

Travel

Down under, sharks freak over chum, punk pulls and lakes turn blue overnight

By Hillary Hauser
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Oh, to be in Sydney — at the same time and in the same hotel as Bette Midler, Elton John, George Benson, the Kiss rock group and the hundreds of groupies milling around outside in hopes of a view of any of them.

To hit Melbourne and its Montecito-like outskirts of Portsea in the off-season, to dive in the waters of Port Phillip Bay, reminiscent of California seas complete with kelp beds.

To go beyond the edge of the Great Barrier Reef into the warm, deep blue world of the Coral Sea for a look at frenzied sharks and then a week later, to fly to Mt. Gambier, South Australia, for a month of diving with lights and safety lines into deep, cold, underground caves where sheep graze peacefully overhead.

To pay \$1500 for a bottle of Perrier.
Now, that's a trip.

The occasion of this trip to Australia was an assignment with National Geographic Magazine. I was to explore the sinkholes of South Australia with photographer David Doubilet, using scuba equipment and cave diving gear to get back into the deep cracks and corners of the immensities tunneled beneath the sheep pastures.

Before we descended on Mt. Gambier, however, David had to shoot a section on sharks — specifically, sharks in feeding frenzies — and for this I went with him and his wife, Annie, to the Coral Sea.

The clear blue oceanic world of the Coral Sea is just beyond the Great Barrier Reef, which is a relatively shallow coral shelf that fringes the northern Queensland coast from Cape York to Rockhampton. Globe-trotting divers say that there is more to

see in the Coral Sea than on famous reef, and they are saying right.

Enormous pinnacles rising from deep water are veritable undersea mountains of marine life, complete with wildly colored fishes, exotic shelled animals, enormous nudibranchs — and cruising sharks. Water clarity is supreme.

With us on a dive boat that operates out of Yeppoon, a tiny coastal town just north of Rockhampton — Wally Mueller's 80 ft. Coralita — were Ron and Valerie Taylor, shark stars of Australia.

