

May 5, 2008

Hi Friends.

It's been a while since I sent an update - no time like the present. Autumn (not "fall" in AU) is well and truly upon us here down under.....in May..... Temperatures are in the 40s at night. Of course the beautiful gum tress ("eucalypts") are evergreen so the countryside still glows with the lovely gray green foliage. The trees are often dotted with specs of white - several dozen sulphur crested cockatoos all screeching together - a real pest for the aussies but I love them :)



The last few weeks have been busy, starting with the National Balloon Spectacular - the annual hot air balloon festival that took place an entire week. We were up early at 6:00am to see the launch of over 20 - just amazing, so beautiful and majestic sailing away. The bird balloon is a giant kookaburra - we've heard a number of them recently - and yes, they really do sound as if they're laughing. The original Parliament House is visible in the background.





Next the Olympic torch relay went right past our apartment building so friends and I made a "Free Tibet" banner and hung it over the balcony of the building. The Chinese government brought in bus loads of people from all over the country, most of them Chinese students - we raised a few comments and fists of protest. We wondered if they realized the irony of the fact that here they too are allowed the privilege of peaceful protest while in their home country they would all be in jail. The Australian police did an excellent job of managing the crowds and the numerous relay torch bearers along the route and events remained calm.



April 25th was ANZAC Day (Australia/New Zealand Army Corps), the AU equivalent of our memorial day. I wish I could describe the reverence the Aussies have for their armed forces. 30,000 people attended the dawn service at 5:30am - yes, 30,000! The simple, eloquent service was extremely moving as all the service men and women were commemorated. The Australians lost a full 25% of all able young men in the country during the first world war. Every town, no matter how small, has a war memorial where each and every soul lost is recorded.



Later in the morning we attended a second service where 2500 veterans and veterans families walked along the ANZAC Parade corridor to the imposing War Memorial, cheered on by 25,000 spectators. In a country this size with such a small population (only 20 million now, there were just 6 million during WWII), each loss is treated with tremendous significance. We Americans should only be so respectful - our vaulted patriotism pales in comparison. I confess I've never attended Memorial Day ceremonies in DC, but the 15 seconds of TV coverage always seem to be overshadowed by some Memorial Day Sale.

(When a single Australian soldier was killed in action last week in Iraq, his body was returned "home" in state. The next day the Defense Minister himself flew to Iraq to help the morale of the Australian soldiers there. How's that for support of the troops!)



This obelisk is a typical memorial from the tiny town of "Collector" outside Canberra, population 300. The bronze walls of the War Memorial list the names of the fallen in every battle around the world since the turn of the century. Sure makes you stop and think about the value of life.

This being autumn, the past weekend we attended an Aussie pumpkin festival - complete with scarecrows and wheelbarrow races. The only thing missing is Halloween - which isn't an event here. In October there are no pumpkins - it's spring time! I enjoyed the fall atmosphere, May notwithstanding.



We continue to enjoy living here among these friendly, thoughtful people, though our stay here is beginning to draw to a close. We anticipate returning to the US in early September at the end of Paul's contract. We have so much to look forward to - children Lea & Mathew newly settled in their own home in our Richmond neighborhood, our little 1 year old grandson Ethan and his parents Kristin & Nathan in CT, and a new little one arriving at the end of July in LA, courtesy of Aarin & Drew. Much to be grateful for!

Cheers to you all ~  
With love,  
Suzanne & Paul