

# AN AUSSIE'S TOUR OF MANHATTAN

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Leather seats and an Australian pilot! Go figure!!! That just about sums up the plane ride to New York. Mind you, the scenery was spectacular. We started off by circling the bay so we got some fantastic views of the Bay Bridge and San Francisco from the air. Then we passed over the Sierra Nevadas. I never really realised just how much of an impact the seismic activity of California has had on the landscape. The ridges and valleys of the mountain formations are incredible. Then we flew over the salt flats of Utah (sorry didn't see Monument Valley) and over Colorado, just north of Denver. The plains of the Mid-West look just like a patchwork quilt. The Missouri River was incredible to pass over as it wound its way through the landscape and the Mississippi is big but barely distinguishable from the surrounding plains as it's so brown.

Chicago is a small blip on the shore of the enormous Lake Michigan. I knew the Great Lakes were big but not THAT big!!!! We could see the famous Sears Tower through the binoculars, which was pretty impressive but nothing in comparison to the Great Lakes. We flew over Canada for a little while, while we passed over Lake Erie. It was starting to get dark so we didn't get to see much of Pennsylvania or New York State but the descent into the Big Apple was very impressive. There were lights as far as the eye could see. We passed over Manhattan, which was incredible, and banked over Long Island before coming into land.

But the good part of the ride ended there. We arranged for a shuttle bus to pick us up and take us into Manhattan and got the shuttle bus driver from hell! First of all, he was very unwelcoming, to the point of rudeness, then he stopped at every domestic terminal at JFK airport to pick up passengers. When we boarded, we were the second stop on his run and there were already two people on the bus, one of which was a middle-aged lady. By the time we got to the fourth stop, the middle-aged lady was starting to get somewhat agitated and after the driver had disappeared for ten minutes only to reappear with five more passengers, she lost her cool and told him to get the hell out of here (well it had been over an hour since we'd been picked up by this stage so I couldn't really blame her). The driver's response was to say 'do you want to drive, lady?' and when she said no, the look he gave as his response all but said 'well sit down and shut up'. As we finally pulled out of the terminals, the traffic had jammed because of lane merges and construction but that didn't seem to bother

our friendly shuttle driver. He just pushed his way through it and took off at a rate of knots. One of the passengers we'd collected last was having trouble with his seatbelt. The shuttle driver (let's call him Jose – and don't go looking that one up please) turned around in his seat and started helping this passenger – while still driving at 60 miles per hour!!!! Well he couldn't get the belt done up so Jose pulled over, at the diverge point of a freeway exit mind you, jumped out and ran round to the other side to open the door to help this poor passenger, just as he got the belt done up. Jose slammed the door shut and started to walk back around to the driver's side to continue but someone else had pulled up just in front of us, lost, so Jose walked over to them to give directions! Meanwhile, the middle-aged lady and a young woman in the front passenger seat started complaining loudly! The young lady (who got picked up just after us) even leaned over and honked the van's horn at our friendly driver. Well that got a reaction! He fairly ran back to the van, opened his door and looked at the young woman and said, 'what did you do that for?' (he was REALLY pissed off by this stage). Of course, the passengers (except Chris and I) started complaining at the driver, telling him their sob stories, especially, the middle-aged lady. Jose was even more furious after this so he got back in the van, slammed the door shut and just about gave us all whiplash in his speedy take off back onto the freeway. (Pant, pant, pant.)

Fortunately, the rest of the journey into Manhattan was reasonably uneventful except for our friendly driver's wonderful driving skills. He tailgated just about everyone possible, even honking at them to move out of the way, sped past everyone he tailgated and changed lanes with a single jerk of the steering wheel. I think most of the passengers thought we'd be lucky to make it to our destinations alive at the hands of this guy. Even the young woman in the front passenger seat sat with her foot against the glove box for the duration of the ride, she was so scared.

Once in Manhattan, now came the task of dropping everyone at their destinations and we were all scattered through the Upper East Side, Upper West Side, Midtown and the East Village. We dropped off one young woman who'd just returned from England first, then the middle-aged lady. Unfortunately, Jose made a huge mistake with our lady friend and missed her street so he got even more annoyed when she pointed it out. I think he was VERY glad to get rid of this one (who just happened to live in an apartment next to Christie's).

