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HOME & AWAY



By **REBECCA
HOSSACK**

I WENT to the Savoy on Thursday for a lunch hosted by ABIE (Australian Business in Europe). The after lunch speaker — a besuited financial analyst — gave a talk on European Monetary Union. Few subjects cause more alarm amongst British businessmen. The prospect of losing their beloved pounds and pence sends them into a spin of insular anxiety. Their Australian counterparts

however, seemed much more relaxed about the whole topic — open to its possibilities and able to assess its drawbacks calmly.

One reason for this, I suspect, is that most of the significant acronyms involved in the debate sound reassuringly like fluffy antipodean wildlife. The EMU needs no introduction; the EURO (the proposed unit of European currency) is better-known downunder as a small West Australian wallaby. It is difficult (even for nervous financial experts) to feel unduly threatened by something that reminds them of Skippy.

If Australian fauna was set in a benign light last week, Australian flora was casting a more sinister shadow. At dinner I sat next to a beautiful toxicologist from the 'Poison Centre' at Guy's Hospital. She was enthusing about the many interesting and exciting poisons to be found in the plant life of the Australian continent.

HER current enthusiasm, however, was derived, not from the vegetable world, but from the animal kingdom. She was making a study of the 'dinoflagellates' to be found in the guts of certain large antipodean fish. These toxins have the bizarre property of reversing some human sensory equations, hot becomes cold and vice versa. This extraordinary feature had, she explained, long been made use of by the Aborigines in their traditional medicine. Millenia of patient experimentation have given Aboriginal culture a knowledge of the properties of Australian plant and animal toxins that Western scientists can still only wonder at. Indeed, my toxicologist-friend suggested that an exhibition of Aboriginal remedies would be a real revelation. Perhaps it will be my project for next year. The merchandising opportunities would certainly be exciting . . .

● Rebecca Hossack was the Cultural Attaché to London's Australian High Commission and

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I HAVE spent most of this week in Western Australia driving along the Great Northern Highway from Brisbane to Kununurra.

The scale of the scenery is almost bemusing to someone who has spent the last decade in the UK.

I had become accustomed to thinking of the Cumbrian Fells, the Yorkshire Moors and the Scottish Highlands as majestic.

But set beside the ranges,

ridges and planes — and the strange red stone outcrops — of the Kimberly, they seem almost quaint. It will be difficult for me to regain my respect for the mountain ash now that I have beheld the bulbous yet stately glory of a thousand-year-old boab tree. The rains were just beginning to arrive and there was a vivid and unexpected greyness to much of the land. Even so, the landscape retains its sense of stark austerity.

It is a harsh and taxing environment. And it is made more so by the animal life. The local population along the way seem to take an undue pleasure in passing on the tales of all the deadly fauna near at hand — and foot.

AT BROOME, when I inquired (with feigned casualness) about shark sightings in the sea off the beach, I was told cheerfully not to worry about the sharks — it was the sea-snakes I should watch out for.

At Fitzroy Crossing, the woman at the petrol station regaled us with anecdotes about King Brown snakes on her front doorstep, while the hotel proprietor at Halls Creel remarked conspiratorially that there was supposed to be a couple of saltwater crocodiles in the beautiful desert oasis just out of town.

As a result, our visit to this idyllic pool was a rather nervous and brief affair. The lizards are a more benign and a more capricious presence. They have all taken to running around on their hind legs like miniature dinosaurs.

I don't know whether this is a new phenomenon. It is certainly not something I remember about lizards in Victoria during my childhood. I wonder whether they have all taken to imitating their ancient ancestors after seeing Jurassic Park movies.

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THIS WEEK I flew back to Australia for a holiday, and as a treat, I travelled with British Airways.

I have been helping them with the launch of their new image.

They are replacing the Union Jack logo on the tail-fins of their planes with a selection of idiosyncratic ethnic motifs from around the world: a Scottish tweed pattern, a Polish daily design, an

from Africa, a Red Indian totem figure.

I helped them to select an Australian Aboriginal painting (by Clifford Possum) and another picture by a Kalahari Bushman called Cquoise.

The new designs are being applied gradually to the BA fleet, and our plane had the familiar, sober livery and flag.

But I was excited to see that our luggage tickets were decorated with a detail from Cquoise's painting and that the stewards' name badges were banded with an abstract design by Terry Frost (the chosen representative of the British artistic tradition).

Most of the cabin staff — and I cross-questioned them thoroughly — were in favour of the new look, finding it "colourful" and "different". Certainly the fact that Mrs Thatcher disapproved of it when confronted with a model new look plane (she tied her handkerchief around the design on its tale as a protest) stood greatly in its favour.

One stewardess, however, dissented forcefully — and with something of Mrs T's tone of voice.

She hated the new look — and feared it might be only the thin end of the wedge. "Next they'll be wanting us to wear native costume," she sniffed sharply.

I didn't like to point out that neither the Aborigines nor the Bushmen wore anything at all.

I flew to Perth. It is not a city I know well, but I immediately felt welcomed by its sun-filled streets, thronging malls and unmistakably Australianess.

I was also much impressed by the municipal planting policy: every roundabout and verge bristled with "Kangaroo Paw" and Agapanthus, many of the roads were treelined.

I always buy Australian flowers for my London gallery so I cannot look at a Kangaroo Paw or a sprig of Eucalyptus without thinking how much it would cost at a London florist. It is often as much as £7 a stem!

So to me at least, the streets of Perth seemed lined with gold.

■ **REBECCA HOSSACK** is the former cultural attache to the Australian embassy in London.