

AUSSIE TRAIL TO LONDON
A Journal by an American

Aussie Trail to London is a true account of one of the most exciting international trips of a lifetime, "the overland through Asia and Europe." This 12,000 mile bus trip could more appropriately be called the Australian Overland for the many Australian travelers who traveled this ancient route in the 1960s and 70s, and even today.

Rarely does an American have the opportunity to join a bus full of fun loving Australians and share with them the discovery of exotic unhurried oriental countries or observe the determined power of the West. But when such an opportunity presents itself, and one is young in years and heart, the spirit of adventure prevails and it becomes noteworthy. Such is the way that mere journal entries from an overland of 1976 came to be known as Aussie Trail to London.

Australia--An Adventure Begins
1974-1976

Chapter 1

On a South Pacific cruise, Christine, an American, is on holiday from a nerve-racking teaching assignment in Melbourne. In her state-room bed, she is recovering from an illness picked up on one of the islands. Jen Rawlinson has come in to cheer her with humorous character sketches she has written about passengers and crew. The girls having just met little realize that they would share the fabulous overland adventure the following year.

While in Melbourne as a teacher, Chris interacts with people of other cultures and first learns about the overland. For years bus groups of young Australians have been traveling this well beaten trail between Katmandu, Nepal, and London, England, as an inexpensive way to "see the world" and visit relatives and roots.

Needing a way home to San Francisco after completing her teaching contract, Chris decides to embark upon this unique adventure. Jen agrees to join her and together they prepare for the journey.

Packing light becomes a challenging endeavor. Vaccinations, lomital pills, chloroquin, sterilizing and salt tablets, and the moneybelt become significant as does Alexander the Great for whom this overland is named. Jen and Chris will meet at Sydney's international airport on the day of departure.

As the time to leave Melbourne nears, Chris flashes back to friends and experiences she will leave behind. The annual Melbourne Cup, the National Trust affairs and Australian Rules Football will be missed. She spends her remaining Australian days at a youth hostel in Sydney.

Australia

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Here, for the first time, she meets young world travelers and life takes on a new dimension.

With some girls from the hostel, she enjoys Sydney at its finest. On her last weekend in this beautiful city, she attends a dinner party for owners of Formula cars, their race drivers and friends. Here she receives an invitation to spend a weekend in Sussex when she arrives in England. She can hardly believe that within hours she will be on her way there.

Singapore--Island Melting Pot
February 23, 1976

Chapter 2

Sydney's Kingsford Smith International Airport hums with excitement and emotion as family and friends see the young travelers off. A holiday spirit prevails along with short haircuts, new clothes and radiant health.

Jen and Chris meet their group for the first time. On the flight to Singapore, Chris finds Sicilian Nino funny and meets Russian Tanya who is seated next to Jen. Leaving the Christian West behind, the plane descends into Singapore's multireligious society with its "free port" status.

Singapore teems with people. Congested streets with tri-shaws, western highrises and slums, and sampans and junks paint the picture of this oriental city. Visits to the Raffles Hotel conjure up past British Colonial rule. A Singapore Sling refreshes some of the group before their midnight tour of Bugis Street where they meet a transvestite. A junk ride on Keppel Harbor to a Malayan village alerts them to the political problems of the region.

Jen and Chris discover the phenomenal Asian "toilet" and are curious as to its design, but forego its use for the present, sensing that it will become a part of their lives in the weeks ahead.

Thailand--Temples and GIs
February 26, 1976

Chapter 3

Buddhist temples and monks, pedestrians, motorbikes, life on the Chao Phraya, the floating markets and the grace and beauty of Thai women depict Bangkok.

The West is still visible. American GIs are seen and met. Reminders of the Vietnam War and The King and I surface. Jaws is a hit, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has made inroads.

The hotel is a dump. Water cannot be used any longer without being treated. Jen and Chris' bathroom facilities cause havoc and frustration. Thongs are worn religiously. The group converts to tea; the coffee is too bitter. Nino and Chris talk for the first time. Jen begins to feel ill.

