

When people discover I'm a travel writer, they often exclaim that I must have the best job in the world. And they're right. But life on the road isn't all open bar tabs and free hotel suites. There have been rare occasions when I've had to set down my drink, take off my slippers and learn some of life's tough lessons. They are, in no particular order, snakes can climb trees, never ask a Balinese cabbie to surprise you, and Samoan pillow fights often end in tears. But on my latest mission, to fly around Australia in six days, seeking travel advice from Virgin Blue Guests seated next to me, I was entering uncharted territory. It's a strange feeling to begin a trip with absolutely no idea of where you'll end up, but there's also a sense of ultimate freedom. I had been given permission to step off the tourist trails and see this country in all its many forms, alongside the people who make it great. And as I packed a bag, threw away my guidebook and readied myself to set out from Sydney on my great Australian odyssey, the words of my favourite modern-day poet, Rupert McCall, flashed into my mind. "The great romance of travel took a young bloke by the hand, to the place that he was missing, to his home, the lucky land." I was about to find out what he meant.

DAY ONE BROOME, 6.15PM

There can be nothing more spectacular than watching the sunset from the window of a flight into Broome. Clouds drift in pink-hued contentment towards the golden horizon and the sky is deep blue and infinite.

Belinda the birdwatcher disagrees. "If you think that's good," she says leaning over from the seat next to me, "you should get down to Broome Bird Observatory." She explains that at this time of year (early autumn) hundreds, perhaps thousands, of birds migrate from Australia to Siberia. Then they return in spring to feed on the tidal mudflats off the coast of Broome.

Belinda also points out that in just a few days, the conditions will be right for the seasonal phenomenon dubbed Staircase to the Moon, in which moonlight creates an illusion of glowing steps leading skywards from the exposed mudflats at low tide.

I thank her and explain that since I'm only in town overnight, I'll have to make do with this stunning inflight display. She shrugs and returns to her copy of *Birds of Australia*.

DAY TWO BROOME, 7.32AM

Breakfast is at Matso's Broome Brewery, and while it's too early for even this intrepid writer to sample the house's craft beers, I do enjoy the excellent poached eggs and a view of luminous Roebuck Bay, a gateway to the Indian Ocean.

After examining my trusty map, I decide that, as I'm due back at the airport in a few short hours, I won't have time to make it to Broome Bird Observatory. I choose instead to take the scenic walk along Carnarvon Road into the town centre.

I come across a sand dune along the roadside and instantly feel that I must climb it. Halfway up, sweating and panting in 34-degree heat, I resolve to drink less and jog more. At the top, however, I'm rewarded with an incredible view.

The colours are different here. The soil is the rich red of the outback and the sand is a deeper gold than the east coast beaches. ▷

144 HOURS, 14 FLIGHTS AND 10 DESTINATIONS. SHANE CONROY ATTEMPTS TO FLY AROUND THE COUNTRY IN LESS THAN A WEEK...

AS THE CROW FLIES

During this great Australian odyssey, I travelled 21,035 kilometres. That's equivalent to...

- 6 :: Tour de France races
- 18 :: Sydney to Hobart yacht races
- 21 :: Bathurst 1000 races
- 500 :: Full marathons
- 6,573 :: Melbourne Cup races