Then he screamed through Central Park to the Upper West Side and dropped off one more passenger there before careening down a highway that bordered the west side of Manhattan Island to Midtown. We thought he was starting to calm down a little by this stage but not for long. As soon as we got off the highway and turned down a side street, we struck a Police scene where they had blocked off the road while they investigated a suspicious looking bunch of people. Jose waited about ten

seconds before mounting the curb and trying to drive around them (and a waiting taxi). Well that got the cops' attention and one of them started running towards us with his badge up and yelling stop. He reached the van and Jose wound the window down. The two exchanged some heated words before Jose wound his window back up and the cop went back to the scene. A minute later, the police car that was blocking the road moved and the waiting traffic was allowed to pass. SHEESH!!!!

Jose screeched past the scene and round the corner onto the main drag. A couple of minutes later he pulled up and unloaded one more passenger (now there was just Chris, myself and one fellow who lived in the East Village). By the time he had finished unloading, collecting his fee and got back into the van, the traffic had banked up. Jose tried to pull out into the next lane but couldn't as there was another car in the way. As the traffic in this lane inched forward, so did our friend. I was sitting a couple of rows behind the driver against the window and could see us getting closer and closer to the car alongside us. Jose was pushing his way into the traffic but the car he was trying to push in front of was just NOT going to let him in. We got closer and closer and closer till finally – screech! Right about the time I yelled out to Jose to stop. He yanked the wheel back to the right and the car he'd just crunched lurched ahead of us, complete with blue flashing light in the windshield, before screeching to a halt several feet up the road. The driver emerged and darted around his car to inspect the damage. I gather there was little or none done but he was furious. Chris, myself and the remaining passenger looked at each other and the same thought went through all our minds – this guy was about to get booked. Luckily for him, the guy turned out to be a fire marshal but he was still pissed (who could blame him). He exchanged several colourful words with our driver before running back to his car and hooning off. Well, Jose had really had it by now. He shot into the traffic, screeched around the next corner and came to a short, sudden stop. PHEW, we'd made it to our hotel – ALIVE!!!!!!! Unfortunately, my nerves were completely shot from the ride, the driver and the altercation with the fire marshal so I was in a right mood with this guy. As I dove into the back of the van for our bags, I said to Chris (just loud enough for the driver to hear), 'This guy's a maniac. Can I have my nerves back?' I pulled our bags out and stood up to face the driver who asked me what I'd just said so I looked him straight in the eye and said, 'Mate you need a vacation. You're a bloody maniac!' to which his reply was to shrug his shoulders and say, 'Welcome to New York'. (Well up your nose too!!!) I was still shaking when we checked into our room!

WHAT A RIDE!!!! Oh, and it only took us two hours to get to our hotel!!!

Well, the last thing I wanted to do was sleep so we went for a walk. We couldn't have picked a better location to stay if we'd tried. We were three blocks up from 42nd Street, one block over from Broadway, and two blocks down from Times

Square! We walked over to Broadway and up to Times Square. At nearly midnight, the place was well and truly alive! It was bright as daylight from all the billboards and streaming signs, it stank just like Hong Kong and there were people and cars everywhere! If you think Piccadilly Circus is incredible, then this place has it beat hands down! There's even a US defence forces recruiting centre right in the middle of the square (which is really just an intersection of about 5 different roads).

Rockefeller Centre was only a couple more blocks away so we walked onto there and had a good gawk at the NBC studio where the Today Show is filmed every morning. There was even a crew setting up a stage for their regular Friday morning concert, not to mention the obligatory security guards. We had a good peek into the studio from the window to see how they had set things out.

It was almost 1am so we figured we'd better get some sleep or we'd be completely shot the next day (well our bodies were still on San Francisco time) so we headed back to the hotel.

### **Friday 9 August, 2002**

I felt pretty whacked from Thursday and was suffering a bit of vertigo as well. We had a really nutritious breakfast at Macca's before buying tickets for a sightseeing bus tour. The tickets we bought gave us unlimited rides on all the tours the buses did around Manhattan.

