

Antonino's European trip journal Sun Feb 16 13:46:53 CST 2003

Sunday October 20th 2002 – Adelaide, Australia

I'll start my journal on this date.

Today is when I've finally moved back in with my parents in Devon Park. I had decided that I had to leave Adelaide two years ago, and this was the year to do it. I decided earlier in the year that October is the month I wanted to leave in. No real reason for the choice. Digressing, up until today there have been about 4 months of intense planning, learning, shopping, and preparing to move from Australia to my intended destination, Germany.

I completed a short German course, learned some of the culture, got mentoring from Lucas at work. The past month was a non-stop period of planning, finalising bills and other loose ends, renting out my house, selling my unwanted worldly possessions, moving the rest to my parents, doing my going away party and a number of social commitments, finalising my heavy Santos workload, and miraculously managed to create a new water tank and irrigation system at home.

A number of deadlines and incredible challenges were faced and overcome, all on time by today.

Here I was lying, alone in my empty house, save for some scraps of furniture destined for charity. My time at my kingdom in Rostrevor was well-spent. I'll miss it, and hope to return. I move to my parents house tonight. Hopefully I can start relaxing, maybe my eye will stop twitching?

Tuesday October 22 2002

My final day at Santos! I was pretty happy. Originally a three-month contract, it has lasted nearly two years.

I had learned lots, met lots of great people who supported me, and tread softly around the people who didn't. Santos is a dynamic place, never a dull moment, and the Unix Support team is well-regarded. I benefited from Santos/CSC, and it benefited from me.

Today was the day of my going-away lunch at Ciao Restaurant. Hopefully my workmates had as good a time as I had. I got an array of 'interesting' little presents. I was keen to try the multi-flavoured condoms. The Palm Pilot German language software would come in handy.

Wednesday October 23-28 2002

At last I can relax and look-forward to the trip. Pig's arse! I still had to sort out house rental and insurance issues, mobile phones, luggage. I still needed to complete my tax return! I hadn't had a chance at any stage since July. I still had to visit relatives and friends, sign forms, pay more bills, make calls, and get ready to leave! My eye twitch was back.

I managed to backup, destroy, and rebuild my computer for my cousin and kids to be a games machine. I spent the fantastic Saturday with Bruno and Veronica at Morialta Falls. I had a final lunch with Veronica on the Tuesday, and three final lunches with Tan and Adam.

Tuesday October 29 2002 – Tokyo, Japan

G-DAY! It was finally the day to leave! As Nick Zissopoulos would say, it was 'unprecedented'. We met with Tan and his siblings at the airport. My godparents also came. Since I know nothing good comes of goodbyes, I made my departure short and abrupt. The last thing Adelaide airport needs is a bunch of bawling wogs.

The Qantas flight to Sydney was short and sad. Breakfast on board was fine; unusual for Qantas, I thought.

Tan and I spent 1.5 hours in transfer at Sydney. I was starving again. Very strange; we bought a light snack. Then we caught the JAL flight to Japan. Comfortable. Lunch was fantastic, and the light dinner was good too. It reminded me why I choose not to fly Qantas. The on-board movies weren't too good. I only liked The Crocodile Hunter. 'Anpanman' was too violent for me. It's a Japanese anime cartoon aimed at under-5s, but the destruction and senseless fighting was amazing.

We landed at 1730h in Tokyo Narita airport. For me, this was an amazing large foreign airport. For Tan, first time overseas, it was a first glimpse into life abroad, of place only known of in his fantasies.

My brother Nicolangelo and his father-in-law Yoshinori Takayama (otosan) were there to meet us with two cars for transport.

We found out that my ANZ visa did not work in Japan, at any ATM I tried. Luckily my Adelaide Bank Visa card did work. Not impressed.

We went to the Takayama's house in Mobarra city. I couldn't understand why we were going there. Nicolangelo explained that it's only a 2.25 hour drive to their house in the 'country' from Narita. Driving to the Iannella's house in Niiza-shi could take up to 4 hours, since one has to drive around Tokyo Bay.

I soon understood the distances! Japan is a huge exciting maze. I had no sense of direction. All writing is in Japanese so it's difficult to get around. Streets are tight, houses, shops, and businesses are everywhere and busy. Convenience stores are on every street, even in the 'country'. It was amazing, and I was still starving.

