

## VISITING CHINA IN 1978

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**2013**

*As I write this in April 2013 the Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, has recently returned from an extended visit to the Peoples Republic of China. She is one of the many thousands of Australians who go there each year. China is of crucial importance to Australia's economic well being and there are close cultural links between the two countries.*

*China and Australia were, however, Cold War enemies until the early 1970s. Even after then there were tensions. China only emerged from the horrors of the Cultural Revolution following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the subsequent power struggle between the Gang of Four, Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping. There was much confusion and civil unrest until Deng manoeuvred himself to the top in 1980.*

*It was during this period of uncertainty that I decided to visit China in 1978. It was a country that had long fascinated me. I studied and very much enjoyed Chinese history at the University of New South Wales in 1970 and was tempted to go on to postgraduate work in that area. My lack of ability in learning new languages dissuaded me from doing so. I closely followed developments in China during the 1970s and was keen to see what was happening there first hand.*

*Visiting China in 1978 was much more difficult than it is today. The annual allocation of the number of Australians permitted to travel in the country was still very small. I was, though, able to obtain a place on a three-week 'China in Depth' educational tour brought about by negotiations between Thomas Cook, the well-known travel*

*company, and Luxingshe, the Chinese government tourist authority.<sup>1</sup> Tourists to China had to be members of organised groups. The tour of which I was part left in Sydney on 2 December and returned on 23 December 1978. Two nights were spent in Hong Kong at the beginning and one at the end. There were 32 members of my group, including the Thomas Cook escort. Most of its members came from various parts of Australia and they had diverse backgrounds. There were also two Americans resident in Australia and a New Zealander.*

*Although the tour was not particularly expensive, the standards of our accommodation, food (always traditional Chinese) and transport were high. The hotel rooms were all of at least three-star international standard and mostly higher than that. Many meals were enormous banquets. We visited well-stocked Friendship Stores from which local residents were normally excluded and where some members of my group spent both lavishly and indiscriminately. Colour films and most western medicines, were not, however, available for purchase at any shop in China that we went to. By the end of the tour we had all experienced heavy colds, which proved a problem for those participants who did not bring appropriate medications with them.*

*During the trip I kept the diary that is reproduced here. It was written, often hastily and late at night, in the form of daily letters to my parents in Sydney. Today it appears somewhat naïve and uncritical. This was at least partly because, as the distinguished China scholar Pierre Ryckmans (writing as Simon Leys) observed in his 1977 book *Chinese Shadows*, the ‘superbly organized’ three-week tours of China for foreign visitors aimed to eliminate ‘anything that might be unpredictable, unexpected, spontaneous, or improvised’.<sup>2</sup> A related factor was that while I was aware of immense continuing problems in China, including widespread hunger and religious persecution, the Chinese minders, all of whom spoke good English and who were nearly always with us, worked hard and with some sophistication to ensure that we received a positive impression of their country. They acknowledged serious abuses during the Cultural Revolution. There was also much criticism of the recently deposed*

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cook, Group Travel Service, ‘Event: China in Depth, A China Appreciation Tour’, Sydney, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Leys [Pierre Ryckmans], *Chinese Shadows*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978 [first published 1977], p 2.

*Gang of Four. We were, though, regularly told, and I largely accepted at the time, that China had learned from past mistakes and was on the path to a better future. The Chinese authorities were keen that visitors such as us would return home as 'foreign friends'.*

*Once back in Rockhampton, where I was then working as a Lecturer in History at the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education (now Central Queensland University), I briefly found myself a minor local celebrity. Very few people in the city had been to China. I gave well-attended public lectures using the hundreds of colour slides that I took on the trip and was interviewed at length on ABC local radio.*

*The diary begins with my departure from Hong Kong to the Chinese border on 4 December 1978. With only very minor changes such as removing some repetitions, it appears as it was originally, and rather clumsily, written. I have retained the spellings of Chinese names used in the diary although in many instances these have now altered.*

#### **Kwangchow 4 December 1978**

Well, here I am in China. It still seems hard to believe. The day started very early. We left the Hong Kong Hotel just after 7 a.m. and went to the nearby station, where we got on a train bound for the border. We arrived at Lowu about an hour later. The entry and customs procedures were fairly straightforward. No one had their luggage searched and after we were all through we were given an excellent Cantonese lunch. After lunch we boarded a most elegant train that took us on to Kwangchow. The carriage in which I sat had velvet curtains, most comfortable seats and plenty of legroom. During the two-hour journey we were served lots of tea. The country through which the train passed was pretty tropical in appearance. As well as banana trees and sugar cane there was plenty of rice growing. We must have passed dozens of villages and thousands of people working in the fields. The buildings were mainly of brick but not many were painted or had windows.