We agreed to do the downtown tour first and jumped on a bus. The bus took us around Times Square then down Broadway to Madison Square Gardens, past the original Macy's department store, onto the Empire State Building then down 5th Avenue past the Flatiron Building (if you remember the room in which the Interview with the Vampire was held, it's in the Flatiron Building). We carried on down to 14th Street, then down 7th Avenue and wound our way through Greenwich Village and Soho (South Of Houston) and down through the downtown area (with glimpses of the World Trade Centre site) to Battery Park at the southernmost tip of Manhattan. Battery Park also was the stop for the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and Staten Island ferries.

From Battery Park we cruised round the southern end of Manhattan on FDR Drive past the Seaport Museum and Pier 17 then up past Federal Plaza, which houses the Supreme Court, and up 1st Avenue through the East Village to the United Nations complex. While driving through the East Village we were pointed out the original Coyote Ugly Saloon but apparently the name is it's only resemblance to the bar in the movie. The bar from the movie is apparently modelled on a theme bar in the Upper West Side. We then cruised back along 49th Street past Rockefeller Centre and up Madison Avenue to Central Park South and the Plaza Hotel (where Crocodile Dundee

stayed in New York in the original movie). We then wound our way down 7th Avenue and back to Times Square. The whole tour took about three hours.

From there we walked around the corner and caught the uptown tour. The uptown tour took us up 8th Avenue, around Columbus Circle and up Broadway past the Lincoln Centre of Arts. From there we turned down West 72nd Street and met Central Park West beside the Dakota Building. This luxurious apartment complex is most famous because it is where John Lennon lived and was killed almost on its doorstep. Yoko Ono still lives there. From the Dakota we turned up Central Park West and passed the Museum of Natural History, Cathedral of St John the Devine (which can hold 60,000 people) and past General Grant's Tomb. By this stage we had reached Harlem and the bus turned down 125th Street and passed the famous Apollo Theatre. We then wound our way down through Harlem and down 5th Avenue and down the 'Museum Mile'. This strip of 5th Avenue is home to Museum of the City of New York, Smithsonian National Museum, Guggenheim Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum and the Central Park Zoo before heading back to Times Square.

We got off the bus at the Plaza Hotel and had a look through FAO Schwarz across the road. This department store was made famous in the Tom Hanks movie, *Big*, because of its giant keyboard in the floor. We had a brief wander around before continuing down 5th Avenue in search of food as it was way past lunchtime.

We made a small detour into Tiffany's, as I'd always wanted to go there. Well it was pretty impressive and so were the prices!!! We wound up eating lunch at a café across the road from Grand Central Terminal.

After lunch we walked over to the Chrysler Building and had a look around the lobby. Unfortunately this building doesn't have an observation deck so we had to be content with that. We continued down 42nd Street to the United Nations complex. Unfortunately, it was just closing so we weren't able to get a decent look around.

We headed back to 5th Avenue and continued down to the Empire State Building. This 102-storey building was built in 1930 (opened 1 May 1931) and took only 1 year and 45 days to complete! The public observation deck is on the 86th floor and provides 360 views of the surrounding city. It's amazing up there! You can see for miles! Any photos I will post (when I get them developed) just will not do the view proper justice. It's quite spectacular. After gawking at the view for a while, we made our way back down to ground level.

It was nearly 7pm so we figured some dinner might be a good idea so we continued down 5th Avenue to find some food. We wound up at Cooper's Square on the outskirts of Little Italy (which has now been consumed by Chinatown) and found a nice little restaurant to have dinner.

Seeing as it had taken us over an hour to walk the almost 30 blocks (yikes), we caught the subway back to Times Square and to bed! We were completely stuffed!!!

### **Saturday 10 August, 2002**

Up early again to beat the crowds to the Statue of Liberty. We got down to the ferry about 9.30 and found there were quite a few people already but very little wait. The security is very tight and, in fact, Chris and I were both asked to remove our watches and Chris his belt before we walked through the security scanners. I've never heard of removing your watch before!!! Of course we got through without any hassle and quickly found ourselves on the way to the island. I expected the ride to be very windy but it was calm as a millpond. The statue itself is just as impressive as it appears. Unfortunately, due to all the increased security, the museum in the base of the statue was closed and no one was allowed to make the 22 storey climb to her crown. This didn't leave much to do except walk around the island and look through the gift shop so we headed back to the ferry.