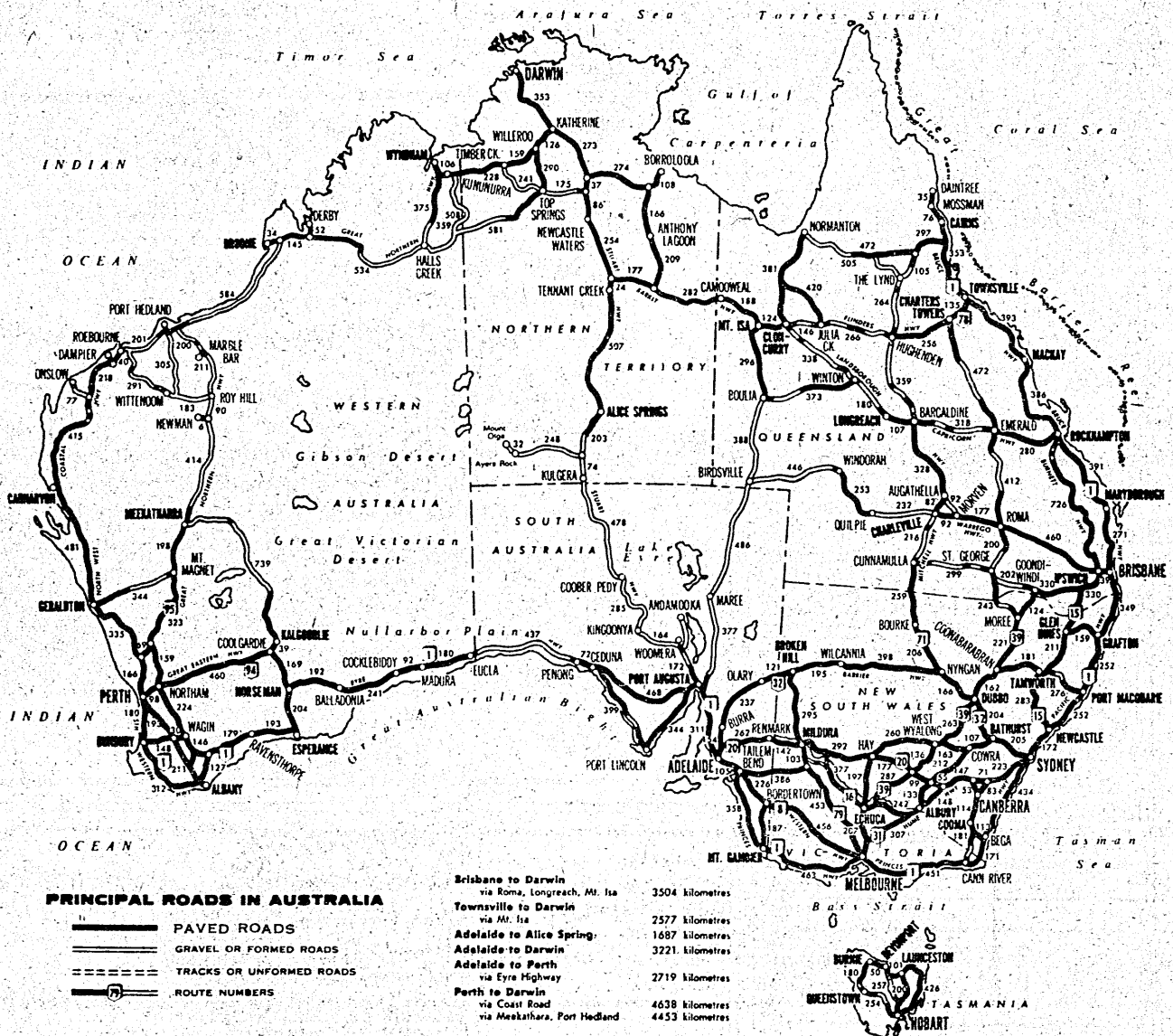
The Taylors were out to test their revolutionary new shark-proof suit made of a metallic mesh resembling the chain mail of ancient knights. They were making a documentary on how this suit worked. Which meant Valerie was to put on her chain mail and swim into the middle of hordes of snapping, frenzied sharks and get them to bite her for Ron's camera.

David's sharks for his Geographic assignment had to be frenzied, too, so in Yeppoon we loaded mountains of fish guts — chum, or "burley," as the Australians say.

First stop, Marion Reef and the Gids pinnacles, where underwater segments for "The Deep" were filmed. On my first dive, I dropped to 120 feet and was met by a big barracuda, then a school of about seven sharks (all gray reef sharks, which the Australians call whalers). The area was absolutely breathtaking, with canyons, gullies and patches of white sand. We could see our shadows as we swam along.

Next stop, Action Point, where I saw my first shark frenzy. Like curious dogs they circled us, tighter and tighter as they became more interested

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AUSTRALIA, as large as the U. S., has a network of highways.

Ah, Sydney, city of hills and water, fish of tropical hue, fashion and punk rock

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in the fish offerings held out to them. Then finally they would attack, vibrating and shaking as they chewed and chomped.

After one dive there, I discovered that Valerie had so successfully stirred her group of sharks into a frenzy that one had bitten her in the chin. There were two holes in her jaw where the tips of shark teeth had broken off.

She was a little sore, she said, but happy because the filming went well.

After two weeks of sharks, the Doubilets and I flew from Rockhampton back to Melbourne. We stayed with a friend in the outskirts of the city in an elegant area called Toorak, known for big homes, unique boutiques and international restaurants and cafes.

Melbourne itself is a business city, with a big, modern downtown area of office buildings and industrial complexes not exactly exciting for tourists, and the unique boutiques of Toorak were curiously filled with styles that Americans might consider passe. Pastels and polyesters dominated and punk was the overall flavor of everything.