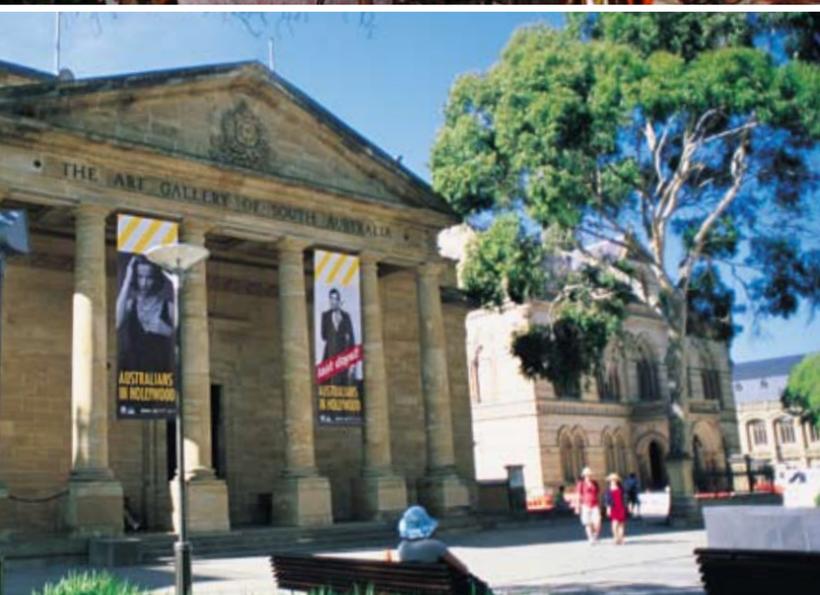


Virgin Blue Cabin Crew and Shane (centre) aboard his first flight, still feeling bright and bushy tailed.

PHOTOGRAPHY :: NORTHERN TERRITORY TOURISM, SOUTH AUSTRALIA TOURISM, TOURISM QUEENSLAND, TOURISM TASMANIA, TOURISM VICTORIA, TOURISM WESTERN AUSTRALIA.



From top: Broaden your horizons in Broome; Get your chops around the croc and emu snags at Bobby Dazzlers in Perth; Head to the Art Gallery of South Australia for your art fix.



The ocean is so bright, it's almost lit from beneath. The sky somehow seems deeper – more limitless.

PERTH, 3.24PM

Having realised that I am running late for my flight to Perth while standing atop the sand dune, it's a mad dash back to the airport. Finally aboard the flight, I have the row to myself so I take a little time to gather my thoughts, which soon turn to lunch in Perth.

I only have one hour to spend in the city centre before my next flight to Adelaide, so I know I'll have to choose well. I decide to make a reconnaissance mission to the inflight amenities as a cover for scanning the aisles for someone to advise me on an eatery. I spot a gentleman who looks like he knows where I can find a good lunch.

Geoff the builder immediately recommends the crocodile sausages at Bobby Dazzler's Ale House & Eatery – "They'll be the best snags you'll ever have", he promises. It's the first time I've tried crocodile but I dive in with gusto and they are indeed very good. Yet the snags sit uneasily in my belly as I realise that the crocs will have their chance to seek revenge when I arrive in Darwin later in my trip. But now, to Adelaide.

“It's the first time I've tried crocodile but

DAY THREE

ADELAIDE, 9.13AM

After a dreamless night's sleep, I wake feeling refreshed and ready to tackle my latest destination. My random travel companion on last night's flight from Perth was mother-of-three Leanne, who was returning to Adelaide after a family holiday. She is travelling with her husband and three teenage sons and, when I explain the concept of my story, she puts a swift stop to my pleas of exhaustion. She tells me that if I'd like to experience real fatigue, I should have children, and she is happy, in fact, to swap me the rest of my cushy assignment for a night supervising her kids. In one of my smarter decisions, I politely decline. With a rare morning to herself in Adelaide, Leanne would go to the Art Gallery of South Australia. It's a short, pleasant walk from the North Terrace hotel strip but I'm disappointed to find the gallery's heavy wooden doors firmly closed until 10am, when I'm due back at the airport. I hope Leanne has better luck.

MELBOURNE, 1.17PM

Warren the IT specialist is travelling from Adelaide to Melbourne to attend a conference on a highly technical subject I can't quite wrap my head around. He soon gives up trying to explain it to me and instead tries a subject much closer to my heart – food. He sends me to Melbourne's Chinatown – Australia's oldest – on Little Bourke Street, between Swanston and Spring

Streets. All the buzz is around Flower Drum on Market Lane but you really can't put a culinary foot wrong here. I recommend that you visit after the sun goes down, in order to watch the precinct come alive with lashings of decorative street lights.

