

The real Australia?



There's been a change of crew since last week. Bo jumped out in Darwin to enjoy a week of the Darwin Festival before flying home to the city and he's been replaced with Tash, a friend from Sydney who now lives in Darwin and is co-piloting with me until Broome.

Tash and I have spent a few hundred kilometres along the road this week facing a bit of a query - what is the real Australia?

Tash has lived in Sydney and Melbourne and took up a job in Darwin at the start of this year because she knew there was "another Australia - a place that exists only in the imagination of many urban Australians". As a writer, she felt it was important to experience the reality behind the myth of the outback and the frontier of this "other" Australia.

Foreigners travelling in our country also have their own perception of Australia.

Two years ago I was kayaking in Cape Tribulation with a group that included two Germans. As we watched the mist rise off the rainforest, the Germans decided this part of Australia was not like Australia at all. "It's much more like Asia," the German girl, who had been studying in Brisbane for six months, said. Her boyfriend had come over from Germany to visit her for two weeks. "It's a shame," she said. "He's only here for such a short time, he won't get to see the real Australia."

I asked her what she meant by this: the real Australia. Was he going to miss the south-eastern slice of our continent that is home to more than 80 per cent of our population, I wondered.

"He doesn't have time to see the desert. Ayers Rock. The real Australia," she said.

Tash and I are now at the start of the Gibb River Road, a 1000 km 4WD track that winds through gorges, escarpments and swimming holes towards Broome.

We spent some time at [Home Valley Station](#) that sits alongside the Pentecost River and overlooks the dramatic escarpments that make up the Cockburn Ranges (that's Tash in the pic, inhaling the surreal colour of the sunset there!).

These ranges will soon be the backdrop of Baz Luhrmann's much hyped film, *Australia*, and one of the staff members working at Home Valley said she's looking forward to this film making more Australians realise the diversity of the outback, beyond Uluru.

During our stay at the station we met Peter Brandy, a Halls Creek musician who performs regularly there.

We listened closely as Pete sang [Have You Ever](#):

*Have you ever been outback of old Alice Springs?
Have you ever camped at Tennant Creek?
And have you travelled through the Tanami in the pouring rain
When the water comes up to your door?
Have you made a friend of two in town in Katherine,
Where the rodeo comes to town?*

*And have you camped out in the desert in the middle of July
With stars like diamonds all around?*

*Have you ever, will you ever begin to understand
The way of life that comes from this land*

*If you've never been
Then you'll never know
What it is to be Australian.*

How many of us will ever know what it is to be Australian, on these terms?

And does a "real Australia" exist?

Posted by Anneli Knight
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