Australia, refreshingly, is a bit behind the times in some ways (the women's liberation movement was just gathering steam when I was there) yet it is oddly modern in other areas. Take the punk business. The young crowd of Australia was going wild in anticipation of the expected arrival of the Kiss rock group within weeks.

From Melbourne we flew to Mt. Gambier, a town named for the volcano tourist spot because of its center, famed Blue Lake. The lake mysteriously turns brilliantly blue in late October or November, and so, locals say, does their bath water. Tourists particularly like to watch the water turn from a turquoise to deep blue overnight.

The entire area of South Australia is a bit like Swiss cheese, riddled with limestone caverns underneath pastoral grazing lands, many now flooded. For our assignment, the Doubilets and I dived these flooded caverns for more than a month.

Particularly Piccaninnie Ponds. "Pics," as the locals called the place, looks like any old marsh swamp, and at first I couldn't believe we were going to dive in it. But when we swam across the first algae-filled pond and through a neat row of reedy plants that fringed a shelf at the far edge, the bottom suddenly dropped away and there we were — suspended over an enormous flooded crack in the earth — 100 feet deep, 150 feet long and 20 feet wide. The fresh water was so transparent, it felt like being suspended over the Grand Canyon without a net.

During the weeks we explored the ponds, I explored holes that tunneled underneath pine forests, water-filled caves that opened up between two lands of highway and, finally, an enormous hole called The Shaft. That one has an opening the size of a manhole cover but, underground, is as big as the Los Angeles Coliseum.

After exploring one enormous underground cave located on a privately owned sheep station, I was invited by the owners to a dinner of mutton and champagne, an invitation I couldn't accept fast enough. During the night of American-Australian camaraderie, a mare foaled without fanfare, but the next day I learned in a country pub — where local news circulated as fast as the beer — that the newborn had been named "Hillary, Santa Barbara Lad." Even though I am a girl and the horse is a boy, I couldn't have been more pleased if the Statue of Liberty had been renamed in my honor.

Back in Melbourne, I was met by some of the cave divers who had taken me under the sheep pastures of Mt. Gambier. They drove me to Portsea and Sorrento, resort communities on the tip of a peninsula that forms the mouth of Port Phillip Bay.

Here, I was ensconced in the marvelous old Continental Hotel — in a room that featured a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, a couple of holes in the lime green wall, a bath down the hall and disco blare through the floorboards from below. Portsea and Sorrento are summer havens for the wealthy of Melbourne, and homes alternate between enormous summer mansions on the cliffs of Port Phillip Bay and beach cabanas similar to those at our own Miramar Beach.

I dived several spots in the bay, including the wreck of the Eliza Ramsden, a 100-year-old schooner that lay in 50-60 ft. of water. And I was momentarily struck by an anomaly: The bay waters were like California — a little choppy, cold and green, with kelp beds of the kind we might see around the Channel Islands. But suddenly a bright fish would swim by. Tropical fish. An Australian leatherjacket. Or a deep blue devilfish. I had half expected to see in that water the usual California sheephead and, when

I surfaced, the lee of Santa Cruz Island.

Ah, Sydney, a city of hills and water. It reminds a lot of people of San Francisco, but for me it is like no other place on earth, a place I have often thought I could move to in a minute.

When I arrived, an old friend picked me up at the airport and we immediately drove to Clovelly Beach, where Sydneysites learn to scuba dive. Here we free-dived and my friend, with his bare hands, took a half dozen abalone for dinner.

On this, my second trip to Sydney, I chose to locate myself in the Sebal Townhouse, a marvelous hotel located at the edge of a shopping section of the city called King's Cross.

A big surprise: Staying in the hotel at the same time were Elton John, Bette Midler, George Benson and the entire Kiss rock group. As I checked in, the lobby was a sociological study in groupies — mainly teen-aged girls dressed in wild outfits.

All the fans were dying for a look at anybody, and one autograph-seeker approached me. When I asked her who she thought I was she said it didn't matter, just sign.

