

# LIFE'S LITTLE ADVENTURES

**Steve Hessling**

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Like most Australians, I was bombarded with American influences everyday, and mostly from the TV. Shows like Miami Vice and Little House On The Prairie depicted life in America from one extreme to the other. The news services showed buildings being bombed, multiple car wrecks on the Interstates, and mad gunmen (usually ex-postal workers) running rampant. So my impression of America? The same as everyone else, who would want to live there?

Well all that changed with the Internet. I started playing on the Gaming Zone and meeting mostly people from America. After weeding out the rat bags and sex fiends, I found that most of the people I chatted with were just like me – normal (mmm... I need to look up the definition of normal). I did find some that were trying to be someone else apart from themselves. To cut a long story short, I meet my future wife in the Zone.

I made travel arrangements to fly to the US for our first meeting. Now we are talking about someone who had never travelled on a plane before let alone been outside of Australia. April 27<sup>th</sup> arrived and with tears in my eyes and apprehension in my heart I boarded the Jumbo. It didn't take long to realize that the 13-hour trip from Brisbane to LA was going to be very long and very boring. Well maybe not as boring as I thought. For 10 hours the plane travelled through constant turbulence and I had a window seat. It's amazing how far one of those wings can bend.

I finally arrived in LA, but still felt like I was in Australia. The airport was a multicultural smorgasbord of people. After getting my luggage and papers in order I had to find a loo. That was when I realized I was in a different land. The first cubicle I visited was clean but the water level was just below the rim of the bowl. Bugger, this one is blocked. I went to the next one, same thing. The third one was the same. So I flushed to see what happened. Man, the suction on the water going down the drain was incredible. I watched the water disappear and then watched as more water took its place, right to just below the rim. After finishing my business I could see both advantages and disadvantages of having a full bowl. There is no way of not making a noise when having a pee but when performing number two's your bum never gets wet from falling objects.

After my initiation into this new world, I started taking note of other differences. People walked on the right side of the footpath, a lot of 'Sir' and 'Ma'am' was heard, and things seemed a lot cheaper than in Oz, but I had still not

been outside the airport system. That was another 10 hours away. I was meeting my 'girlfriend' in Milwaukee, so I had various flights from LA to Dallas, Dallas to Chicago, then another one to Milwaukee where we finally met.

As this is not a story about us, but about my initial experiences in America, I won't get personal, but our wedding drops into the picture later on. We had to travel from Milwaukee to Fond du Lac in Wisconsin about 1 hour north. Now watching TV and seeing the steering wheel on the left side is a whole heap different to actually sitting in a car with the steering wheel on the left. I guess one word might sum up my feelings about that – scary. We drove around in circles (so I felt) for 30 minutes with cars coming at me from all directions. Then it was onto the open road. It was late and I was very tired so I didn't take any notice of what was going on outside the car.

After a few days in and around Fond du Lac I realized that when you get away from the big cities, the towns and people are not that different to those in Australia. If it hadn't been for the fact that Wisconsin is snow and ice for almost 6 months of the year. I could quite easily have lived there.

My stay in the US was almost 4 weeks and as my girlfriend's son lived in Florida I offered to hire a car so we could visit him. That was the start of what became a 5,000 mile road trip, and 4,000 miles of that I drove. Just outside of Chicago on the Interstate, I decided to do a bit of driving. A bit? We drove from Wisconsin to Florida and then across to Texas to see her girlfriend and then back to Wisconsin. That's the most constant driving I have ever done and it was in a foreign land. But I learned a lot about the road system in the USA and it made me realize that the road system in Oz is way behind, and the place that was an eye opener was Atlanta. I-75 travels underneath the city (so it seemed) and is about 6 lanes each direction. Imagine travelling in the centre lane at 70 mph, not having any idea if you are still on the right path, dozens of cars passing you at what seemed like 160 mph and your girlfriend is asleep. ASLEEP!! That part of the trip was where I learned about on-ramps and signage and that the blinkers on 99% of all cars in the US don't work. After that, not getting lost was a breeze. I was also amazed at the number of semis on the road. A lot of freight in Australia is carried by rail or ship. Most freight in the USA goes by road, and these buggers don't slow down for nobody.