At the Takayama's house we were greeted by Sachiko (ikesan, Nicolangelo's mother-in-law), Wakaba (Nicolangelo's better half), and Hoshitaro her brother. I was really happy to see them again. Ikesan had prepared a Japanese feast for dinner. Sushi platters, rice soup, salad, Sapporo beer, and a two litre bottle of sake! I was in heaven. Tan has to try hard to not gain weight, but his time in Japan couldn't help! Everywhere, every day, all meals were big and delicious. Especially with ikesan, who makes every meal a celebration. A simple breakfast consists of fresh bread, salad, yoghurt, fruit, chicken, fish, coffee, milk, and anything else lying around. However, since Japan is cold, you burn calories fast. We all eventually went to sleep that night. Ikesan showered Tan and

myself with gifts, especially clothes which I was extremely grateful for.

Nicolangelo asked Tan and I to 'smuggle' 18 mozzarellas for them. I was bemused, I offered to bring gifts like wine. "Cheese. Just bring the cheese", my brother ordered. Later I understood why. The street price for a 2L sake bottle - \$20, red wine \$5 to \$15, but Italian mozzarella is \$35, while in Australia it costs \$3.50. We had brought them \$630 of cheese!

Wednesday October 30 2002 – Mobarra, Japan

We finally had a chance to have a look around the Takayama's house. It was amazing. Built of wood outside and plasterboard inside. Two storeys, four bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, traditional/modern Japanese living area downstairs. Fantastic Japanese yard. A half-acre block!

Mobarra-Shi is a city in Chiba, a precinct on the edge of Greater Tokyo, so it's virtually countryside. There are still lots of little rice paddies and fields in the area, but many people live in large, lavish two-storey houses on extremely generous blocks! Go figure. it's like a Japanese Fulham Gardens. There are many shops and businesses around. Plenty of large warehouse-style stores the size of Bunnings, plus many convenience stores. Is this the country? Yes. Japanese countryside is densely populated, almost urbanised.

Other Japanese oddities -

Japanese baths (O-furo) - In a washroom, you use the open space to douse yourself clean. You can stand or sit. Then you get into a bath full of warm clean water for as long as you want, to relax.

Dining tables (Kotatsu) - Their tables are a third in height and mahogany. You sit on large cushions cross-legged under the table. A radiator is built in under the table. A quilt covers the sides of the table, to keep the diners warm.

Toilets (otearai) - Fascinating. Toilet seats are purchased at consumer electrical stores. They plug into a standard outlet. The basic model is simply a seat-warmer, but the upmarket models can include a clock, alarm, radio, plus squirt water to wash you, then blow you dry.

Mobile phones - Most users now have the latest 3rd generation mobile phones. they have big colour LCD screens, digital cameras, built-in arcade games, and can be very personalised with phone clips and the like. Command brands are NEC, Toshiba, Panasonic, Hitachi, and Sanyo.

Water filters - An electrical appliance attached to the tap, with touch controls. They can filter, heat, or pass water through without filtering. The Iannella's would later prove to be the economy model, which is a unit that is attached to a tap, with only a simple lever to control water flow and filtering.

Quilts - They can be the standard variety, or they can have big sleeves. You can wear them if you need to get up at night.

Rug heaters ('hot carpets') - Under rugs there is an electric blanket to keep it warm and toasty. Very comfortable.

GPS units - car drivers often had this accessory, almost essential in Japan since it's hard to get around. They can show the local area map, give directions, and advise on traffic congestion.

Horoscopes - Your horoscope isn't dependent on your Astrological Zodiac sign, but on your blood type. Your horoscope for the day is reported on television morning shows.

Today Nicolangelo took us around to the local shops, since he knew that Tan and I were hunting for electronics, but he also wanted to shop around for notebooks. That morning, my Palm Pilot decided to enter another reset loop, causing me to lose all data on it. Not impressed. Since modern Japanese laptops don't have serial ports, I needed a USB to Serial converter. The big new shops (Brescia, Laox, 100 man bolt) in the area had incredible ranges and competitive prices. I found my USB cable. Browsing was fun. Tan looked hard for digital cameras, but with all writing in Japanese, it was difficult. Prices weren't cheaper than Australia, since all models are the latest. There were no cheap models.

