

Baltic bride (2)

As I stood there on the tarmac of Darwin airport, the first thing that struck me was the heat and the humidity. It was like being in an oven. In the whirlwind of the introduction process I just hadn't thought about the timing of my visit. I had arrived in January, which is in the middle of the Australian summer. I had just left the Polish winter. Also I didn't take into account the fact that Darwin is at a latitude of about 12 degrees. Kraków has a latitude of 50 degrees.



I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I had not kept moving like the other passengers. I heard a gruff voice saying 'Hurry up, follow the arrows into the building'. I started walking towards the airport building but after only a few metres I had to remove my jumper and coat. I was perspiring profusely.

I collected my suitcase and then went to the customs gates. There were guards with dogs and the dogs were sniffing the luggage. I felt so scared that I almost started to cry. 'What am I doing here. I hate this place', I thought. After a long wait in a queue I finally cleared customs and started looking for the bus to Tennant Creek. I found the bus terminal but I couldn't work out which bus I should take. Luckily there was an information counter. I was so scared and confused that I temporarily forgot most of the English that I had learned in night school. 'I can't understand what you are saying', said the women behind the counter. 'Show me your passport. Ah, Polish. Hang on a minute. Bogdan is around here somewhere'. She left the counter and exited through a rear door. She returned with a man who was dressed in a security guard's uniform. I just can't describe the relief I felt when the man spoke to me in Polish.

Bogdan worked at the airport and he explained that I had to catch the Alice Springs bus. 'The Alice Springs bus leaves from Bay 3. It stops at Tennant Creek. I will write you a note in English to give to the driver' he said in Polish.

'Is Tennant Creek far', I asked. 'Yes', he said with a smile. 'You are in Australia now and it's a big country.'



Feeling more confident, I found Bay 3, handed the note and my suitcase to the driver and found a seat on the bus. I noted straight away that this bus was different to those in Kraków. The steering wheel was on the right side. At the front on the outside was a large metal attachment made from steel pipe. I gazed out the bus window. There were strange trees growing

around the airport buildings. I know now that they were palm trees but at that stage I had never seen anything like them before.

I looked at some of the passengers on the bus. They had dark skin, like Negroes that I occasionally saw in Kraków. But their features and their hair were different. All the bus passengers were dressed in light clothing. I must have looked out of place in my heavy blouse, woollen shirt and fur lined boots.

More passengers started getting on the bus. A woman sat down beside me. 'Where are you going', she asked. The English I had learnt at night school started to return. 'I am visiting, a, um, friend who lives on a cattle station near Tennant Creek', I replied. 'Oh, you are from Europe', she said, immediately detecting my accent. 'I used to live at Tennant Creek. Now what is the name of the cattle station?' I couldn't remember the name so I took out one of Andrew's emails from my handbag. 'It is called Sandy Downs', I said. The woman looked surprised. 'Sandy Downs!' she exclaimed, 'Oh yes, I know where it is'. She said no more about the location of the cattle station but her reaction made me feel uneasy. I found myself longing for the security of Kraków, even though I had only been in Australia for a few hours.

The bus left the airport and I took in the sights of Darwin from the window. It was modern, not at all like Kraków. 'This place was flattened in the seventies', said the women beside me. 'Most of it has been rebuilt'. I was puzzled. 'Was there a war?' I asked. She laughed. 'No, there was a cyclone.'



We soon left Darwin behind and started following a major highway. The road was flat and wide and the driver increased the speed of the bus. The vegetation started to change. It was no longer tropical. Now there was no grass and very few trees, just a few stunted bushes here and there. I was sitting towards the front of the bus and so I had a good view of the road ahead. Suddenly an

animal I had never seen before jumped onto the middle of the road. The driver didn't even slow down. The animal bounced off the large metal attachment at the front of the bus. I looked back. The animal was lying dead on the side of the road. 'Bloody kangaroos', said the women beside me, 'The bull bar sure comes in handy.'

The bus travelled through the night but I couldn't sleep. A few more kangaroos and also an emu fell victim to the murderous bullbar. Finally we arrived in Tennant Creek. I couldn't believe it was so far from Darwin. The town looked sun bleached and uninviting. The countryside was completely flat. I was so tired and so frightened of this strange place. I got off the bus, feeling apprehensive about meeting Andrew for the first time. A man was standing beside a four wheel drive utility holding a sign with my name on it. I was puzzled. He didn't look like the man from the photographs that Andrew had sent. I approached him and said 'Andrew?'. He gave a hearty laugh. 'No, I'm not Andrew. He is still out chasing wild cattle. I'm his mate Bluey. We both work at Sandy Downs.'

Bluey picked up my suitcase and threw it into the back of the utility beside a strange looking dog who started snarling. 'Ah, don't take any notice of old Charlie. His bark is worse than his bite', said Bluey. I climbed up into the vehicle and we headed out of town on a gravel road. 'The Landcruiser is so rough to ride in', I said, 'How far is Sandy Downs?' I asked. 'Well, its about 150 kilometres', he replied.

After several hours on the rough dusty road we came to a gate. Since I was the passenger, I was expected to open it. 'I thought we would never get here', I said with relief. But Bluey quickly dispelled my anticipation of escape from the dust and heat. 'We are only about half way', he said.



We continued along the bone jarring road for several more hours. Finally I saw a group of buildings on the horizon. 'Next stop Sandy Downs', said Bluey. The Landcruiser stopped beside one of the buildings. 'You will be sharing this cottage with Lucy. She is the cook', Bluey told me. I was taken to my room. 'The men are expected to return from the muster tonight', said Bluey and left me all alone in the spartan room. I lay down on the hard bed and sobbed. 'Tomorrow I am going back to Poland', I sniffled. I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I remember was a man's voice speaking my name. It was Andrew. 'Claudia, welcome to Sandy Downs'. I didn't know what to say and I started to cry. 'I want to go home', I said between sobs.

Andrew came over and held my hand. 'Just try to calm down,' he said in a soothing voice.

End of Part 2