

Day Trip, Down-Under Style

By Esther Baird

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Our family is a big fan of the day-trip. In Beverly we often open our map, pick a town about two hours away that we haven't visited and hit the road.

So in Sydney we decided we were ready to try a day-trip down under. Ensnconced in our right side steering rental car, (don't ask how many car mirrors we side swiped in those first miles), we headed north. Our destination was Hunter Valley, a wine area about two hours out of Sydney. Getting there proved easy enough and by mid-morning we were happily tasting Semillons and Merlots.

But after a bad Shiraz that I suggested tasted like Birkenstock sandals, we decided to push on to the valley's garden park where our daughter could play and we could grab lunch. Our map showed that it was nearby and just a matter of following the orange roads - whatever that meant.

Apparently orange meant, 'we've run out of asphalt - have fun!'. Though not the ideal conditions for a small economy car, we hurtled onto the unsealed roads of dust and dirt and admired the valley fields.

Suddenly, in just such a field, I saw something. Was it? It was!

"KANGAROOS!" I screamed.

My husband jerked violently and nearly drove us down the embankment. After we quickly agreed that I'd point out wildlife in calmer tones, he pulled over and we looked. Sure enough I'd seen three kangaroos. One was hopping at breakneck speed across a field. Hopping! Because that's what kangaroos do. We were bedazzled and once we finally found the park, we sat and felt giddy about our authentic Australian sighting.

Leaving the valley was just as exciting though for all the wrong reasons. Fifteen minutes into our drive we came to a policeman turning people around. Our maps didn't show another road out of the valley, but we followed the other cars to a small gas station and I went in to consult.

Inside the station the collective group of turned-back drivers explained to a bored employee that the road out of the valley was closed. Suddenly the door to the back room burst open and a man came out looking a little too happy for the distraction.

"It's a brush fire!" he yelled.

The lady helping us said, "Well I'm trying to get them to Kurrie Kurrie so they can get on the road there."

The man was gleeful. "Not if the fire goes through Wyogong! The whole road will be out they'll never make it."

"What if they go up past Kurrie Kurrie to Haxton and hop on the Kangy Angy?"

"Sure maybe, but it'll take five hours, and the whole road may be in the fire." He looked wildly at us. "You may be stuck here!"

Suddenly it was mayhem. Everyone tried to figure out how to get to Kurrie Kurrie or the Kangy

Angy or the Wollolombi on their own map. Meanwhile the man added to the growing sense of urgency by yelling that we all best get a move on to 'beat the fire'.

(As aside, I will never take for granted the familiar nomenclature of Beverly. Cabot and Rantoul are simply easier to scream out when in a hurry than Wyongong and Kangy Angy.)

I noticed that one driver was edging towards the door.

I went over to her. "Do you know how to get out of the valley?"

"No, but they do," she said pointing to two college-aged girls who were confidently getting into their car.

Just like a game of musical chairs when the music stops, we all began running to our cars and forming a chain of lost souls driving madly through the valley. Meanwhile I noted with growing apprehension that we could see plumes of smoke billowing on the horizon in all directions.

We raced about for 20 minutes and managed to catch up with a fire engine. We sensed it wasn't a good to be driving in the same direction, but as the man at the gas station pointed out, it was the only way out.

Finally the engine pulled over and we saw it was attending to yet another brush fire in the adjacent field. We quickly drove by and thankfully managed to get to the highway before any other parts of the valley spontaneously combusted.

Hardly the relaxing sort of day-trip we had envisioned, but still fun in an adventurous sort of way and we knew we'd be appreciative of the varied ways we could enter and exit Beverly when we returned home!