Sydney is a city for the night. King's Cross comes alive after dark and the rock scene is very big, American groups creating a bigger splash there than here.

Another big business of the city is modeling, and one afternoon I went to the fashionable Paddington area to visit Chadwicks, the biggest agency around. With me was a former writer for Soldier of Fortune Magazine who was now modeling men's clothes and making a killing in this land down under. But it seemed as if everywhere I went in Sydney, men and women were talking about someone they knew making the cover — or centerfold — of Playboy, Vogue etc.

Highlights: A lunch in the great outdoor cafe of the Sydney Botanical gardens, a tour of the opera house with its enormous white-sailed roof, a boat ride through the inland waterways of Chermoyne where homes are castles, and a train ride to Roseville East, on the outskirts of Sydney, to visit the Taylors and preview the shark-frenzy photographs taken earlier.

On my last day in Sydney, a Sunday, my friend took me to the Gap, where we sat on the cliff overlooking the pounding sea, walked down a hill past topless swimmers in a calm bay, and drove to Bondi Beach for an afternoon jam session at a wonderfully sleazy old hotel called the Astra.

The music, by a popular Sydney group called the Sherbs, was deafening 60s stuff, and leather-jacketed men danced with tattooed women sporting butchered, punk haircuts.

Then they loaded me onto the plane for home. Now flying Qantas first class is something out of this world, and on a 13-hour flight from Sydney to Los Angeles you can eat fantastically well and sleep all you want, as if you were home in your own bed. (At the time of my trip National Geographic's policy was first class for any jaunt over 800 miles.)

Boarding in Sydney, I found I was the only person in that upstairs lounge above the circular staircase of the 747, and the thoughtful stewards could hardly wait to wait on me, their only passenger.

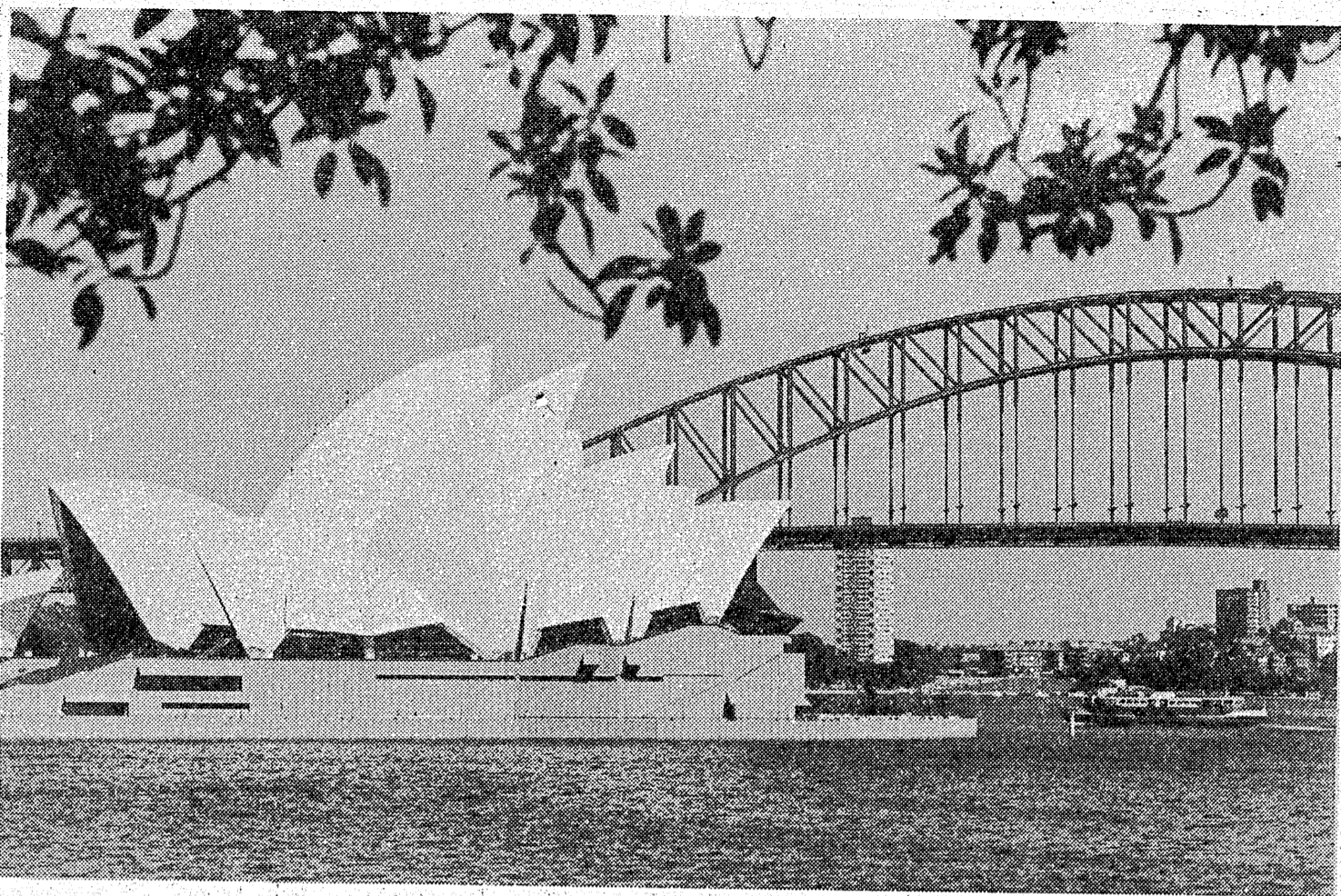
But there was something about that Sunday in Sydney, that made me fall asleep before the plane left the ground. I vaguely remember one steward insisting that I have a little of the Beef Wellington he had put before me. I think they would have hand-fed me, they were so eager to please.

