 'cheeky glass of chardy' which more often than not, turned into a bottle of 'chardy'. We would talk about the day. Friends, boyfriends and travel. We would discuss the frustrations and fears that we shared about the tube and what was

going on in the world and back at 'home'. We would try and justify spending 50 '*quid*' (pounds) which approximates to a ridiculous AUS\$ 150, on fake tanning solutions as the lack of sun was driving us mad.

We would talk about the beaches in Sydney, how much we missed the fresh food and healthy lifestyle. We would reminisce on the days when our jeans actually fitted without part of our 'Buddha' belly hanging over the top. We would discuss English men, and what our parents would say if we told them that we were going to marry one and live in the UK. We became best friends in London due to the fact that we had both left Sydney Australia because wanted to know more! However, for all our frustrations we had with London, we loved this city, its people and the way in which living in it had enriched our lives. I think I speak for most Australians living overseas, when I say that although you would not swap your overseas travel, work and living experiences for anything, there is a feeling of excitement, bordering on relief when you meet someone on the other side of the world who comes from the same country and background as you.

However, after four years, I am now saying goodbye to London and Bonjour to France. I have recently been given the opportunity to work in France on one of my greatest passions in life, singing. A new adventure is about to begin, but I will never forget the impact that my four years in the UK have had on me. I found my independence there. I developed my passions, made life-long friends, worked in inspiring companies with dedicated colleagues, travelled extensively, and had amazing experiences with intriguing people. I can truthfully say that I leave London life and the UK behind without regret.

The funny thing is that the one of the most prominent memories I have of living in London is the simplest of all the snap-shots in my mind. It is those moments that I would share my Australian experience of living overseas with Sam, another Australian living in London. She would encourage me to try new things, helped me focus on my dream to sing, rather than just on the corporate career that I was forging in London. Never for a second, even at the worst of times, did she let me forget the amazing, colourful life we were living overseas or why we had made the decision to sample life in another part of the world. I looked up at the way Sam lived her life in a city such as London. She had this amazing ability to go out and get all the good things that life had to offer. She knew how to live in the moment. Which is a 'trick' everyone should learn if they are to tackle life outside their country, their home, their comfort zone.

However, most importantly, Sam and I both knew where we had come from and how lucky we were that we could still call Australia home.

This story is dedicated to my beautiful friend Samantha Mar. She passed away suddenly at the age of 27, on the 28th February 2003. May her spirit live on in all those who live their life in the moment.



Jessica Michaels has been living and working in London for four years now and has used London as her base to travel to Europe, North and South America. Although she knows that Australia is her home and a place that she will always go back to, she is now pursuing a singing career in the UK and in Europe.

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