

We Go Down Under
By Esther C. Baird

“We’re going to Australia in September!” my husband announced. I let out a scream of delight and swung our 11 month old daughter around the kitchen in our Prospect Hill home.

“No shoveling snow this winter!” I cried.

My husband’s job was transferring us to Sydney, Australia for six months. It was the perfect time to go since we’d miss the winter in Beverly while gaining Sydney’s summer. We’d leave our friends, family, house, car, cat and my favorite Stop N Shop clerk to go on the adventure of a life time. But first we had to survive the flight.

There is no easy way to travel to the other side of the planet with a one year old. No matter how you slice it you will spend at least 20 hours in the air. I’ve blocked much of it from memory and am just left with images: the car seat that didn’t fit into the plane, cheerios sailing through the air, pipe cleaners and popsicle sticks sticking into my face, and mercifully, free business class wine.

My husband discovered that our daughter liked to have her feet massaged with the free airplane lotion. So during the final hour of the flight, we both held a foot and rubbed away. Two blurry days after we left Boston, we arrived in Sydney ready to see our new country and to let one moist-footed little girl get some fresh air!

It was pouring rain and an unusually chilly 45 degrees when we moved our suitcases into our sparsely furnished apartment in the town of Bondi Beach, located just a few miles east of Sydney. We took our keys from the Realtor and were left with no phone, heat, food, drink, Internet and, the most stressful for me, no coffee. It’s hard to even know where to start when you don’t have a phone – how do you call for phone service?

We quickly learned the ropes and jumped into our new town. Bondi is Sydney’s most famous beach with beautiful, fine, white sand stretching just under a mile and enclosed at either end by cliffs. Our apartment was only four blocks off the water. When people asked me how I enjoyed living near a beach, I always laughed and replied. “In America we live by a beach too!” I explained how both Dane Street Beach and Lynch Park were within walking distance of our home, but I’d admit that I couldn’t swim in the water year round, and the sand wasn’t exactly white.

Surfing is what put Bondi on the map. The waves were amazing and the water was always speckled with the black wetsuits of surfers waiting for the perfect ride. As we walked around town we often saw surfers in wet suits carrying their boards and running barefoot, clearly in the grip of their obsession, to the beach. You had to watch out for them with their long pointy boards as they only had eyes for the waves and not for Mom’s with strollers! But we found that their full-speed, all-out attitude, was to embody the culture of Australia. This was a country that lived with gusto.

The actual town of Bondi is similar, in size, to downtown Beverly. But unlike Beverly, second to surfing, Bondi is a tourist town. As a result Campbell Parade, the main drag along the beach, is thick with cafes and bistros. During that first week as we struggled to find groceries, baby food, and most importantly coffee, we spent a lot of time walking to the cafes and ordering ‘take away’ meals.

Once we got a handle on the food situation, I turned my attention to addressing our car. More specifically, our lack of a car; our transfer package did not include one. In Beverly, while I walked through town or down to the Commons almost every day, my life as a Mom ultimately revolved around our car. We drove to playgroups, we drove to the grocery store, we drove to the Northshore Mall, and sometimes on sweltering summer days we drove around the block for the air conditioning.

In Bondi, instead of buckling my daughter into her car seat, I was hauling her up and down hills, (Bondi is surprisingly hilly), and off and on buses. Further, I almost always did this with bags of groceries and beach paraphernalia slung over my shoulder. It was exhausting. I fell into bed during the first month and wondered how I could do it again the next day.

But I did, and slowly I became accustomed to the more rigorous lifestyle. Our daughter began to look like a beach baby, the days were getting longer instead of shorter, and best of all there was no possible chance of snow.