After much trial we managed to restore my Palm Pilot, check email, manage my finances. We had another glorious Japanese lunch of glutinous rice squares and noodles with tempura vegetables. We had gyoza for dinner; Japanese style dumplings, plus many other things. Delicious.

It was out last night in the Takayama house. Tomorrow we would be departing for Nicolangelo's flat. Our big luggages were sent there by courier, but we wouldn't be seeing them for four days.

Among the Mobara city shops, Nicolangelo found me a pair of fantastic Italian walking shoes which would prove invaluable. Tan and I bought food gift packs for the Takayama's, they were great hosts. I also got an invaluable universal power adapter.

That night we presented our gifts with some clip-on koalas we found in Sydney. They were very well received. We had a 'memorable' family photo session.

Thursday October 31 2002 – Niiza, Japan

We got up early and moved fast to leave for Niiza-Shi. After another large breakfast, Hoshitaro and Ikesan drove us all to the local train station. Our departure was very fast.

The train from Mobara goes to the Tokyo city limit, to the Shinjuku line. Forty minutes. Then we had to transfer to the underground bound for Tokyo station. Tokyo station is a multi-level, multi-platform hive of activity in central Tokyo. Like the rest of Japan, it was disorienting and amazing. We even got to step outside to street level! However, in all this time we never got to see Mount Fuji.

Another 40 minutes. From there, we caught the Matsuri line to Ikebukoro, 20 minutes. Ikebukoro is a large commercial hub in the Saitama prefecture, about the size of Melbourne.

At this point, Nicolangelo took us to Citibank in a nearby building. He was worried why my Visa card was rejected by local ATMs. They gave him directions to the Visa Office on level 8 in the nearby Sun City building. We went there. The Sun City building was actually a complex of four skyscrapers, and Nicolangelo found it difficult to figure out where to go. At level 8 we only found restaurants. A helpful waiter directed us to the correct building to enter, then onto level 8. We eventually found the Visa Office on Level



Illustration Ikebukuro and Sun City

7. The only answer they could offer was that they didn't know why my card didn't work. Fabulous.

We went back to Ikebukuro station. At this point Tan and I were left on our own. The Iannellas went on home, leaving us to explore on our own. This way we could see what we wanted at the station. Our instructions were to catch the Tobu-Tojo line out to Shiki station and ring Nicolangelo to collect us. We drifted aimlessly around the station for an hour. There were many platforms, arcades, shops, and at least two department stores there. We needed lunch and we were lost. We knew there were eateries somewhere, we had seen them, but we could not find them again! It's no use asking anyone for help, since nobody can speak English. We eventually settled for the lovely food gallery at the Seibu department store, where we had spaghetti and prawn cakes.

We eventually found the Tobu-Tojo line, and went to Shiki station. 20 minutes. This was a small suburban hub, only 3 small department stores, 2 fast-food outlets, about 30 shops...

We rang Nicolangelo who came to collect us, and took a taxi to his apartment building saving a 15 minute walk. Finally we were there! The Iannellas live in a modern new building called Angelique, in a modest, yet comfortable apartment. We had to get ready to depart that night, since they had planned a big trip to Nikko! It was a Golden long-weekend in Japan, so everyone would be on holiday.

An 8-seater van was leased for the trip. Nikko is a kitsch tourist town in the highlands. It extends though a valley between two mountain ranges. There are natural forests, a lake, and a huge Shinto shrine. It has been declared a Japanese National Treasure.

By 1730h we packed the van for the 3 day trip, then we went to the RIKEN research institute where Nicolangelo works. We were there to collect Lars Kindermann, a work colleague, and Angela, his wife, and their 18-month old daughter Zoe. They are German, so it was an opportunity to practise my German language skills. I soon realised that I was very primal, and I could foresee problems in Germany.

We made the trip to Nikko using the freeway. For each stage of the freeway, drivers must pay a levy. We took advantages of rest-stops along the way. Zoe was reasonably well-behaved, and only screamed a couple of times, but mostly slept.

Wakaba booked us rooms at a lovely bed-and-breakfast. We arrived, checked in, then went to a local 7-11 to get some meals for dinner.

