

# AMERICAN WIVES - AUSTRALIAN HUSBANDS

**Stuart Ford**

---

There are a few of us that I know of, Australian men that married American women. The American girls came to Sydney to work on the Olympic Games. We met them, fell in love, and ended up moving back to America with them. It was a booming little export business for a while, though I never saw it mentioned in the Austrade figures. It was like the WW II invasion of GI's into England, though in reverse. American girls are compelling; they are confident, boisterous, and full of incessant energy. They're a little more exotic than our own. They dare to flounce convention; they're more edgy. With that, comes the fact that sometimes they can be a little strident, but everything is a trade off. The move to America doesn't seem a big thing in the abstract, how different can it really be from Sydney? It starts with a romance, an idea and a plan conceived in the imagination. It becomes real, as the jet takes off from Sydney en-route to the States. Moving to America was a much bigger deal than we ever imagined.

I'll admit straight out of the gate. I wasn't born Australian, I'm a 'new' mate, a naturalized Aussie. I'll argue with any 'ocker' in a Rocks bar that I'm as Australian as they are. They just happened to be born there; I picked the place. I probably know more about the bush and the history of the country than most 'Sydneyiders'. The Australian rhythm resonated with me, and I found the home that I had been looking for. I vote, I pay taxes, and I carry an Australian passport. I barrack for the Wallabies against my old country. Look under my skin, and I'm true blue to the core. The move to Australia wasn't difficult at all, I felt at home from the moment I landed. The people were friendly and welcoming. I've had part of my family living there since 1958. Australia was where I always belonged; I just didn't always know it. I had to find my paradise. I did, and I loved Australia, as I had no other place before.

I expected the same experience when I moved to America. Naivety is a blessing sometimes, it protects us from ourselves. Now I live in California. You need to think of California as a country. It is very different from the rest of America. If California broke off, it would be the sixth richest country in the world, and the thirtieth largest. California is an economic powerhouse. I live in Los Angeles, which if California is a country, then LA is an independent fiefdom. There are many Australians here. Some come for the movie business; others because LA is the first

airport you get off at when you fly in from Australia. Much like why there are so many South Africans in Perth. Los Angeles is a huge, sprawling metropolis. It doesn't have a true centre, unlike Sydney. It is like an endless collection of suburbs, each with its own town centre. It ranges from beach communities, through the Hollywood Hills to the vast San Fernando Valley. Saying you live in Los Angeles is like telling someone you live in New South Wales, it is at best an approximation.

When you arrive in America, you enter a system where you have no history. You have no social security number, so you are a non-entity. Things we take for granted become challenging; credit cards, car leases, home loans - all difficult to qualify for as you lack the credit history. They don't take overseas references here, so you have to start slowly and build your profile over time. California is different. The climate is similar, though in LA at least, less humid. The people speak approximately the same language, although the nuances are different. They think differently. I sometimes believe that the reason Americans are so daring overseas, is that they come from a society that is so politically correct. They get outside the States, and react to the open intellectual and spiritual landscape. Australians are accepting of colourful idioms and eccentric ideas. I can only imagine the outrage if they launched a brand of cheese called 'Coon' here. America is unique. Different country, different strokes; diversity is strength.

The American economy is a monolith. It makes ours seem like it's in diapers still. Where we would expect thousands of consumers, they traffic in millions. The scale and pace are unexpected. Changing any system here can't be done on a whim or for a minor improvement in productivity. We might have to throw out a few pieces of hardware, in America you are talking about huge hardware and capital investments. Sometimes their systems are a little moribund, but the sheer mass and volume makes change a challenge. Trying to understand America is not as simple as you imagine. It takes time and a fair amount of patience. Since I've been here, I have done many things. Initially I worked for a large multi-national company; the same company I had worked for in Australia. That didn't seem quite right to me. It was as if nothing had changed, except the location of the office. For a while, I was the CEO of an Australian software company that wanted to launch into the States. That was a non-starter, as the software failed on its first installation here. It just couldn't handle the sheer number of transactions demanded by the American economy. Since then, I've become by default an entrepreneur. I've consulted, run a business with my wife, dabbled in trading, and now write, mainly for my own amusement. My experience is not uncommon, I know many Australian entrepreneurs here. We don't quite fit the system. If you're competing for a job, especially a senior position, the hiring executive knows Wharton better than he knows Monash. He or she, we must

remember to be PC here, is more aware of Pacific Bell or MCI, than he is Optus or Telstra. It gets a little old, so you end up running your own show, a little bit of Aussie ingenuity and application, and you can make a buck here. I ranted and raved about the inequality for a long time. It must have been a bore to those around me. I am now more philosophical about it. The system was never going to change for me - I had to learn that. I needed to adapt to the system. I moved here for love, not career anyway. Love doesn't change at the border. We've had our hard times. The dot com meltdown took away a lot of our business. We reinvented and bounced back. Australians are a resilient people.

