

AUSTRALIA'S Great Ocean ROAD

BY PROFESSOR CHARLES A. PALMER

The Australian inland is much too high as it approaches the Southern Ocean west of Melbourne. Sometimes it drops precipitously at the coast causing large cliffs overlooking the shore. In other places, the land drops further inland where the streams heading toward the ocean form tall waterfalls. There are also areas where the land slopes gradually to the ocean where sheep graze along the ocean or rainforests cover the coast. No matter where the land falls, the scenery is spectacular.



CHARLES AND JOE PALMER

I went to Melbourne, Australia last January for three months. My employer, the Thomas M. Cooley Law School, has established a program at Monash University to teach law to American law students who travel there for the term. My 20-year-old son, Joe, took a term off from college to go with me. He assured me that Australia's 19-year-

old drinking age had nothing to do with his cultural interest in the country.

We found Melbourne to be a big, bustling, sophisticated city. Collins Street, where I held my classes, is the Fifth Avenue of Australia. Many Australians claim that it is the site of the first English mystery novel. But regardless of the big city splendor, Joe and I became enchanted by the highway along the coast known as the Great Ocean Road. Built

primarily by soldiers returning from World War I, the Road was opened to through traffic in 1932.

The Shipwreck Coast

The area where the Great Ocean Road runs along the cliffs overlooking the southern Ocean is often called the Shipwreck Coast. It is the final resting place for over 700 ships that met their end on the large waves, tricky shoals, and cliffs of the Southern Ocean. When gold was found north of Melbourne in 1851 (two years after the discovery in San Francisco) the world's clipper ships regularly brought adventurers seeking treasure and carried away the gold they found. Since the ships couldn't get through the Suez Canal (which hadn't been built at the time) but had to pass around the southern tip of Africa, the southern route around Australia to Melbourne on the west was much preferred. The ships tried to stay within sight of the mainland, a mistake for many. Low tides, strong winds, and poor visibility were a recipe for disaster. The Australians claim that anchors and metal parts of these shipwrecks can still be found along the shore, but Joe and I were never able to find any of them.

The Twelve Apostles

Today, the rugged shipwreck coast offers spectacular sightseeing to the Australian visitor. The twelve apostles are striking rock formations off the coast of the Great Ocean Road near Port Campbell. These formations are created by the ocean waves pounding limestone cliffs over 230 feet high. The waves form arches and natural bridges as they carve the cliffs at their base.

The arches caused by the waves often fall into the ocean, leaving freestanding stalagmite looking rock formations rising out of the ocean. Some of the newer formations are as high as the cliffs, but most have been whittled away over the years. In fact, there aren't even twelve apostles anymore. Depending upon whether you count the smaller formations, there are between 8 and 10 apostles today. Australian scholars believe that the dwindling number of apostles has little religious significance.

The Loch Ard Gorge

On June 1, 1878, a 1700-ton clipper ship, the Loch Ard, with 54 people aboard was picking its way along the south Australian coast and the twelve apostles when a



LOCH ARD GORGE IN AUSTRALIA

storm hit. The ship frantically dropped its sails and put down its anchors but was no match for the gales of the Southern Ocean. The Loch Ard ran aground. All of its passengers but two were lost at sea. Tom Pierce and Eva Carmichael floated on various parts of the ship until they were both able to grab the ship's mast. The mast floated into a gorge in the vicinity of the twelve apostles. (Presumably Tom and Eva did not count the number of apostles on that stormy night). In the gorge, now known as the Loch Ard Gorge, they reached a sandy beach and a rocky cave where they spent the night. The next day, Tom climbed the high walls of the gorge and walked to a sheep ranch

for help. Tom and Eva never saw each other again, (except in a popular Australian movie). Eva returned to Ireland where she was married, and Tom became a ship's captain.

Joe and I climbed down the steps carved out of the limestone cliffs into the gorge where Tom and Eva spent the night. At the bottom of the steps, near the back of the gorge is a large, sandy beach. The walls of the gorge (over 200 feet high) rose around us. Big waves continually hit the sides of the narrow entrance to the gorge. The cave where Tom and Eva spent the night could be seen on the right guarded by large rocks sticking out of the water. It was low tide and the rocks were close enough together so that we could jump from one to another until we reached the mouth of the cave. The cave was wide and deep, about 150 feet. The initials of couples more amorous than Tom and Eva covered the walls of the cave. But the tide and the waves were on the rise, so we did not stay long.

Back at the top of the stairs leading out of the gorge are the graves of many of the victims of the Loch Ard disaster. This cemetery looks down on a roiling ocean that would gladly break another Loch Ard, if it got the chance.

Not too far away from the gorge is a blow hole, a formation in the rocks along the shore that I have only seen in Australia. The blow hole is formed by a cave that begins at the ocean, about sea level. As waves hit the cave, a roaring spray of water reverberates through the cave until it blows into a hole in the ground. As tourists approach the hole, one can hear the water coming through the cave and then blowing into the hole. It is difficult to get close enough to the hole to look down. The white cloud of roaring water at the bottom of the hole causes everyone to stand back.

Rainforests

Not all of the coast along the Great Ocean Road is spectacular cliffs. In many areas the land slopes gently to the ocean. Most of these areas are covered by lush rainforests. Large ferns (some 25 feet in diameter), moss covered beech trees, and towering eucalyptus trees form a fascinating world of green. It rains in these forests almost every day but the forest canopy protects hikers from the rain.

Waterfalls

Joe and I took the Barham River Road out of Apollo Bay back through the rainforests. I felt like Indiana Jones as the road turned to gravel and then a two-track through the forest. Tall beech trees with hanging moss that scraped the top of the car added to the effect. About three miles back from the ocean we finally reached the end of the two track at a dilapidated wire fence. Someone lived around here but they weren't around. A peacock walked slowly down the stream while white cockatoos (native to Australia) flew overhead. We set out on a track heading across a field and then along a stream. For the next two miles, we crossed the creek on logs (there were no bridges), crawled under sprawling ferns, and walked on paths covered by a canopy of green. We could hear the waterfall long before catching sight of it. The waterfall was at the end of the streambed where it ran into a 20 foot wall. The stream, coming our way, heading toward the ocean, flowed over the wall and onto logs that had come down the stream. We walked across rocks and logs in the river, listening to the roar of the falling water. It was difficult to tell whether the walk through the rainforest, the waterfall that was ours alone, the majestic formations of the twelve apostles, or the gorge was the highlight of the trip. Australia does that to you. ■