

Beautiful Bermagui

By Michael Winkler

The Age ran this as part of its 'My Favourite Holiday' series, 2005.

have been melancholy in Manhattan, alienated in Alice Springs, bereft in Belize. Exotic climes don't guarantee good times. Holidays, I am increasingly certain, happen from the inside out.

A true holiday needs: the right place, the right company, the right mindset. Good books, good beaches, good beverages. For one precious week in each of the past two summers, all of these criteria have been met when my youngest brother's family and my own have convened in Bermagui.

It is a fishing town, and I don't fish. I love to see the fisherfolk going earnestly about their business, while I have nothing more pressing to attend to than scheduling my naps.

When I am there, I celebrate my awayness. I buy trashy interstate newspapers. I grow a weasly beard. I let my kids cut my hair; they design a reverse mullet which makes me look like a WWE wrestler. (They think this makes me *tres* trendy, whereas my wife is exasperated and won't walk down the street with me unless I'm wearing a hat; both outcomes are satisfactory.) I listen to Top 40 radio. I don't wear shoes. I feel like someone else, someone way less uptight. I look in the mirror; it's like seeing Alan Stockdale wearing boardshorts at a rave party. I am a revelation to myself. The fantasy of difference is not difficult to sustain for a week.

Beautiful Bermagui is just off the treacherous Princes Highway, an unpleasant drive from Sydney, Melbourne or Canberra. Consequently it has no glitz, not too many tourists, and the sort of feel somewhere like Anglesea had a generation ago.

The house we rent is tumbledown, the carpet as worn as a fifth-day Test wicket, the furniture functional and ugly. The cupboards smell of mice, and cockroaches scuttle the kitchen floor at night. But it has position, position, position; fewer than 10 houses share our exquisite view which stretches down to the docks, along the ocean beach to Camel Rock, and beyond to the noble bulk of Mount Dromedary. Hours disappear, standing at the window and gazing.

There is only one cool shop in town, a converted veterinary surgery that sells astoundingly good gelati. I have been thinking about it for a year. I remember there was a woman who worked behind the counter who looked like Gina Lollobrigida. My wife remembers a different woman, one who looked like Audrey Hepburn. These respective selective memories speak volumes, no doubt. This year only Audrey is working, but the gelati tastes better than ever.

On day one I am coy about exposing too much flesh on the beach, aware that whale-watching season customarily runs from September to November on this part of the coast, and it is January. However, a quick peruse of the Horseshoe Bay sandscape shows that my midriff is no more than middling by local standards. I might have the head of a WWE wrestler, but others have the complete bulbous-bellied physique. I love this town more each day, and display my torso with unaccustomed abandon.

On holidays, I am the man I could be if I wasn't the man that I am. I collect firewood instead of mail, surf the ocean rather than the internet, worry about SPF rather than SMS. I read picture books to my

nephews, get hammered at Connect-4 by my kids, wreck my knee playing backyard soccer, drink more tea and less coffee. I don't turn on, I don't tune in, I do drop out. I bodysurf with the élan of a much braver person, emboldened by the knowledge that my brother is part-porpoise. I read a book a day. I nap after lunch. Sometimes I nap after breakfast as well. We eat like kings and drink like lords and swim twice a day. I sleep dreamlessly. My holiday, I realise, is not just from my conventional life, but also from my conventional self.

I suspect it is the sort of transformation that can only happen by the sea. I was born in the red mallee and grew up in the green north-east, but all my yearning is for blue ocean. Pottering along the littoral, at Bermagui or anywhere else, provides not just contentment but also a sense of connection. The human brain is supposed to be 75 per cent water – but here, on holidays, I'm sure that mine is 99 per cent brine. The infinite sine-curve of the ocean's rhythm matches some primitive rhythm inside me. Jack Kerouac sat on the opposite side of the Pacific at Big Sur and tried to capture orthographically the ocean's song. I wouldn't attempt such a conceit, and I don't need to anyway. The roar and hiss and sigh is always within me, buried deep, like a spiritual pacemaker.

For a decade of my youth, my family and our Sydney cousins met each January for a fortnight by the beach. Every year we went on the same walks, retold the same jokes, played the same games. But each year there was something different, also – a new craze, or an unusual incident to remember. The pleasure of those holidays was akin to that you might get from a sonnet or haiku: the form remains rigid, so the delight comes both from the familiarity of the flow and the subtle variations.

Now it is the next generation's turn. Our combined families boast four livewire boys, aged from two to six. Years from now, they will remember the slip-and-slide in the Bermagui backyard (I busted myself so badly I couldn't sit comfortably for days), the fat purple crabs in crevasses on the town rocks, buying fish and chips from the town jetty, running away from surging waves at Camel Rock, a dawn trip to the docks with their uncle.

When the week ends, we return to the urban fray. We have agreed to book again for next year, to write the next chapter of shared family holiday history, and no doubt we'll be back again in 2006. Another holiday sonnet, simultaneously familiar and unique. For me, another chance to meet my holiday self.

As you leave Bermagui you pass the Umbarra Cultural Centre. For tens of thousands of years the Yuin people lived in this area. They feasted on seafood and fresh fish. They bathed in the ocean. They gazed at Gulaga (Mt Dromedary). They told stories to their children. They had babies, sang their songs, lived their lives. Every day, they did the sort of thing that we allow ourselves to do for one or two weeks each year. Now, remind me again which is the more developed civilization?