My experience is not that unusual. I have a friend, I'll call him Bob. Bob respects his privacy and his wife even more so. Bob was an Australian export husband, like me. He moved to an all-together different part of America. Bob was a successful guy at home. He was a CPA, MBA and ran a very successful computer company. He couldn't find a job here, not one that lasted anyway. I've lost touch with Bob now, but the last time I heard about him, he was riding his Harley across America to go and help out at the World Trade Center after September 11<sup>th</sup>, that's the sort of upright guy he is. I suspect by now, that Bob is also an entrepreneur. He was certainly heading that way. I meet many Australian small business owners in my travels, in all different kinds of businesses. Australians are a unique breed. They don't take themselves too seriously, and try to balance their working life with their personal time. Many work at home to be close to their family. Some join the Australian networking groups that flourish here, while others studiously ignore them. Some want to be seen as Australian, others blend. Most of us read the 'Herald' or 'Age' on line, to keep up with the scores and the gossip. Australians are by nature innovators. They adapt and reinvent to fit the environs. It is no different here than at home, in that way.

Someone I don't even know runs my favourite little Australian idiosyncrasy here. I have never introduced myself for fear that it would burst the bubble of my imagination. It is the office of an Australian Tourist Commission. I won't say which, to protect the innocent. I drive past the office sometimes and it always makes me smile. It isn't in a business area or very close to the airport. It is in a small, neglected theme village close to the ocean. It is the sort of place that gets the Japanese coach tours during the week and the Mexican families at the weekend. I see the sign for the Tourism Commission proudly hanging there, and it looks so incongruous. I also see a man there on the balcony sometimes, reading a book, drinking a coffee or looking at the view. I am sure it isn't our tourism representative, but I like to imagine it is. It would be fitting, a little Aussie backwater in the huge flow of the American economy.

There is one big disappointment for Australia here; that is how New Zealand is winning the battle for the tourist dollar. Air New Zealand is a much larger presence here at the airport than our dear, old Qantas. Most Americans I meet, have an ambition to, or have been to New Zealand. I try to convince them to add Australia to their itinerary. I see advertisements for New Zealand all the time; they pervade the consciousness. The campaigns for Australia are sporadic and disjointed. They either present us as some sort of environmental paradise, or as an exotic place of ancient wonder and awe. We don't seem to have the positioning quite right and sleepy little New Zealand is stealing a lot of American tourist dollars that should be rightfully ours. I suspect we'll get it right eventually; we usually do. But to the heads of the relevant authorities and corporations - wise up guys, the All Blacks are sticking it to us in the tourist game!

Australia has invaded the movies though, so many stars, so much talent. The Australian presence in Hollywood is becoming pervasive. Australian stars have some of the sensitivity of the English, with a more likeable, maverick charm. My wife has one of my favourite quotes on the subject, 'Tom Cruise lost us in the divorce.' There is a certain allegiance to the life we had in Australia that will never leave us. We look at Australia with the softness and love that comes from distance. Australia was where we met and fell in love, for that it will always be our happy place. Our home is a little Australia - aboriginal art, ostrich eggs, a Farr-Jones signed jersey, and artistic photographs of Australian landscapes. I don't even notice them anymore, but I'm grateful for them when I do.

I do miss Australia, little things mainly - meat pies, the pub, my mates and that huge sky and clear sunlight that is so unique to Australia. I miss the smell of the bush, the sounds of the kookaburras, walking over fallen jacaranda petals, and the bustle of the harbour. I go back sometimes. It used to be on business, now it is more for fun. I catch up with friends, but after a while, you start to feel like an outsider. You don't have the same experiences anymore. You don't have the same daily references, and you can only live in the past for so long. Did I say I miss meat pies? I really miss meat pies. Harry's Cart was a favourite stopping point after a big night out. Don't tell me if it's not there now. It lives in my memory now, and that is a sacrosanct place. Nothing changes in my memory, and selfishly, that's the way I want Australia to remain.

We talk about retiring to Australia one day. There are family matters that hold us here for now. We envisage a rambling house, in the bush and close to the ocean. The sort of place where the scent of the eucalypts wafts through the house, and the crash of the surf is a distant but constant rhythm. It will have a view down to the sea, an endless panorama of clear, blue Australian sky. It is our dream, one day we will

come back. We have agreed that if I die before that, my wife will spread my ashes from South Head. I don't care what the authorities say about it. One day, I will come home to Australia; it is where I belong. It's where our hearts lie. Australia is still the lucky country, and one day we will come home.



**Stuart Ford** is a native of Great Britain. He lived in Australia for many years, and has travelled extensively around the world. He now lives in Los Angeles in a multi-cultural household with an American wife and stepchild, a Rhodesian ridgeback and an Australian Cockatiel. His writing credits include a first novel, *Lost in Africa*, due for release in 2004, a short story published in the Bromliian Magazine (UK), and an honourable mention in an Open Short Story Competition (Australia).

*Copyright © 2003 Stuart Ford, All Rights Reserved*