We arrived at Kwangchow at about 2.30 p.m. and were met by some guides. We were then taken to a huge hotel. My room is also huge and has a marble floor. It overlooks

the trade centre. Not long after arriving we were taken on a tour of the city. We stopped at a museum in a building that dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Pearl River, and the Sun Yat-Sen memorial. Our main guide is a very pleasant girl who has a nice sense of humour. Kwangchow is a big bustling place, full of blue clad people on bicycles. The standard of housing is generally very poor and many people wear tattered clothes. All, though, seem well fed and there are not the extremes of wealth and poverty to be found in some other countries. People in the streets are very friendly to foreigners and some spoke in English to us. The atmosphere is far more relaxed than I felt it would be. On our return we had a superb meal in the hotel.

The tour group of 32 people is not a bad bunch and consists of a real mixture – young and old, male and female, rich and not so rich. One other academic in the group is a biologist at the University of Melbourne. It will be interesting to see how we get on after three weeks together.

Tomorrow we set off to a commune.

P.S. Chinese drivers are as reckless as any I have seen and make a lot of noise with their horns. It is just as well that there are very few vehicles on the road.

### **Kwangchow 5 December 1978**

This morning I had a Chinese breakfast, consisting of various dumplings and rice porridge. I rather liked it. We then set off on a one and a half hour journey to a commune. The roads on the way were swarming with people on bikes. As well there were trucks and buses but very few private cars. We passed through countless villages and rice fields. Every square inch of land seemed to be used.

On arrival at the commune we were greeted by its leader and given the inevitable cups of tea. The various features of the place were then described to us and we were allowed to ask questions. It is a big concern, with a population of about 52,000. The adults are divided into production brigades and units. Wages, by our standards, are very low – about three dollars a week. But all workers are allowed to maintain their own private plots and a free market exists for private produce. We then visited a few

machinery workshops, a power station and a dam. After this we had a really delicious lunch. One of the guides at our table was very curious about what we ate in Australia and also about Christmas. Once lunch was over we had yet another batch of tea. Our next stop was a village in the commune where we were allowed to visit some of the homes. Despite the outward similarity of the houses, on closer inspection they differ greatly. Some are no more than hovels while others are reasonably comfortable. We then moved to a hospital. By our standards it was very primitive and also pretty dirty. But one has to remember that until quite recently there would have been no hospital in the area at all.

We got back late in the afternoon. After dinner tonight we go to a cultural show.

### **Kwangchow 6 December 1978**

After writing last night we went to a 'cultural park' where we joined hundreds of Chinese in watching a modern opera. The story was a comedy and though we could not understand the words it was enjoyable. The costumes were very colourful and the acting and singing excellent. After the show we were allowed to wander around. I watched a basketball game for a while and visited a couple of shops.

This morning we drove to Fushan, a city about 30 kilometres away. We first visited a handicraft centre where we saw people painting, carving and sculpting. The quality of their work was quite good. From there it was on to a porcelain factory. We viewed various pieces of porcelain from the first to the last stages of their manufacture. Most of the styles were both intricate and traditional. There is a deliberate policy of encouraging old crafts.

We had lunch at a restaurant in Fushan. It was the best meal we have had so far, and that is saying something. I will be spoiled when I get back to eating Chinese food in Australia!

This afternoon we visited a Taoist temple, now a 'peoples museum'. It dates back 700 years and has some really gorgeous carving. As far as I am aware, there is not a single real temple left in China. Our guide explained that Taoism is still practiced but only

by the old people in their homes. On the way back to Kwangchow we stopped for a while at a Friendship Store.

Tomorrow we visit a kindergarten and in the afternoon fly to Hangchow.