Once back in Manhattan, we walked up towards Wall Street from the terminal and reached the Stock Exchange. The block of Wall Street that houses the Stock Exchange is closed to vehicular traffic, partly because of road works but mainly due to all the increased security. Around the Stock Exchange itself has been blocked off by guardrails and a security guard is constantly posted near the entrance.

From the Stock Exchange we walked over to the site of the World Trade Centre. The site itself looks very much like any normal construction site, except for the thousands of people! There is a viewing platform, which is just a series of holes in the mesh behind the chicken wire fence for you to see through. The subterranean levels of the centre are exposed to the open air on the west side of the site but the rest looks like levelled ground.

Unfortunately, the whole scene looked more like a three-ringed circus than a tragic site that over 50,000 people used to call work. There are numerous stalls selling just about every piece of merchandise under the sun. The merchandise ranges from caps and T-Shirts to books full of photographs, little statues of the twin towers and statues of the fire fighters that raised the American flag. Even postcards that bare the printing 'World Trade Center 1973-2001' (yes the spelling is deliberate).

There were two things in particular that affected me. The first was the mental image of just how big those buildings must have been. Standing in the middle of Manhattan, surrounded by buildings, most of which were at least 50 storeys tall, feeling extremely small in the scheme of things and feeling an overwhelming sense of bewilderment that two of these buildings were twice the height of the surrounding skyscrapers was truly incredible. The second thing that affected me was just how

little damage the surrounding buildings sustained, given the sheer size of the two towers and velocity of their collapse.

One of the surrounding buildings, the Deutsche Bank, was damaged quite badly. The windows are still boarded up and a large portion of the building has been scaffolded and covered in shade mesh. According to the tour guide we had on Friday, the city hasn't decided if the damage is severe enough to tear the building down or repair it. The building next to it was in a similar state but apart from that, the other surrounding buildings looked unscathed!

From the World Trade Centre site, we walked over to City Hall. Another building blocked off to all traffic. The park in front of City Hall is quite pretty but the barricades spoil it somewhat. I dunno, all this in the name of security!

By this stage we were getting hungry so we headed towards the Seaport Museum and Pier 17 (highly original names, these Yanks) which is exactly like San Francisco's Pier 39 – full of tourist shops. Across the road from the museum was a small mall full of restaurants so we chose one to collapse for lunch – we were both parched as the day had turned out not only to be stinking hot but incredibly humid as well.

After lunch we crossed the road and had a look around the Seaport Museum, which consisted of 3 early 20th Century sailing vessels and, a few blocks away, which we didn't investigate, a museum. We only explored the largest of the three boats and decided that we would forego the others as they weren't particularly impressive.

We had a walk through the Pier 17 complex, looking in a couple of souvenir shops and gawking at the Brooklyn Bridge, nearby. I had a big chuckle at one shop, dedicated to all things purple! It's merchandise ranged from notebooks to fluffy toys, T-shirts, bags and any other accessory you could think of.

After cruising around Pier 17 for a while, we walked back towards City Hall and stopped to look at the courthouses. The US Courthouse is well famed by the TV series, Law and Order. One of the tour guides on the bus told us that the producers of the show have a constant lease on one of the courtrooms for their show and the cast is often seen during filming on the front steps of the court. The other courthouse is the Supreme Court and has also had many film and TV scenes shot on the steps.

From there we caught the tour bus back through the East Village as I wanted to catch a shot of the Coyote Ugly Saloon (without luck) before disembarking back in Midtown and heading back to the hotel to freshen up for the evening. We had a quick dinner in a food hall on 42nd Street before catching the night tour included in our tour bus package.

It was a really nice night for an open top tour and the tour took us through Greenwich Village, past the only remaining street of the Little Italy district, Mulberry

Street and round some of the downtown areas before driving across the Manhattan Bridge to get some spectacular night views of the Manhattan skyline from Brooklyn.