Nepal--Away from the Maddening Crowd
March 1, 1976

Chapter 4

An hour layover aboard the plane in Calcutta surrounded by armed Indian soldiers precedes their jubilant sighting of the magnificent Himalayas from the plane. Arriving in Katmandu, they are greeted by nonchalant locals bearing rifles and shouldering bullet belts.

They encounter a primitive society where Hinduism and Buddhism reign. Here hygiene has little significance and slowness is a way of life.

Western hippies and trekkers find a haven in Katmandu as do Australian bus groups. The group meets their courier, Neil, and their driver, Graeme, who brief and warn them in detail about potential hazards of the overland. "Baksheesh," "the wog," "the trots" and "the Delhi belly" will be added to their vocabularies. The holiday spirit begins to fade as the realities of the overland set in and sickness spreads.

A walk through Katmandu reveals few cars and numerous bicycles with warning bells. Spitting locals abound. A boar, cows, dogs and chickens roam the roads and streets. Human and animal waste are everywhere.

The monkey temple, the goat sacrifice to Kali, the ash covered, long haired Sadhus wearing loincloths and the pock-faced weather-beaten locals will all be recorded in their journals. A visit to a vibrant Christian orphanage, signs of the American Bicentennial and Aunt Jane's American Restaurant are part of the Katmandu scene.

The overland trek begins when the group leaves Katmandu. Crowded into a small Nepalese bus, they cross the scenic Himalayan foothills to their appointed hotel and waiting London bus. Driving on the left side of the narrow road, the breathtaking but dangerous trip is grueling, causing discomfort for all and much agony for ailing Jen. Averaging twenty MPH, experiencing hairpin turns at thousand foot drops, the group is initiated into bus travel over dusty dirt and gravel roads.

Below cloud-shrouded Mount Everest, they lunch and modestly choose their first loo spots in the bush. Scurrying lizards on walls, mosquitoes, ceiling fans and another weird bathroom arrangement introduce them to life in the poorest of Asian hotels.

India--Cultural Potpourri
March 6, 1976

Chapter 5

Their five hour border stop and the girls' makeshift bathroom on the bus set the tone for India. Days of driving on poor roads amidst countless pedestrians at the slowest speeds stretch before them. Cleanliness and health become major considerations. Adjusting to India's lethargic pace and nonchalant attitude become necessary.

India

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Buddhism is all but absorbed by Hinduism. The holy Ganges with its bobbing corpses and funeral pyres depress the group, while yogis, cobras, pythons, camels and houseboys impress them.

Stories of British colonialism, the Mogul greats and their Mongol ancestors surface. At Agra, Shah Jahan's love for his favorite wife is reflected in the Taj Mahal, the supreme example of Mogul architecture.

Nino and Chris share thoughts and concerns about their futures. She is taken by his youth, idealism, humor and zest for living. But a ten-year age difference dictates their platonic relationship.

In Jaipur, "the Pink City," monkeys run rampant. The group begins eating narn in place of bread and chai replaces the word for tea. The call for baksheesh repeats itself. The elephant ride reveals "grabbing" elephant drivers and the ancient splendid palace of Amber.

New Delhi swarms with prosperous Sikh businessmen and frenzied locals celebrating the Hindu spring festival of Holi. Grabs and touches continue to annoy the girls. American food is enjoyed as is the company of English missionaries who tell sad tales of the persecuted Indian Christians.

Their drive into the thawing Himalayas to Srinagar, Kashmir subjects the group to close calls over rickety military bridges and around mountain slides. Here they first encounter the haunts of Alexander the Great. They learn of the popularity of Kashmir as a summer residence for past and present heads of state. The buildup of Indian military alerts them to the ongoing Muslim-Hindu (Pakistan-Indian) struggle over this prized territory.

While Chris and Jen spend money madly on unique Kashmir souvenirs, houseboys and cooks care for the group's every whim on comfortable houseboats on Dal Lake. Amiable locals, delicious food, fantastic scenery, rest and privacy make it hard to leave this Himalayan retreat.

But alas, two days after leaving Srinagar at the Golden Temple in the Sikh city of Amritsar, while a hefty Sikh expounds the attributes of his religion, Chris becomes gravely ill. A night with chills, fever, dry heaves and trips to the loo follows. Coping with the next day's border crossing becomes her main concern.