### **Hangchow 7 December 1978**

This morning we visited one of Kwangchow's kindergartens. It was a fascinating experience. It has about 400 children who live on the premises for six days a week. As well as receiving the normal sort of kindergarten education, they are taught to love and respect the government and Communist party. The children, despite such indoctrination, were quite delightful. Though adults dress very plainly, they were in brightly coloured clothes. We saw them singing, dancing, painting and exercising. They put on a short concert and also a puppet show for us. One of the numbers was 'Click Go the Shears' in Chinese. They seemed to be genuinely enjoying themselves and happy to see 'foreign friends'.

We had yet another magnificent lunch, this time in the North Park Restaurant, one of the most famous in China. Life is one great meal after another these days.

This afternoon we visited a park that commemorates the Canton Rising of 1927 in which a number of local Communists were killed. There are also monuments to the Soviet Union and North Korea. I was a little surprised that the Soviet monument was still there. The park itself was beautiful, with superb flowers and most attractive lakes. A number of Chinese were there relaxing. There were also many overseas Chinese about - mostly in Kwangchow to visit relatives. I even saw girls and boys holding hands - something that is normally rare. Later in the afternoon we went to another park and then to the airport. At the airport we said goodbye to our Kwangchow guides. All three were very nice people and very friendly. I was sorry to leave them.

The flight to Hangchow was in a Boeing 707. It took about one and a quarter hours. I cannot say much about Hangchow, as it was dark when we arrived.

### **Hangchow 8 December 1978**

After getting up this morning I went for a walk. Our hotel stands besides the West Lake, a really idyllic expanse of water surrounded by beautiful maple trees and old mansions, once the homes of the wealthy. A number of locals were up and about. Many of them were shadow boxing.

After breakfast we visited a 'neighbourhood' in the city. This consisted of an administrative area rather like one of our municipalities but much smaller in size. We saw the school, medical centre and a home once visited by Mao. Naturally enough, it is now a museum full of photos of the event. As well, we visited a home and spoke to the person who lives there. By Australian standards it was very small indeed but it was quite reasonable by Chinese standards. There were very few consumer goods in evidence. These cost as much as they do in Australia but the wages in China are far lower. It was, however, clear that the area was a far better place to live than it once had been.

After lunch in the hotel we visited an old Buddhist temple, now a museum. Parts of it were a thousand years old. It was the most impressive temple I have yet seen and set in a lovely location among the hills. The trees still retained some of their autumn colourings. Hangchow is a good deal further north than Kwangchow, so by mid afternoon the weather was getting pretty cold. Our final visit for the day was to a bonsai nursery. The various miniature plants were most exquisite.

Tomorrow we spend most of the day here before taking a train trip to Shanghai in the evening.

### **Shanghai 9 December 1978**

This morning we went on a boat cruise on the West Lake. It really is a most beautiful stretch of water and incredibly placid. We landed for 45 minutes on an island called 'Three Pools Reflecting the Moon', man-made in the eleventh century. This island is a lake dotted with rockeries and cut into small parts by winding bridges. There are also some attractive pavilions. We left the boat at a park, through which we walked. It

was also very beautiful. The landscaping was in the traditional Chinese style – the various pavilions and pagodas blended in most harmoniously.

After leaving the park we went to the Pagoda of Six Harmonies. Built in the seventh century, it is 13 storeys high. I managed to climb to the top and got a splendid view of the surrounding country.

This afternoon we went to a silk factory. We saw some of the famous Hangchow silk going through various stages of the production process. The products made at the factory contain some of the most intricate designs I have ever seen.

In the early evening we boarded our train for Shanghai. It was just as comfortable as the one we got to Kwangchow.

We arrived at Shanghai at about 10.00 p.m. Our hotel is quite fabulous. It was built during the 1930s when Shanghai was the centre of European commerce in Asia. It is a tall building with huge rooms – all of which have the old style furniture and are well looked after. I feel as if I am back in Europe before the Second World War staying in a luxury hotel in one the capital cities.

### **Shanghai 10 December 1978**

This morning we drove to a Children's Palace in Shanghai. One the way we went through parts of the city. It is still a very European looking place. There are many buildings used by Europeans before 1949 and in the centre there are some most imposing office blocks from that era. The Children's Palace is a recreation centre for children in their leisure hours. It is quite an impressive place. We inspected groups of children playing games, singing, playing musical instruments and pursuing various hobbies such as making model aircraft. Australia could learn quite a lot from China in the area of early childhood education though not in other aspects of education.