Friday November 1 2002 – Nikko, Japan

The next morning, we had a lovely American breakfast and checked out. We went into town to go and visit the ancient Shinto shrine. It was a collection of temples and monuments built up a hill, surrounded by forest. Fabulous. We witnessed a Shinto wedding.

After lunch, we departed for the other side of Nikko, which has a lake, waterfall, and other attractions. We noticed a huge traffic jam leading to it though, so it was decided to wait until tomorrow to try again. So we went to a local supermarket instead. I hoped we'd spend a long time there because...

By this time, I was starting to react badly to Zoe. She did not agree with being strapped in the baby seat during transit. She howled loud and often, and her parents did their best to appease her. I am a nervous and impatient person, I react badly to loud noise. A constantly bawling infant behind me was very testing. I maintained my self-control by remaining frozen, only with the power of Zen. Nobody could imagine the number of times I wanted to throw her out the window with every scream, except Tan.

We drove on to our next destination, the Nasu Village resort town. Wakaba expected it to take two hours to get there, but it was a four-hour drive. Four hours of Zoe. The Japanese countryside was amazing. We got to our lodgings at about 1900h. Wakaba had found a rental home shack in a holiday complex. Nasu Village is a holiday town which has rapidly grown. It is near snowfields in the Japanese highlands. There are lots of new hotels and restaurants which imitate the styles of exotic Western chalets. Lots of different European restaurants. It did not feel like Japan at all!

Our holiday home was reasonable. After unloading the van, Wakaba wanted to go to a 'Viking Restaurant' for dinner. This is an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord restaurant. We drove to a new nearby brewery, in a huge new building. The front of the building was an enormous dining area the size of a palace. There was a variety of food to suit every taste. It was quite impressive, if not tacky. Tan was in his prime. We ate well, and returned to the holiday house to sleep.

Saturday November 2 2002 – Nasu Village, Japan

This morning was my first experience with old-fashioned Japanese toilets. They are long, cylindrical basins on a raised platform. The idea is that you squat over the basin, do your business, then flush away all the waste. Your 'gift' is sitting right there under you, in open air. It takes lots of physical and mental strength and balance to use these toilets. Apparently old ladies hold on to the toilet pipes to maintain themselves.



Illustration 2 At a pagoda at the Nikko Shinto shrine

The next day we packed and headed off back to Nikko. Nasu Village was a nice area, it's a pity we didn't stay longer. The mountain view was great. We took the freeway back to Nikko to avoid the grueling four hour highway drive, even though we got to see lots of the Japanese countryside. Zoe was here usual pleasant self. At about 1030h we were about 10km from Nikko, in the country, we reached a traffic jam. The line of cars was amazing, lading to Nikko. It seemed that all Japan was going there on holiday. By 1130h we reached the point yesterday where we decided to bail out. We continued to the Nikko lake which was found in the mountains above. At least two hours later we got to the top of the mountain and managed to get onto the esplanade of the lake. I was so stressed that I uprooted a temporary roadworks sign, then I put it back.

It was cold. The lake was stunning, surrounded by mountains. A few snowflakes had started to fall. I knew I wouldn't look forward to snow. We were going to see a waterfall, but Zoe couldn't handle the cold. So we walked around the stunning esplanade instead. Lots of tourists were there, and the streets were in gridlock for kilometres. We took a cable car up to a nearby mountain to view the area from a lookout point. It was amazing, the snow-topped mountains, the lake, the town, the forests, the cold. Zoe and parents



*Illustration 3*Traffic jam outside Nikko

went back down via cable car, but the rest of us took a hiking trail back down. It took us a while to figure out where the trail was due to the old misleading signage. It was great! I was in my prime. At the bottom, we ran into wild monkeys. We were wary, since they are ferocious, but these were mothers with their young. It was nearly 1600h, and we met up with the others in a restaurant for lunch. We left Nikko at about 1730h. It was dark. There were hundreds of tourists waiting at the bus station to leave Nikko. The buses obviously were stuck in traffic. The traffic was still miles long. We left Nikko, taking the highway for part of the trip back to Tokyo. Luckily, the traffic jam started to dissipate after 30 minutes on the way back.

We eventually used the freeway for the last 80 km into Tokyo. Luckily, the traffic was not jammed. We were going to use one of the rest stops to take a break. The first three we found had a long queue of cars waiting to enter the complex; obviously the 400 car parks in each of them were full. We continued until we found one which was half full, and stopped there.