When I asked for a Perrier water, two of them brought it with white towels over their arms, one with the glass, the other with the water. By the time we landed in Honolulu I had managed to drink half of it, and on the last lap I finished it off before drifting back to sleep.

When I think back on my first class trip to and from Australia, I like to do a little math.

The fare difference between first class and coach was then approximately \$3,000 — or \$1,500 each way.

Now that was an expensive bottle of water — or an expensive memory of a last day in Australia peopled with the Sherbs and tattooed, punk-haired women dancing with leather-jacketed men.



SYDNEY'S OPERA HOUSE is known around the world.

Islands spring a sale

The Caribbean is having a spring sale.

The "Season of Sweet Savings" sponsored by the Caribbean Tourist Association begins in mid-April.

Hotels in the association's 25 member countries are lowering rates an average of 30 to 55 percent for the season which lasts through the fall. Cruises are often 20 percent cheaper. And average temperature is up only five degrees.

Visitors will be plied with a variety of "freebies" called "sweeteners." Examples: A free night for each week of paid nights, plus a bottle of rum; a madras gift bag containing perfume, rum samplers and souvenirs; a basket of spices, recipe book and rum; a free half-day of snorkeling equipment use, no rum.

There'll be no more waiting for golf course and tennis courts, the CTA insists.

Great dates:
Carnival, Virgin Islands, April 18-24; St. Vincent, June 27-July 6; Grenada, Aug. 9-10.

Dutch sovereign fetes, Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, April 30.

Regatta, Turks and Caicos Islands, May 24.

Pablo Casals festival, Puerto Rico, May 28-June 12.

New luxury liner

NEW YORK (UPI) — Holland America Cruises' new \$135 million luxury liner has been named the Noordam. The 32,000-ton ship is expected to be commissioned in January 1984.

Victoria Travel

L.A. to PHOENIX one way \$42
S.B. to SAN FRANCISCO weekend travel one way \$44
L.A. to SALT LAKE one way
L.A. to ALBUQUERQUE