We had a delicious lunch at the hotel. I then went for a walk in the nearby area. People in Shanghai seem accustomed to Europeans and I did not get the stares that I have had in other places.

Later in the afternoon we went to the Industrial Exhibition. It housed in a huge, and very garish, Russian style building that was completed in 1952. The exhibits are very varied – machinery, cars trucks, musical instruments, clothes etc. Generally speaking the standard was not especially high. The cars were just like American models in the late 1940s. But one has to remember that China had little industry at all until the 1950s.

This evening we are going to a concert.

### **Shanghai 11 December 1978**

After writing last night I went to a concert. A number of items were on the programme, including solo opera performances, folk songs and orchestral works. We then had ‘Click Go the Shears’ (yet again). This seems to be the song most Chinese associate with Australia. The theatre was packed. Apparently while the Gang of Four was in control the range of entertainment would not have been so great.

This morning we went to an arts and crafts centre. It is housed in a lovely, although deteriorating, old mansion which was once the French consulate. We viewed weaving, paper cutting, model making and some other activities. I was amazed at how quickly the people there could do very intricate work.

From there we moved on to an old Buddhist temple. Unlike other temples we have seen, it is still in use and there were quite a few monks present. I doubt, however, if many locals would have the courage to worship there. In one section of the temple there is a superb Buddha statue made from one piece of jade. It was brought from Burma in the 1880s.

After another excellent lunch at the hotel, this afternoon we visited a big truck factory. It makes 12, 15 and 30-ton trucks. I have never visited a truck factory before so do not know whether it is similar to those in other countries. We had an interesting time walking through the main production area and afterwards were allowed to

question the manager. One striking feature is the lack of protection against industrial accidents.

I feel very isolated by the lack of news, not only about the outside world but also China itself. I have a feeling that something important is going on. This morning I saw big crowds of people reading wall posters. This afternoon there was a noisy demonstration of some sort just outside the hotel. A number of people from our group watched it and none was molested. They could not find out from the hotel staff what it was all about. It would seem that the period of political uncertainty is by no means over. I just hope that things do not become too dramatic while I am here.

### **Wusih 12 December 1978**

I found out last night that the demonstration of which I wrote was by a group of people demanding more freedom of speech. They assembled outside our hotel in the hope that some foreign journalists might be staying there.

This morning we went to an old part of Shanghai, where we inspected a walled garden, parts of which were several hundred years old. It was very attractive. We then went to large department store. It was very crowded and had a surprisingly wide range of goods. Most, however, were not of high quality and would have been very expensive for the average Chinese to buy.

After another first-rate lunch, we left Shanghai by train for Wusih. We arrived after a journey of a little less than two hours. We were taken to a brand new hotel on the shores of Lake Tai. The lake looks really beautiful and we will see more of it tomorrow. This evening we go to an opera.

### **Wusih 13 December 1978**

The opera last night was most interesting. It was traditional Chinese written many hundreds of years ago. The costumes and sets were most spectacular and the large audience obviously enjoyed it. Until a couple of years ago such an opera could not have been performed. It and others were banned from the time of the Cultural

Revolution to the downfall of the Gang of Four. Entertainment in China is now far more diverse than it was even a couple of years ago.

This morning we visited a workers rehabilitation centre near the lake. It was nicely housed and had a pleasant setting. There we saw various people being treated for their ailments. Many were doing special exercises while some were receiving acupuncture.

From there we moved to a really lovely park by the lake. It was well landscaped with the usual pavilions harmoniously set into their surroundings. We saw a number of large junks sailing by.