HOBART, 6.49PM

As I walk through the freezing Tasmanian night in my thick coat and scarf, I find it hard to believe that I was sweating and getting sunburnt in Broome only yesterday. I'm on my way to the wharves on the stern orders of Jim, the retired engineer from row 12 on the flight from Melbourne, who informed me that Sea Shepherd's famous anti-whaling ship, the *Steve Irwin*, is docked in the harbour and well worth a visit. He's right. Even at rest, the ship looks menacing and it towers over the smaller, innocent-looking fishing boats.

It's only early but the streets are quiet. I peek into the dark colonial alleyways of the city and decide to seek solace at the IXL Long Bar at the Henry Jones Art Hotel. I'm greeted with a rush of warmth as I walk through the sliding glass doors and sit down to enjoy a club sandwich at the small designer bar, a glorious modern contrast to its colonial surroundings.

I dive in with gusto and, indeed, it's good.”

DAY FOUR

ROCKHAMPTON, 3.11PM

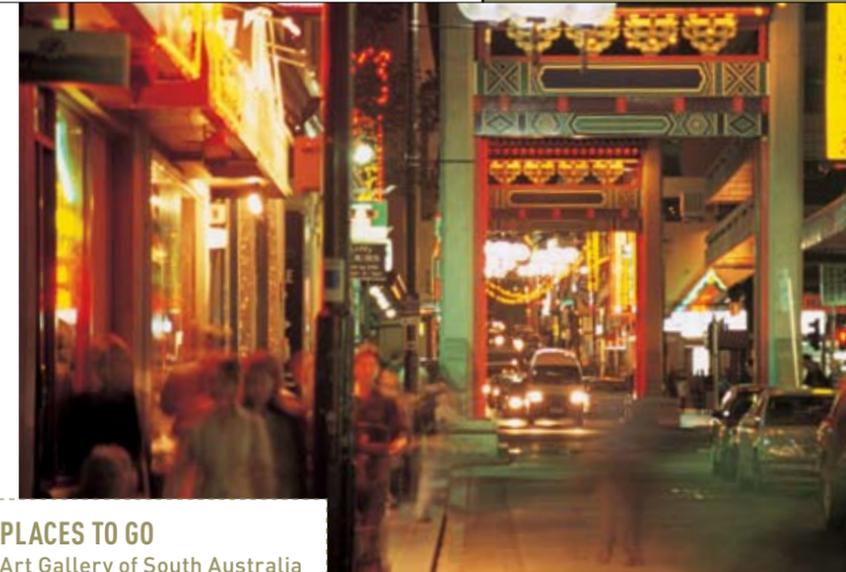
On my flight to Rockhampton, I'm surprised to be seated next to Phillip, a Virgin Blue pilot. After the obligatory "I hope you're not flying the plane from back here" crack, I'm even more surprised to discover that Phillip will be back in the cockpit for my next flight to Townsville. Although he's little help when it comes to where to go in Rockhampton, sheepishly admitting that he has never actually made it out of the airport.

John the cursing cabbie, on the other hand, is full of advice. He steers me to The Criterion Hotel, right on the river, which is now my pick for the best country pub in Australia. Tartan carpet, scattered memorabilia on the walls, cold beer and a chatty bartender is as good as it gets. I'm devastated when it's time to leave.

TOWNSVILLE, 9.28PM

Between Phillip the Virgin Blue pilot's soothing 'welcome aboard' and my comfy seat, I'm straight off to sleep on my flight to Townsville. The crew member has to wake me for the safety demonstration and, afterwards, I slip back into sleep and don't stir again until the tyres touch down on tarmac.