Pakistan--Sitting This One Out
March 23, 1976

Chapter 6

During Chris' bout with the sickness, Neil, Nino and some of the girls come to her aid. In Lahore, the group meets and mingles with another bus group as Chris tries to recover. Visiting Chris, Jen shares character excerpts from her journal and tells her of the group's experiences in Lahore.

Pakistan

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Islam dominates Pakistan, and the group learns of the hostile feelings towards western women. Neil warns them to distract local boys from throwing rocks at the bus as they leave Lahore by waving wildly at them.

The group is introduced to eating delicious buffalo meat and sleeping on ropebeds.

Afghanistan--Assorted Crises
March 26, 1976

Chapter 7

A muezzin's predawn call to prayer from a nearby minaret awakens the travelers to the realization that they have truly entered the world of Islam.

The ruggedness and dangers of the country they are about to enter are reflected in their crossing the renowned Kyber Pass used by Alexander and other ancient conquerors. Fortified citadels, ominous caravans and grazing camels greet them as they cross into Afghanistan.

In Kabul, at the foot of the Hindu Kush mountains, Patty Hearst's photo is seen on the cover of Time. They learn that Americans have frightful futures in Afghan jails. They see women shrouded in burkhas, and become spectators of the national sport, Buskashi, where skilled horsemen compete for possession of a headless calf. Jen and Chris attend an Afghan wedding reception.

Leaving Kabul, they become involved in a "hit and run" accident. The authorities ground the bus and take Graeme's passport and driver's license. Day after day they question their fate as they wait to hear from the military general. Would they be stranded in Kabul?

Sundowners arranges a trip for the group to remote Bamian Valley. They employ local drivers using two mini buses. Neil and Graeme stay behind to continue negotiations between the military general's office and the injured boy's family.

In Bamian, the group views hundreds of grottoes and the world's largest Buddha hewn from rock, testifying to a thriving past civilization. They see the mounds of ruins left by Genghis Khan. En route back to Kabul, Chris encounters an embarrassing situation and Janet is bitten by a dog.

In time baksheesh is paid and the group is allowed to leave Kabul. Their arrival in Herat, with its jingling horsedrawn gharries, finds Brenda and Neil returning by taxi to Kandahar to look for Brenda's missing passport. By now Janet is quite anxious about her bite and considers returning to Kabul for the painful rabies shots.

Iran--Glorious Past, Changing Future
April 7, 1976

Chapter 8

Continuing on without Brenda and Neil, they head for the border. Handsome, flirty Iranian border guards greet the girls asking if they have hashish. Displays of discovered contraband and impounded vehicles alert the group to the dangers of drug possession.

To make up for lost time, they drive all day and late into the night. They spot the night lights of the Soviet Union and one morning wade in the Caspian Sea before turning south to Tehran.

Semitrailers, American cars, Harley Davidsons, men in continental suits, a Persian carpet of John F. Kennedy, nightclubs, restaurants, and The Virginian reflect the West. The resplendent blue-green mosques, women draped in black chadors, taste treats of nougat and pistachio nuts, chelo kebab, Persian poets, painted miniatures and oil reflect the Muslim society of the Shah.

There are whispers to use caution in voicing political views and in writing postcards. The Shah's photo appears in every shop and he rules with an iron fist.

It becomes evident in Isfahan that Iran is a man's world and that the girls need male escorts. Nino and Chris enjoy their first morning touring Isfahan on foot.

Jen and Chris meet American military advisors and are wined and dined by Iranian military officers. The death of Howard Hughes makes headlines in an Isfahan newspaper.

The imagined grandeur of the ancient Persian Empire and its rulers envelops the travelers. Biblical characters such as Kings Cyrus, Darius, Ahasuerus (Xerxes) and Queen Esther come alive. With Alexander's conquest of Persia (Iran), it becomes Hellenized.

Stranded on the desert with a bus problem, Neil gives the group their first lesson in setting up camp. More time is lost necessitating additional long drives into the night. Toilet paper becomes a coveted commodity.