After visiting my girlfriend's son and parents in Florida and her girlfriend in Texas, we got back to Wisconsin after about 2½ weeks. I had arrived in Wisconsin just after winter so I hadn't experienced how cold it gets. I did, however, have it a good authority that it gets 'bloody freezing and I'm going to move to Texas because it's a bit warmer.' I wanted to help her move before going back to Australia so we hired a 20' Ryder and car trailer and headed south. It was once again my turn to be scared. I had never driven any type of truck before and here I was driving this huge

box towing a car. The trip was uneventful but I got to see more of the country. The truck stops and rest areas are fantastic compared to the ones in Australia. These have full facilities including vending machines, toilets, maps, covered eating areas, and parking for an army. We all know what the Australian equivalent is – a water tank, a concrete table and chairs with an old timber roof, one toilet and a hole in the ground where you have a fire going to boil the billy.

More eye openers awaited me in Texas. For several days before I was due to fly back to Australia we stayed in an old single wide trailer. That's like a 36' caravan housing 4 people. But many Americans live like that – very cheap housing. Just driving around some of the country roads, I saw trailer parks that have dozens of these 'single wide's' as they're called seemingly tossed onto the ground. No semblance of order at all. It was then I understood why tornado scenes on the news showed acres of matchsticks in the aftermath. The newer style of trailer is sturdier and most are 'double wide' and quite roomy. The negative stigma of living in a trailer is less than in previous years because of the construction standard and 'look' of the modern trailer.

While in Texas, I was introduced to some culinary delights, although I was completely confused with the names. One morning I was asked if I would like sausage and biscuits. My mind ticked over several times and I had a vision of a Jatz biscuit with a Pork sausage on it. I asked what it was. Sausage is a mince made from pork and 'other' stuff, is quite spicy and is prepared with a white gravy. A biscuit is basically what we know as a scone. So sausage and biscuit is like having a savoury pork mince on a scone. It actually tastes quite nice.

As a kid, I heard Granny on The Beverley Hillbillies say she was cooking grits. I couldn't work out why someone would want to eat the sandy stuff I had at the bottom of my budgie's cage. Now I know better. Grits is made from corn and is similar to porridge in consistency. You can have it any way you like but I prefer mine with cheese and butter and a little salt and pepper.

My first time in America had come to an end. With a very tearful goodbye, I boarded the plane in Dallas and back to Australia I went. I had many stories to tell the folks back home about my trip. Needless to say, I knew I would be back.

Even though I had only been in America for 4 weeks, looking at the big picture showed that both countries were very similar and it wouldn't take anybody from Australia long to assimilate themselves in the USA. It's the smaller details that are fascinating. My first trip was so overwhelming that I didn't comprehend a lot of what was going on around me.

I got the impression that being an Australian in America can be somewhat of a novelty to a lot of Americans, but I saw that as being someone special. I got the usual

'I love your accent' to 'do you know the Crocodile Hunter?' While visiting my girlfriend's son, I was 'show and tell' at his school. I offered to do it because it gave me the opportunity to represent my country and to set some myths straight.

One night we went to the 'Outback Steakhouse' in St. Augustine touted to be a genuine Aussie place to eat. There were a few boomerangs on the wall next to those yellow plastic signs saying 'Kangaroo Crossing' and 'Mozzies Ahead' and I was the only Australian in the place. I had a look at the menu and of course the names of the meals were Australian but the meal itself was basically American. The only beer they had was Fosters. So I declined. All the ads for Fosters depict the beer as 'Imported' and 'Australian for beer'. When you look closely at the label you see a picture of a kangaroo and the word 'Imported'. Yes folks, imported from Canada. That's where it is made.