I have time for a quick dinner in bustling Palmer Street but nagging in the back of my mind is the 4am wake-up call that awaits me the following morning. I eat at sleek Rhino Bar and am served a steak so big,



PLACES TO GO

Art Gallery of South Australia
+61 8 8207 7000

Birds Australia Broome Bird Observatory
www.broomebirdobservatory.com

Bobby Dazzlers Ale House
www.bobbydazzlers.com.au

Cairns Central Shopping Centre
www.cairnscentral.com.au

Crococaurus Cove
www.crococauruscove.com

Flower Drum
+61 3 9662 3655

IXL Long Bar
www.thehenryjones.com/ixlbar.html

Matso's Broome Brewery
www.matsosbroomebrewery.com.au

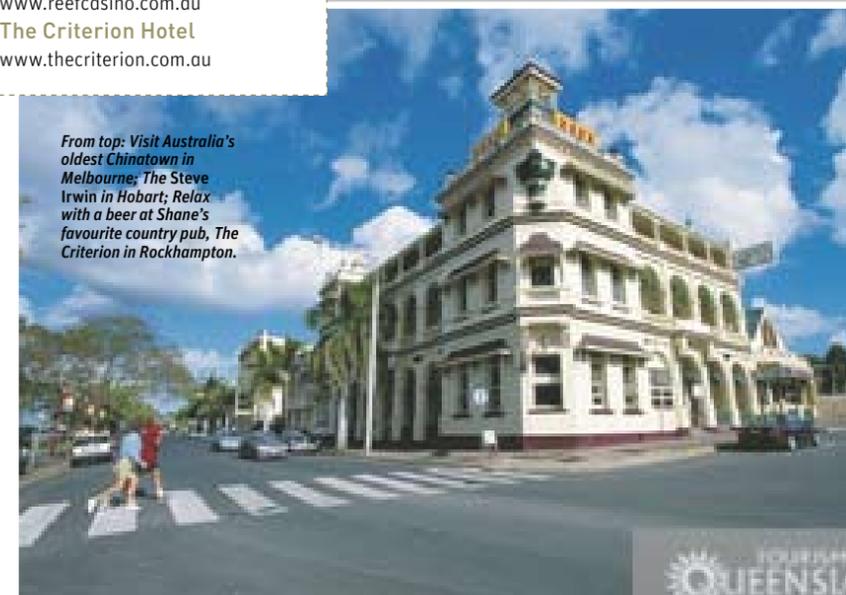
Rhino Bar
www.rhinobar.com.au

Reef Hotel Casino
www.reefcasino.com.au

The Criterion Hotel
www.thecriterion.com.au



From top: Visit Australia's oldest Chinatown in Melbourne; The Steve Irwin in Hobart; Relax with a beer at Shane's favourite country pub, The Criterion in Rockhampton.



I have no choice but to surmise that it was provided by the establishment's hefty namesake. I spend most of dinner locked in an inner debate over whether it is my journalistic duty to eat the entire steak. I try – and fail.

DAY FIVE CAIRNS, 8.12AM

I've been wearing the same pair of flight socks since I was in Perth and I'm starting to wonder which may be my most pressing health concern – deep vein thrombosis or a manky sock disease akin to trench foot. Max the 14-year-old says I don't need to worry because he wore his footy socks for eight straight games once and nothing happened to him. Max is on his way to visit his grandmother and tells me I should "totally scope out" Cairns Central Shopping Centre.

The large retail space is pretty much what you'd expect from any major shopping centre – shops-foodcourt-shops. I must admit that wandering the glossy white lino with no particular shopping agenda takes me back to my own days as a teenage mall rat, but the experience doesn't hold my attention for long.

“ I've been wearing the same pair of flight socks since I was in Perth. ”

Instead, I head for Max's second choice, the Reef Hotel Casino. Rest assured, young Max is no gambling fiend – he's rather more interested in the rooftop Cairns Wildlife Dome. Contained within a giant glass atrium on the roof of the casino is a surprisingly large tropical zoo complete with wallabies, koalas, snakes, plenty of roaming bird life and quite possibly the only fourth-floor crocodile enclosure in the world.

BRISBANE, 9.09PM

David is 86 with two hearing aids that seem to be more for decoration than any real function. He's fascinated with my laptop, and asks me if sending an email is like typing a letter. I tell him that's exactly what it's like and he seems satisfied. We move on to a lesson in mobile phone usage but when we get to SMS messaging, his eyes glaze over.

We land in the Queensland capital and I help him across the tarmac to the airport gate to meet his granddaughter who, it seems, is running late. I don't have enough time to leave the airport before my next flight so we decide to have a cup of tea together while we wait and take another shot at SMS. I demonstrate on my new iPhone but the touch-screen brings up a whole new set of problems.