We then boarded a comfortable motor cruiser. While we sat and ate pieces of fruit and drank the inevitable cups of tea the scenery passed by. On board I had a most interesting discussion with one of our guides here in Wusih. He was born in Shanghai 39 years ago. During the Second World War his family's home was burned by the Japanese and afterwards, before 1949, all his brothers and sisters died of disease because his family could not afford to go to a doctor. He studied English at university and became a teacher. During the Cultural Revolution, however, he was criticised as an 'agent of foreigners' and became so demoralised that he threw away his English books and worked in a factory for a very low wage. He later taught English at Wusih University before, at his own request, being transferred to his present position, which he enjoys. He was very critical of the Gang of Four. He also said that Mao Tse-Tung made a number of mistakes. He felt that the present leadership was good in that it was making China more democratic and establishing closer contacts with the outside world. His feelings about Mao are shared, it seems, by a lot of Chinese now. He is interested in reading more English novels but finds them hard to obtain. A couple of us have since given him books we have finished.

We got back to the hotel for lunch and then went to a pottery factory, which produced beautiful clay and plaster figurines. It employs 600 people.

From there we moved to a park in the centre of the city, fairly much like others we have seen.

Finally we were taken to some shops. I am amazed at how much money some people on the trip are spending. I can now see why tourists are helping China's foreign exchange position.

### **Nanking 14 December 1978**

We left Wusih very early this morning for Nanking. Our train journey took us through very hilly countryside, which was, by Chinese standards, sparsely populated. We arrived at Nanking at about 11.00 this morning. The intense cold struck me as I got out of the train. It really is freezing here. Nanking is an ancient city with a population of about three million. It was the capital of the Taiping revolutionaries during the mid nineteenth century and was again the capital under the Kuomintang. It is now a largely industrial city.

After lunch we went to Nanking Teachers College. It was a fascinating experience. The college has about three thousand students and seven hundred academic staff. Students do a course of four years. We were allowed to mix freely with the English language students. Although all were only in the second year of their course, their standard was very high. We also saw a performance put on by music students. I spoke to some of the staff, including one man who had just returned from Australia after spending two years teaching at the University of Adelaide and the Canberra College of Advanced Education. The Dean told us about the college and answered questions. Morale was very low during the Cultural Revolution and some courses could not be offered then. It is now very much like colleges in Australia. Lecturers, though, teach for 20-24 hours a week and receive the equivalent of approximately 20 to 30 Australian dollars a month.

This evening we eat out at a restaurant.

### **Nanking 15 December 1978**

Last night we went to a restaurant in the city for a meal. It was the best food I have had so far on the trip. A banquet of eleven courses, the food was beautifully presented and wonderful to eat. Most of the dishes were appealingly sweet.

This morning we boarded a boat on the Yangtze River to take us to the industrial city of Fenshan, some 30 kilometres away. We were the first tourists to make the journey by boat. The boat itself was brand new and very comfortable. The Yangtze is the longest river in China and very wide. We saw some other shipping but little of the banks. However, it was nice being out on the water and able to chat with people.

We arrived in Fenshan in time for lunch, which we had at a hotel. The food was again excellent. We then drove through the city. It is an iron and steel centre with big chimneys billowing out coloured smoke. China could well do with some anti-pollution measures. We proceeded on to another part of the river where we stopped and climbed a high hill. The poet Li Po spent a lot of time in this area and it inspired some of his verse. There is a small museum about him that we visited.

We returned to the river at Fenshan and boarded our boat, which then took us back to Nanking.

### **Peking 16 December 1978**

This morning we went first of all to the Yangtze Bridge. It is a most impressive structure spanning the Yangtze River. It was, however, a rather misty morning so we did not see very much.

We then drove to the Sun Yat-Sen Mausoleum. Sun died in 1925 and the mausoleum was completed in 1927. It is in a large forest and approached by hundreds of steps. Sun's body lies in state inside a large domed building. He is revered by both Communist and non-Communist Chinese as the founder of the republic.

Our last stop at Nanking was the Nanking Museum. It covers the whole history of the area. Among the exhibits was a jade suit. I could have spent much longer there but we had to go to the airport for our flight to Peking.

En route to the airport we heard the dramatic announcement of the agreement between the United States and China to establish diplomatic relations. It will be interesting to see what happens to Taiwan.

After lunch at the airport we went by a Trident aircraft to Peking. We were taken by bus to Peking's city centre. Our hotel, the Peking Hotel, is right on Tien An Mien Square and is the best in the capital. It is full of well-dressed guests, mainly, I suppose, businessmen and diplomats.

This afternoon we went to some antique shops not far from the hotel. They contained interesting material but it was very expensive.