There was a shop and fast food outlets. It was teeming with people. After 30 minutes we left again making good progress. Once we hit Greater Tokyo we went through a turnpike, then a different freeway driving on the upper level. The view was surreal, Tokyo is truly sprawling. Zoe started screaming madly; I constantly visualised using her as the basketball for three-point goal shots, over the freeway safety walls. We got to RIKEN campus, dropped off the Kindermanns, then went back home to Niiza-shi. The end of a very long and amazing trip.

Sunday November 3 2002 – Niiza, Japan

Nicolangelo wanted to show us urban electronics shopping. We went to Ikebukoro to see the electronics precinct. Tan and I were left alone. It was great! A mini-adventure walking around through multi-level shops, trying to figure out what signs meant, and what things really cost. It was

clear that we weren't going to buy anything, but we scoped sections like laptops, palm pilots, digital cameras, digital video cameras. After two hours, we returned to the apartment.

We then all went to Tokyo Disneyland! It was a half-hour trip away by subway. Part of it was above ground, over Tokyo Bay. The scene was amazing! There must be four main roads and four train tracks across that point. The bay was blue and clean. It was the best view of Tokyo, and of ships in the harbour. Tokyo Disneyland had its own train station!

We waited for Nicolangelo's friend Takiko to meet us. I was starving so Tan and I had a small lunch in the train station. When she arrived, we went to a nearby theme-park shopping centre with lots of expensive Disney/American shops. Nicolangelo and Takiko had lunch, I stepped into a Planet Hollywood for the first time. Not exciting.

We all went to the admissions gate, since Wakaba was yet to arrive. Since she showed up at 1330h, we got in during 'Starlight' hours, we were able to stay until 2100h! As a bonus, there are less kids at night...

The two girls were in their prime! They knew Disneyland inside out. All the best rides, best practices, best timing. It was a blast! I'm not a Disney fan, but the park was fun. The Jungle Boat, Roger Rabbit, Haunted House, and Peter Pan. The highlight was the Space Rocket indoor roller coaster. It was fast and furious, with lots of direction changes, and a final blast off! We also got to see the 'Disney Electric light parade', an electrified floats with a whole range of Disney characters. We said goodbye to Takiko as we caught our trains home.

Monday November 4 2002

Our last full day in Japan. Nicolangelo took us to Akihabara, a famous Tokyo electronics district. It has hundreds of electronics shops. We went down many streets and through many shops. It was amazing. Lots of bright lights and products. Nicolangelo went looking for notebooks again, Tan and I got tired fast. I bought an electric nostril trimmer, so I was ecstatic. I also bought a basic backpack which I intended to use.

We went back to the apartment to be greeted by Wakaba and a banquet for dinner! She prepared spaghetti con vongole, chicken, fish, salads, all fantastic.

We had to get a good sleep, since tomorrow we had to depart!

Tuesday November 5 2002 – Frankfurt, Germany

A sad day. We left Niiza-Shi at 1030am, where we went to a train station to catch the Skyliner train. Hence via the subways, this takes you to Narita Airport in 30 minutes. It was the last we saw of Nicolangelo and Wakaba.

The Skyliner trip was an express train Shinkansen style, cutting through Greater Tokyo. We eventually got to Narita. Narita is a big airport! It took us a while to figure out where to check in. Tan came to see me off, since my flight was at 1330, and his was at 2230h back to Sydney.

Once my flight to Frankfurt was boarding, leaving Tan was a hard moment, since my holiday was over, and my whole life up until now was packed up and left far behind. Now I had to leave my best friend. I could see him in the viewing area as the plane took off.

My JAL flight to Frankfurt was pleasant. My flight stewardess was a bit arrogant, but I otherwise got what I wanted. Most of the twelve-hour flight was spent sleeping, since we were flying into a new day; today. The meals were good, and even the in-flight entertainment was good! I watched four good movies, including Scooby-Doo.

The trip was over Russia. Far eastern Russia is mountainous and beautiful. Flying over northern Russia, the plane emerged over the Baltic sea and Estonia. It then turned to fly direct to Frankfurt over northern Germany. All Europe was under cloud, so I saw nothing until we landed in Frankfurt. It was an amazing view! A fantastic skyline over the river Main. Very nice.