Turkey--A Fabulous Crossroads
April 20, 1976

Chapter 9

Entering Turkey, they pass a five-mile line of semitrailers from Asia and Europe waiting to be searched for contraband before entering Iran. Minutes later on their right, Noah's Mount Ararat and the distant towers guarding the southern approach to the Soviet Union are sighted. Before them stretches a green grassland dotted with large bright poppies extending to distant mountains.

Warm smiles radiate from the people. Warm bread and delicious food begin their day. Gone are the days of chelo kebab and narn and, for the most part, the veil.

Turkey

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The impact of the early Christian church is upon them. Cappadocia, Tarsus, Ephesus, Troy, St. Paul and St. John all leave their impressions. Hittites, Greeks, Romans, Ottomans, gods, goddesses and ruins play their respective roles as Turkey's panorama unfolds.

Camping begins late one evening on a Mediterranean beach, and cooking detail follows the next morning. "Bachelors" become "la pièce de resistance." Jen, Tanya, Nino and Chris become a foursome.

Nearing the northwestern coast, more tales of Alexander and St. Paul are revealed.

Their last evening in Asia finds Chris and several others sitting on the beach looking across the Dardanelles to Europe. Asia had been Chris' home for sixty-six days, and, despite its discomforts, it was with regret that she would leave this vast and amazing continent.

Crossing into European Turkey, the impact of World War I is immediately felt as they hear about the disastrous Gallipoli Campaign of 1915-16 and visit an Australian and New Zealand cemetery.

At a campsite near Istanbul, the group patronizes a smokefilled nightclub crowded with Turkish men. A singer and a belly dancer provide the entertainment. Chris' feelings for Nino surface.

Istanbul's Topkapi Palace, the Blue Mosque, the Pudding Shop and the famous Turkish baths delight the group. With commuters, Tanya, Nino and Chris cruise the Bosphorus Strait to the Black Sea. They end their day in Istanbul at the harbor enjoying a superb meal. A friendly Turk leads the lost trio to the bus stop which brings them safely back to camp. The Muslim world of Turkey had indeed been good to them. Tomorrow Greece and the Christian world!

Greece--Back to the Western Beat
April 30, 1976

Chapter 10

Despite centuries of animosity between Turkey and Greece, the border crossing is relatively easy. Churches and crosses replace the temples and mosques of Asia.

Slow bumpy roads give way to modern expressways. Fast walkers, fast talkers, impatient people, speeding traffic, food chains and hordes of American tourists abound in gray Athens. Coffee becomes the customary beverage again.

Here, where the group walks through ruins on the acropolis, Socrates, Plato, Aristophanes and countless geniuses of Athen's Golden Age once walked. Pericles and Phidias' Parthenon, once housing a sublime statue of the goddess Athena, and St. Paul's encounters with the Athenians are brought to mind.

Greece

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Their nights in Athens find these travelers from the east enjoying restaurants and nightclubs featuring blaring bands and handsome Greek dancers. New friends are met.

Leaving Athens, the stories of Alexander and St. Paul are left behind. The group begins to make the transition back into western thinking and coping. They set their sights on London and the pace increases.

Yugoslavia--Making Up Time
May 6, 1976

Chapter 11

Long drives through scenic alpine country, lunching in prime cities and taking loo stops are the order of the day. Live cuckoos are heard in a forest. Lovely parks and campgrounds abound.

Highlights of Tito and his independent stand against orthodox communism and the beginning of World War I share time and space with Turks, Romans and ancient conquerors.

In Belgrade, they celebrate Jen's birthday, and the evening has an unexpected ending for her.

Italy--A Peek into the Boot
May 9, 1976

Chapter 12

The group learns that they have just missed a 6.5 earthquake. Paralleling the Adriatic Sea, they enter the outskirts of Venice in the afternoon and set up camp at Camp Fusina, rumored to be one of only a few camps in Italy where Australian bus groups are allowed to stay. Here they mingle with loud, but friendly, beer-consuming Aussie travelers.

Vaporetto become the means of transportation, and they pass idle hours walking along the water, eating ice cream and pizza, feeding pigeons and watching people in St. Mark's Square.

The Crusaders, the Venetians and their past prominence in the Mediterranean, and the Polo family become relevant to these emerging world travelers.