This evening after dinner I went with some friends from my group to a nearby department store. This was followed by coffee and brandy in the hotel.

### **Peking 17 December 1978**

After breakfast we set off by bus for the Forbidden City, now known as the Palace Museum. Despite very cold weather we had a fascinating morning. The city is far more extensive than I had imagined it to be with many halls and buildings and thousands of rooms. The Emperor and his court lived in so much splendid isolation that it is little wonder that they lost contact with most other people. The buildings had the most beautifully carved ceilings. Chiang Kai-Shek took many of the furnishings and treasures away in 1949.

After lunch at the hotel we went to an arts and crafts factory. We saw work with ivory, metal and jade as well as people making snuff bottles, which were being painted from the inside.

From there we moved to Mao's mausoleum, a huge building completed nine months after his death. We joined a huge but quickly moving group of people that filed past the embalmed body. Mao's features were rather pale and pallid but there was no mistaking the devotion of most of those who walked past.

Our last stop was at the Friendship shop, where we stayed for over an hour. It was the largest and best of those that I have visited.

This evening after dinner I again joined people for drinks and coffee.

### **Peking 18 December 1978**

This morning I woke up to discover a city covered by freshly fallen snow. Its whole appearance was quite altered. Before breakfast I walked to the Square and back to see how it looked under its white cover.

After breakfast I got on our bus and we drove through the snow-covered streets to a middle school. There we were greeted by students and teachers and saw various classes in session, including English and Physics. The English class had children speaking about the life of Lenin. Classes were large but the school seemed well equipped. We had a question session in which we were told that there had been a serious breakdown in discipline during the Gang of Four period and that there were still some disciplinary problems. Teachers usually only instruct in one area each and can earn anything between 20 and 100 Yuan a month. Before we left two girls recited what they knew about Australia. A larger group sang 'Click Go the Shears' and 'Waltzing Matilda'. We then sang 'Auld Lang Syne'.

We moved from the school to the Summer Palace. En route we passed the campus of Peking University, which looked impressive. The Summer Palace must always be very beautiful but was even more so with all the snow. The various pavilions, walkways and temples, which clustered around a lake, were really lovely. The palace was even more interesting than the Forbidden City. Members of the imperial family lived there until 1924. The weather, however, was very, very cold. I have never felt so cold before in my life.

We lunched at the palace and on our way back to the hotel stopped at the Peking Zoo, where we saw some pandas. They are much bigger animals than I thought they would be.

On getting back to the hotel I had coffee and a long hot bath.

This evening we had Peking Duck for dinner.

### **Peking 19 December 1978**

We left the hotel early this morning and took a train for the Great Wall. The journey took us through some very rugged snow covered country. We reached the wall after a journey of a few hours. Once there we walked for about 20 minutes and then climbed up the wall itself. Despite the extreme cold (minus 15 degrees), the view was superb. The wall weaves its way up and down hills and looked especially good in the snow. We spent an hour walking up and down parts of the wall and then returned to the train. We lunched on board.

We stopped again this afternoon at the Ming Tombs. They were also impressive. The one we visited was approached by a series of steps, which went hundreds of feet underground. The main chambers were quite large.

We went back to the hotel by bus. The weather was very cold indeed. The temperature in our unheated bus was measured at minus 5 degrees. I was glad to reach the hotel and have a hot bath.

This evening we went to a ballet. Most of the excerpts danced were of western origin, the only Chinese piece being in honour of Chou En-Lai. The second part of the programme was from 'Swan Lake'. On the whole the dancers performed very well.

### **Kwangchow 20 December 1978**

This morning in Peking we visited an air raid shelter. It was underneath a factory and could accommodate some hundreds of workers in an emergency. It is part of a complex that spreads right under Peking and was erected during the late 1960s. We looked at a kitchen, hospital, archives room, dining room etc., all of which are underground.

We then drove to the airport, where we had lunch. We said goodbye to the two guides who had been with us throughout the trip. We boarded a plane for Kwangchow. I was one of the fortunate few to be in a first class seat.

We arrived at Kwangchow after a flight of two and a half hours. We were met by our old Kwangchow guides and taken to the hotel.

*On the following day we travelled to Hong Kong. We were there for a night before flying to Sydney.*