Frankfurt airport was surprisingly easy to navigate, even though it's quite large. Compared to Tokyo, I can now handle anything!

I got a taxi, where the nice driver told me a bit of Frankfurt. I asked to go to the Haus der Jugend. This is a 400-bed hostel on the banks of the Main. It was my first experience in a hostel, and by no means a good one.

I had asked in advance to stay for a month, but now I was told that I could only stay two days. The volunteer reception clerk said they were 'officially booked out' in three days. Bullshit. After going to my room of four beds (I was the only occupier), I went downstairs. the elevator, which I never saw, was apparently out of service.

I went to the bar, and asked the volunteer bar attendant where I could get bottled water. The little four-eyed German bastard quite frankly told me that the autovend has water. He was even more annoyed when I asked him what he meant. He was referring to the Coca-Cola vending machine nearby. There I guessed which brand was most likely to be water, and paid for it. Bang! A big 1 Litre glass bottle was in the bottom dispenser. I took the bottle and unscrewed it. An uncontrollable surge of soda pours over my hand, shoes, and floor. I hate fizzy drinks. I paused for a second to control my rage, then walked out of the hostel with my over-sized bottle of bittersweet over-fizzed mineral water, leaving my mess behind.

I went outside to see what I could find. Wandering the nearby streets, I found myself in Sachsenhausen. This is a 17th-century part of central Frankfurt. Fancy German writing, coloured buildings, cobbled streets, like a postcard.

It had lots of restaurants, bars, and clubs. All of which were shut. I found a little hotel in a side street called Hotel Atlas. The Maitre D'Hotel gave me a price of 25 euro a night for a single room. Since my feral hostel was 22 euros, it was a good offer. The decor reminded me of the Casablanca movie, the Maitre D'Hotel of Humphrey Bogart. Very nice. I went back to my stinking hostel and went to sleep at 2030h.

Thursday November 7 2002

Jet lag. 0100h and I'm wide awake. By 0500h, I decide to get up. I walked around the area to see a bit of Frankfurt, it was great. There was obviously a huge multicultural community here, and it felt

very open. Lots of Turks, Mediterraneans and Africans. Everyone looked very classy, and many people helped me by speaking in English.

I went back to the Hotel Atlas to book it for the next day, and asked for directions to the Arbeitsamt. This is the German employment department. I went there to see what to do to register for work. I was directed to a room for my postcode, and waited in queue. Once the attendant saw to me, she switched to English due to my bad German, and gave me the address of the Arbeitsgehorde. This is the work registration office for non-Germans. Since it was across town, I decided to make a day of it, and walked all through the central city. It was great! There were lots of fashion shops and decent department stores. Prices were good, and quality was great.

After four hours of walking in light rain, I eventually found the Arbeitsgehorde. It was a long way away, and it was lightly raining all day. I nearly walked through a Deutsche Bank car park, before a security guard stopped me. The Arbeitsgehorde is a department which handles all foreigners affairs, and once I was directed to which building to go to, I found myself in a queue of many foreigners.

Once I was seen to, I tried to explain that I wanted to work and showed my passport. The short plump four-eyed bitch who served me was obviously upset that I couldn't understand when Germans speak at full-speed. But she did write down instructions; I had to complete a Residence Permit form, but I needed a job first! Understood. I went back into the CBD for more window shopping. Nothing else interesting to report that day.



Illustration 4 Frankfurt am Main

Friday November 9 2002 – London, United Kingdom

After waking up at 0600h, I was sick of this crap Frankfurt situation. The city was nice, the people were borderline, but the job market didn't seem to exist. The number of people at the Arbeitsamt didn't inspire me. I decided that today I should see if I can find evidence of IT work.

I went back to the Arbeitsamt, asked the old male receptionist if he spoke English. He said no (funny, everyone else does...) so I asked if I could go use the computers to check job opportunities. He said yes, so I went to use them. They turned out to be German-language only kiosks. I tried my best to hunt for IT work, but found nothing. Strike one!

Once I checked into the Hotel Atlas, I commented that I may not stay for many days, since if I

couldn't find work, I'll leave the city. Later, the hotel manager ordered me to see him. He wasn't willing to give me a room at 25 euros, and instead made me pay 40 euro up front! Strike two! However the room was quite nice, opulent, private bathroom, and toilet.

