

First trip to red earth

Bernard Appassamy | 18 April 2019
2 Comments



I'm standing in front of a photographic triptych in sepia tones. To the left, a scrawny blonde boy running and laughing along a cobblestone street with an oversize baguette in his left hand. A vintage flour bag with a Paris address in the middle. And to the right, a group of teenage Caucasian girls laughing as well. All, I'm guessing, from France, early 1900s.

What are the odds of these French children ending a century later on a homely dining room wall in the outback?

I'm on my first trip to 'red earth'. Tonight we are staying in a township with a population of just over a thousand in a squeaky-clean weatherboard house. 'Every possible thing had been thought

of by the owners – nothing was lacking,' justly claims a review. This explains the 9.5 rating, but I am nonetheless stunned by the bath towels folded as two life size origami swans kissing at the foot of each bed.

The isolation is familiar – like the Mauritius I grew up in, but these swans also capture a different Australia to the one I have known until now, up and down the more affluent east coast. What appears spectacular to a tourist travelling in an air conditioned car remains brutal for the locals, as evidenced by the drought and near ghost towns forced to reinvent themselves through tourism.

Everywhere, as we tick off the attractions, my snapshots fail to capture the epic landscapes and stories. As a traveller on the move, I experience them fleetingly, only skimming the surface, like flicking through rows of disjointed postcards on a rack.

At memorials, museums and galleries, the settlers' history point to hardship, and their shocking working and living conditions. Causes of mining deaths include 'Rock Fall', 'Explosion', 'Fell Down Shaft', 'Crushed By Wagon' and 'No Details'. A painting by former miner Sam Byrne, born 1883, illustrates a scene he saw as a child – Cecelia Prendergast, a sex worker and brothel owner, strapped half naked to a wheelbarrow, and pulled by the police through a crowd on the main street. Antique porcelain shards from the region, relics of the empire, sell by weight in clear plastic bags for \$30.

The present can be equally tense. Cultural divides appear in a blip. One 40 degree afternoon at the municipal pool, a few Aboriginal families splash about in one corner. On the opposite side across empty lanes, a group of caucasian children train, with their coaches screaming and their parents sitting above in the shade, glazed.



"For the first time, I glimpse an understanding of this country's regional pragmatic optimism, and vernacular such as 'hard yakka', 'getting on with it' and 'she'll be right!'"

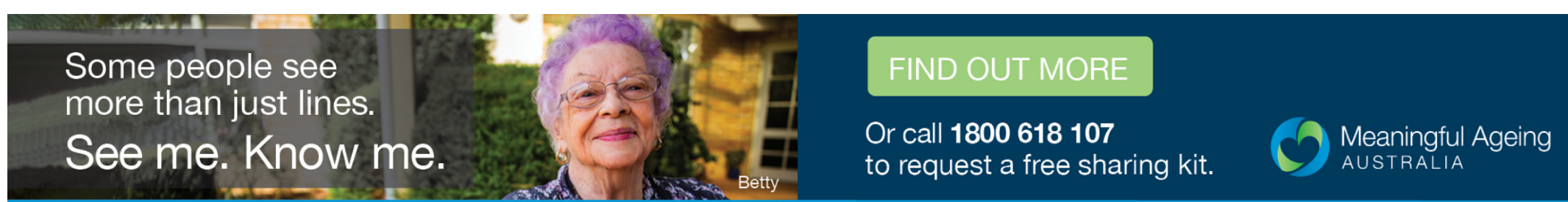
A few days later, a traditional owner holds a Welcome to Country in the hotel courtyard to a handful of tourists struggling in the heat to keep their attention while shooing

flies. Within ear reach at the cool bar inside, the TV is blaring 'Advance Australia Fair' to punters queuing for happy hour.

An elderly cameleer–descendant mosque caretaker points to piles of rubbish thrown over the fence by the neighbours. 'The Council knows about this ... ' He spent his teenage years at a boys home after twice escaping his father, the first time at age nine, to be reunited with his mother 500km away.

With *Footprints*, artist Abdul-Rahman Abdullah comments on the sensitive composition of contemporary Australia – how it looks and how it feels – with a flat kangaroo skin crushed at one end by a stack of red mortar bricks, all in fact painstakingly carved from wood.

For the first time, I glimpse an understanding of this country's regional pragmatic optimism, and vernacular such as 'hard yakka', 'getting on with it' and 'she'll be right'.



There are also unexpected gems: the small jug of fresh milk that greets us in our room in every fridge at every stop, or the owner of a new age café with incense burning who invokes tradition with, 'I make my vanilla slice base the old fashion way: with Sao biscuits', and the train buffet waiter who responds to my request deadpan, 'No, you can't have the scones. They are fattening'.

At the small airport waiting for our return flight, I witness another kiss, a lesbian couple, clearly distressed, one sitting sideways across the other, their arms locked in an embrace. The entire ground staff of four play with a puppy. The cafeteria lady watches TV.



Bernard Appassamy is a Sydney writer and artist who grew up in Mauritius.

Main image by Bernard Appassamy.

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