Tipping is almost unheard of back home, but over here it is a way of life. So I had to have a quick lesson on how to tip, when or when not to tip and how much. For good service you can leave as much as you like. For lousy service I was told that you leave a penny (1 cent) showing that you didn't like the service you got. I wanted to be part of the action, but I wasn't carrying any US currency. So I called the waiter over and explained that I only had Australian notes on me. I offered him a AU\$5 note and his eyes opened really wide, he got a huge smile on his face and I think it was the best tip he had ever had. Here was an Australian in an Australian restaurant offering Australian money. I bet he still has that purple note.

Of course all the paper money over here is the same colour...oops...color and the same size. Nobody at my (pre) stepson's show and tell could believe the different colour...oops...color of our notes. I showed them that the different size was to help the blind know how much they had and the different colour...color...whatever, made it easier to see how much you had at a glance. Of course the kids didn't care what the explanation was, they just liked how pretty the notes looked.

The first summer I spent here brought a few revelations home. Because the size of the US and Australia is roughly the same and the geological position are also almost the same albeit in opposite hemispheres the climate is the same, although it snows more in the US in winter. Unfortunately, having roughly the same summer climate doesn't mean the mozzies are the same. I remember as a kid watching cartoons depicting Mozzies the size of sheep flying kamikaze style into their victim. Well, its true. There are these huge black mosquitoes that are extremely aggressive and don't waste time looking for the best place to land. It's straight in for the kill, no matter what is in the way – clothes, glasses, car windows. One good thing about these buggers, they are easy to kill. One swat and they are dead, and the reason they are

easily disposed of? Once they get their proboscis 2' into your flesh, its very hard for them to make a fast getaway.

Since my initial trip, my girlfriend has made a trip over to Australia, I made another trip back to the states and she came back to Australia where we were married.

Here are a couple of things from my girlfriend's point of view. Just like Americans, we take for granted most things in our respective countries. The first thing my girlfriend wanted to see when she arrived in Australia was a kangaroo. After visiting the US I could understand her excitement at seeing something that I see everyday. At my first sighting of a live squirrel I nearly wet myself. I say 'live' because the first 2 squirrels I saw were road kill. So when she saw a mob of kangaroos, and nearly wet herself I understood the excitement, but I still said, 'They are only kangaroos.'

I believe the cost of living in the US is lower. We seem to have more disposable cash, but some things are cheaper in Australia. My girlfriend noticed the cost of pineapples. Living in Queensland, I saw pineapples everyday for sale when in season, and very cheap. She was amazed at a sign that said '8 pines for \$1.' In the US the cheapest pineapple is about \$2.50 and that is only an average sized one.

Having now been in the US for over 18 months I have experienced many things like a fall festival, Easter, summer in Florida, Christmas (still strange wearing winter woolies at Christmas), theme parks and swimming in the Atlantic.

With my current job, I have had a chance to observe the differences in housing between Australia and America. It's not the shape or design that is different but the roof and the ceiling materials. 90% of houses in the area I work have what they call shingles on the roof. These are in the design of the older style wooden shingles but are usually made of recycled rubber material. Not many houses have tiled roves. And all the ceilings have 'popcorn' on them. These are small, round balls blown onto the ceiling with paint to give a decorative look. It does look good but it makes it very hard to repaint the ceiling with a roller. The only way is to spray paint.

I have only touched on a fraction of the differences I have noticed since coming to America. There are still many things that I could write about like the different accents between the people of America, patriotism, the different police forces, NASCAR, rednecks, politics, frogs, food... and the list goes on.

But there are also many similarities between the two countries. Maybe these differences and similarities will appear in Volume 2 the book.



**Steve Hessling**, his wife and step-son live in East Palatka Florida, definite Redneck country. As can be seen in his story, he was introduced to his new place of residence in a somewhat unusual way: meeting his future wife on the Internet.

Would he do things differently? Never.

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