I went to the supermarket down the road to get some food, but also for detergent since I needed to wash clothes. I approached a shop assistant and explained in bad German that I needed to do hand-washing. She directed me to a tube of detergent paste and explained that it's well-suited to hand washing, especially for tourists. Excellent, I was very proud that I achieved that.

I went back to the hotel, and demanded the hotel manager to lend me the Yellow Pages since I needed to look for work. Thankfully he found it for me before I lost my temper. Germans use a different word for 'yellow pages', which does not even equate to even a 'business directory', and the book isn't even yellow.

I went to my room and tried ringing a few agencies to see the likelihood of work prospects. Out of seven agencies, I could ring only four. The others were disconnected. Two were IT recruiters. One didn't want anything to do with me since I didn't speak German. The other was promising, stating that German wasn't necessary for jobs in Frankfurt. But where were the jobs? Strike three, I'm out!

Hence I decided that Frankfurt was not worth my time. I arranged with my friend Stuart in the UK to go see him for a while, it was clear that the UK had more work opportunities.

The race was on to evacuate from Frankfurt. I hunted around Sachsenhausen to find a Reisebüro (travel agency), and eventually got a Lufthansa special to London for 65 euro that evening. I then went to an Internet café to find a hotel in London. I booked the Earls Court Hotel in Earls Court. This is an area of London popular with tourists, and lots of hotels.

My flight was at 2130h, I was in London by 2230h. I felt immediately more positive about this trip as soon as I entered Heathrow. After an exhausting wait for a tube ticket, and a convenient trip on the Picadilly line, I was in Earls Court by 2330h. I tried to convince an Italian girl to share my room but that didn't eventuate.

Friday November 8-17 2002 – Basingstoke, United Kingdom

Stuart had given me directions to get to Basingstoke, the city where he lives. After breakfast, I packed and left, bound for Waterloo Station by Tube. I woke up to shower, but I cursed as I realised that I left my toiletries at the infernal hostel in Frankfurt. May they all burn in Hell.

Waterloo station is one of the large stations with rail links to the south-east of the country, plus the Eurostar to Paris. I caught the next train to Basingstoke. The trip was nice, lasting over an hour. Once leaving London, which was dull, brown, wet and sprawling, the trip went through the Thames Valley, with beautiful green countryside, picturesque cottages. the major towns like Woking and Farnborough, surprisingly were quite large and had lots of big businesses, like warehouses, distribution centres, and 10-storey buildings! there were familiar names like IBM, CSC. Once at Basingstoke station, Stuart picked me up in his Rover, affectionately called 'Betty'. Basingstoke is a medium-sized town which has lots of 'council housing', like Elizabeth. Stuart lives in Chineham, which is a village/suburb on its outskirts. it's very nice. All uniform brown semi-detached homes. He lives in a three bedroom home with his girlfriend Melody, and their neighbour's cat Ally. He leads a good life, working from home with a VPN into Sun Microsystems.

Melody is a wonderful person, with a warm face and a warm heart. She is easy-going and charming, like many of English people so far. I'm glad to have met her, and grateful to spend a week there.

I got to spend time with their friends. Our first night we went to the local Chineham Indian Restaurant. They have a good group of friends, often seeing Kevin, Millie, Alek, Darren, and Sue. We got to see lots of the English countryside, visit the new Basingstoke shopping centre. It was Melody's birthday on the Monday, so I got to see the surprise of her gift from Stuart, a shiny black Peugeot 306!

Despite all this, I came to see Stuart to get help to find work and I spent lots of time contacting recruitment agencies. I got settled enough to do this, unlike Frankfurt.

Monday November 18 2002 – London, United Kingdom

I moved back to London, having booked a room at the Hotel Boka in Earls Court. It turned out to be a disgusting place, maybe worse than a Russian Gulag.



Illustration 5 Stuart, Melody, and the beast

I was concentrating on finding work anywhere in the UK. I started experiencing difficulty, since the range of 'criteria' specified in System Administration jobs is different from what is required in Adelaide. Secondly, some recruiters don't want to consider me for permanent work, since it's perceived that foreigners will not stay long. The IT industry is slow at the moment, a war is imminent, and being Christmas, it's Winter, it's competitive, plus workers go on holidays...