Austria--Tranquil Idyll
May 11, 1976

Chapter 13

Leaving Venice, the Italian countryside reminds Chris of her childhood home in central California. As Neil counts hands for those needing accommodations in London, she wonders if she will ever be able to settle down. The trip has opened her mind to so many new ideas.

Crossing breathtaking Brenner Pass through the Italian and Austrian Alps reminds the group of its significance to the Romans, World War II and Hitler and Mussolini.

Austria

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Lunching in rainy Innsbruck, they eventually make their way to the lovely village of Kirchberg near the famous ski resort of Kitzbühel. Staying in an American managed chalet, they enjoy rest, good food and unplanned hours. Chris hikes the nearby hills, and with a grateful heart ponders life and the exhilarating events of the past weeks.

West Germany--A Modern Phoenix
May 13, 1976

Chapter 14

Long, complicated border crossings are a thing of the past as they cross into West Germany and back into Austria within minutes. They lunch in Salzburg and briefly encounter memories of Mozart and The Sound of Music before continuing on to Munich.

The somber reminders of World Wars, Hitler and the Nazi Party confront them, as does the past tragedy of Munich's Olympic Village. The American Bicentennial is capitalized upon, and some Australian bus groups find their utopia in the beer halls.

Also in Munich, the group says "goodbye" to Derik, who will catch the midnight train for West Berlin to join another group traveling to the Soviet Union. Derik's departure sadly reminds the travelers that their days as a group are numbered.

En route to Heidelberg, Chris contemplates other camping trips--perhaps the fourteen country European-African Sunseekers or the eighteen country West-East European Cossack. However, her weariness discourages any definite decision for the present.

The group unanimously votes to bypass camping in Bruges for all night travel to London. They are saturated with history, art, religion and scenery and have had their fill of camping. Their desire to hear English and to rest pushes them on.

England--Home Away from Home
May 17, 1976

Chapter 15

Their last hours together find the group in Cologne at noon. Nino and Chris with the others enjoy an organ recital in the magnificent Cologne Cathedral, then set off for lunch at McDonalds.

The bus speeds over the flat Belgian countryside bypassing quaint villages and cities with lovely thatch roofed homes. In Bruges, they dine on steak and chicken served on white linen before driving on to the seaport of Ostend.

As they await the midnight ferry at Ostend, a pensive mood settles over the travelers as they contemplate their imminent breakup. Nino confirms his fond feelings for Chris with a kiss on her forehead.

England

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Aboard the ferry, they congregate in the empty restaurant lounge with their sleeping bags. To comradic applause, diplomas denoting individual character traits observed on the trip are presented to everyone. Soft singing by some nonsleepers follows as the ferry's kitchen crew watch and listen and the rest of the group trys to sleep.

Through the early morning mist, with gulls circling overhead, the White Cliffs of Dover appear and the group returns to the bus. The ferry door opens on England, and they are soon processed through customs.

Passing through Canterbury, they breakfast at a road stop twenty miles beyond, then begin to compete with London commuters. Passing familiar London landmarks, they eventually arrive at the Sundowners' office in Earls Court. They rejoice; they have made it!

Chris decides to return to the States after all. Her remaining days in London are spent with Jen, Tanya and Eileen in Earls Court where Aussies abound and a melting pot of Asians reside. Relaxation, limited shopping and sightseeing comprise her days.

She sees very little of Nino who will stay on in London indefinitely. He applys for work at several Australian bus companies and is hired by Sundowners as a driver. Jen and Tanya leave for Jersey where Jen will finally meet her English relatives. The twosome will later embark on a Sundowners' trip through Scandinavian and eastern bloc countries. Chris travels to Sussex to visit her Grand Prix racing friends.

The day for leaving England arrives with Nino and Eileen seeing Chris off at busy Heathrow. Feelings are not expressed, only a quick hug and kiss. Yet there is hope that Nino and Chris will meet again in London. In the meantime, they will write.

Settling into her British Airways' seat and adjusting her headset, Chris' thoughts turn to the future. Diana Ross is singing:

Do you know where you're going to?
Do you like the things that life is showing you?
Where are you going to?
Do you know?

At that moment, all she knows is that she is heading home to America and her family. How will they be after two years?