By the time the tour dropped us back at Times Square, it was after 11pm so we headed straight back to the hotel and crashed.

### **Sunday 11 August, 2002**

We started off by catching the subway down to Washington Square, as Chris wanted to see the arch at the entrance to the square. It turned out to be a small version of the Arc de Triomphe. From there we went over to the Brooklyn Bridge and walked across it. It was quite weird walking across the bridge between the two directions of traffic and above the roadway. Those of you who have seen Kate and Leopold will know what I mean. Chris was happy as Larry as he is as much in awe of the Brooklyn Bridge as I am of the Golden Gate Bridge.

From the Brooklyn Bridge we headed back to Midtown for lunch and ended up eating in the dining concourse of Grand Central Station. Apparently Jackie Onassis invested a lot of time and money into restoring the station several years ago as it was in a poor state. She did an excellent job and the station looks amazing.

After lunch we wandered through some markets that had been set up on Madison Avenue, consuming about 10 blocks! By the time we were done with the markets, I felt utterly exhausted and went back to the hotel for a rest while Chris went up to see General Grant's Tomb in the Upper West Side, almost into Harlem.

When he got back the two of us walked up to Central Park and explored the lower half of the park. It's an enormous park and very popular, particularly late on a Sunday afternoon. We walked up to the rowing lake, which has a restaurant at one end and an archway and fountain about half way round (if you've seen the movie Ransom you will recognise this archway as the place where the boy was kidnapped from, and then round to Bow Bridge. Bow Bridge has also had many movie scenes filmed on it, including the original Highlander movie, Keeping the Faith and numerous others.

From the lakes we walked across the park towards 5th Avenue and completed our circuit by walking down 5th Avenue to the nearest subway station and back to the hotel to change for dinner. We dined at a Korean BBQ restaurant on W32nd Street. It was really nice.

By the time we'd finished dinner we were pretty exhausted and were planning to be up early again the next morning so we called it a night and crashed.

### **Monday 12 August, 2002**

Went to Rockefeller Plaza in the morning to watch the live broadcast of NBC's Today show. We caught the last hour of the show and just before 10am Katie Curic, one of the main hosts, emerged. She did the autograph and photos thing before disappearing back into the studio. From there, Chris and I went back to the hotel to pack our things and check out. We then walked back over to 5th Avenue to pick up some last minute souvenirs before heading back to Times Square for lunch. When we got back to Times Square we found a crowd of eager teenagers hoping for a glimpse of whoever was performing in the MTV studios as they were currently filming. Apparently this is a fairly regular occurrence.

While we were killing time, we had a look inside Toys R Us in Times Square. One of the tour guides mentioned that the store housed a 60-foot Ferris wheel so we decided to have a look. It was quite impressive. Also in the store were Lego models of the Empire State Building, Chrysler Building, Statue of Liberty and a New York Yankees hat, not to mention a 15 foot mechanical Tyrannosaurus Rex!

We wandered around Times Square a bit more before heading back to the hotel to pick up our things and head out to JFK.

The trip back was fairly uneventful except our take-off was delayed 30 minutes while the flight controllers decided what to do about air traffic going into a weather front over Chicago. We ended up making a couple of minor course adjustments and flew further north into Canada than we did on the way over.

Of course all the fun started when we got back to Oakland. We'd not checked any bags for the flight back so getting out of the terminal building was a breeze however, when we emerged, we found a police car parked right by one of the entrances with someone in the back, obviously under arrest and about five police officers thoroughly searching a car in front. This went on for quite some time!

It took Hoppers ages to get to us because of traffic. I've never seen traffic that congested at an airport – so many people trying to drop off passengers and pick them up. It was such a mess.

We finally got home about 10.30, over an hour and a half after we'd landed. Not quite as bad as New York but not far behind it!

One of the funny things we did while we were in New York was every time we'd see a site that had been used in a movie we began thinking of all the movies that were filmed in New York. Unfortunately, I didn't keep a count but I think the total number we'd thought of must have exceeded 50 films! An amazing city to visit but no way would I want to live there. It's TOO busy for my liking.