DAY SIX DARWIN, 2AM

I've now been awake for 22 hours straight and am trying my best to make friends with Gemma the German backpacker, which is tough going because I speak as much German as she does English, which is very little. ▷



From top: Are you hungry enough to tackle the hefty steaks at the Rhino Bar (above) in Townsville?; Discover your animal instincts at the rooftop wildlife dome in Cairns.





From top: Snap to it – meet the monsters of Crocosaurus Cove; Enjoy a long lunch in Mitchell Street, Darwin.

I think we talk about crocodiles – or at least I make a fool of myself trying to impersonate one.

DARWIN, 12.15PM

After a sublime sleep in, I shake off the cobwebs with a brisk and sweaty walk along Mitchell Street. This is Darwin's main entertainment drag and its many pubs and restaurants are already heaving with the lunchtime crowd. The steamy tropical heat is thick, and up-beat music, cold beer and happy conversations spill out of the crowded venues in a heady swirl of excitement.

Amid the Mitchell Street madness, I stumble upon a small urban zoo named Crocosaurus Cove. Its signage promises that within I will discover the magic of reptiles, and it reminds me of this morning's pantomime with Gemma the German backpacker.

I head inside and find several large crocodiles, including the real-life scaly star of *Crocodile Dundee*, lolling around in their enclosures. My favourite, though, is an 80-year-old saltwater crocodile named Chopper who lost his two front feet in a royal reptilian rumble. His keeper tells me that he's still as mean as a cut snake and weighs about 800 kilograms. I can't help but wonder how many sausages he would make. I do, however, feel a pang of guilt when I hold a baby croc who weighs significantly less. His jaws are bound and I ask the friendly keeper if we can untie him so he can at least have a fighting chance for retribution. He looks at me as if I've lost my mind, which, obviously, I have.

SOMEWHERE OVER QUEENSLAND, 11.58PM

On my flight back to Sydney, I sit back with a hard-earned beer and reflect on my trip. It really has been remarkable. I've seen the sun set over the Indian Ocean in Broome, eaten crocodile sausages in Perth – and then met them for real in Darwin – marvelled at an anti-whaling ship in Hobart and frolicked in a tropical oasis atop a casino in Cairns. But more than anything I've seen, it's the memories of the people I've met that will stay with me. I've learnt a lot about myself and about this strange and wonderful country that so many of us are lucky enough to call home. I've also learnt that the two most magical words in the Australian lexicon are 'G'day mate'. It's not a cliché, they really are magical. Test it out – say them to the person sitting next to you right now. Go on, do it. It won't hurt a bit, I promise, and you never know where it'll take you. 



A BLOKE'S GOT TO SLEEP SOMETIME :: Here's where Shane grabbed a few hours' blessed shuteye during his Australian odyssey.



BROOME
:: MERCURE
INN
CONTINENTAL

This excellent family hotel is equipped with two inviting swimming pools. Located only a short walk from the must-visit Matso's Brewery, couples will enjoy the one-bedroom spa suites.



ADELAIDE
:: MERCURE
GROSVENOR
HOTEL

With a prime location on North Terrace and close to the most spacious hotel rooms I have ever seen, this property is a winner for people travelling for either business or pleasure.



HOBART
:: GRAND
MERCURE
HADLEYS
HOTEL

This is the oldest continuously operated boutique hotel in Tasmania. It was built with convict labour and my vast suite feels like a museum. A must for history buffs.



TOWNSVILLE
:: GRAND
MERCURE
APARTMENTS

Located smack bang in the heart of the vibrant Palmer Street dining precinct, these impressive, spacious apartments offer tasteful design and the last word in luxury. A first-class flophouse.



DARWIN
:: NOVOTEL
ATRIUM

This is a top-shelf hotel with uninterrupted water views is located just a short walk from busy Mitchell Street. The foyer, complete with glass lift and indoor tropical jungle, is a tourist attraction in itself.