Saturday November 23 2002 – Basingstoke, United Kingdom

I went back to Chineham for the weekend, since it was Melody's birthday party. I got to meet more of their friends who were very nice. It was held at the Chineham Arms, their local pub. They were also performing, along with Darren, playing guitars, which is their hobby. I got to be a photographer for the evening! It was a good weekend. Her German friend Anka, who lives in Reading, paid me out for my short and biased experience in her homeland.

Sunday November 24 2002 - London, United Kingdom

Back at the Hotel Boka, in my crusty, dirty room, in a rundown Yugoslav-run hotel. Earls Court is a tourist mecca. It's supposed to be Australian-dominated, but instead it's full of Spaniards and Russians. I'm really hating my hotel so I decide to switch back to the Earls Court Hotel the next week. At £3 extra per night, I get a clean functional room!

My days in Earls Court consisted of sleeping in, spending two hours at the Internet café, writing to friends, reviewing jobs, ringing recruiters. Then I would be doing errands like groceries, or reading

or television. The rest of my time is spent being a tourist. I would often go for long walks in nearby areas to explore the city, sometimes for up to five hours, sometimes in cold or wet conditions. Some places are within walking distance, others are a Tube ride away.

Some of the many highlights of Central London are -

Hyde Park - Lots of space. Major features are the new Star Trek exhibition hall, and the Serpentine lake. It's next to Kensington Park, which has the Kensington Palace, the Albert memorial, and the Serpentine Gallery. An exhibition was showing a Japanese artist who creates bubblegum-style manga with a hint of underworld rifts, like fangs and skulls.

St James Park, Green Park - They are near Buckingham Palace. Good escapes from the city.

Battersea Park - overlooks the Thames and features sports grounds, many gardens, and a Peace Pagoda. The decommissioned Battersea Power Station is adjacent. This is a huge art deco rundown power station, on sixteen hectares of prime real estate on the Thames! The first time I saw it, I thought it was a hideous eyesore on the landscape. Soon I was in love with it, it's one of the city's treasures.

Buckingham Palace - London residence of Queen Elizabeth, next to the Queen Victoria memorial. The family house is Windsor Castle in Berkshire.

Westminster - The borough which has Parliament house, Big Ben, Westminster Abbey, the Wesleyan Central Meeting Place, Tate Britain, Trafalgar Square, Leicester Square, the National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, Admiralty Arch, Covent Square, Soho, the Ministry of War Offices...

Parliament house - huge Thameside building, Gothic style, impressive.

Westminster Abbey - enormous Gothic cathedral.

Trafalgar Square - convergence point for five famous roads, like Pall Mall and the Strand. Lots of monuments around here, hence hard to avoid. Admiralty Arch and Captain Cook's statue are nearby. The dominant landmark is Lord Nelson's column, about 4-5 storeys high, with four



Illustration 6 British Parliament House

lions at its base. There are some monarchs on horses, two fountains, and the St Martin-in-the-Fields church. The National Gallery has European Art dating back to the 1200s, encompassing Renaissance to Impressionist. The most exceptional piece was by Rousseau, title 'The Nymph and the Satyrs'. The nymph was pleasuring herself under a tree, one Satyr had unveiled her to watch, and another was amusingly pleasuring himself behind a tree. All the Christian paintings were very moving. My favourite artist was Canaletto, who produced many vistas of the canals of Venice. Van Gogh's artwork also brightens a room.

The National Portrait Gallery is nearby. It has portraits of famous Europeans dating back to the 1300s. The most amazing pictures are those of Henry the 8th and his wives.

Leicester Square - near Charing Cross Road. It's a small square surrounded by cinemas, pubs, and shops. It's near Covent Gardens, which has lots of designer shops nearby, and opens onto the Theatre District. Soho is a district with lots of tight old lanes and kitsch shops. There is a Chinatown here. Carnaby Street, in Soho, lots of fashion shops. It was the birthplace of the UK pop/fashion/music scene in the Sixties, but today it must be pale in comparison.

Natural History Museum - A huge building in Kensington with of exhibits like Dinosaurs. The National Science Museum is adjacent, with interesting exhibits. The best parts are the animated Tyrannosaurus Rex, and the three storey-high metallic Earth. Animal species are recorded and preserved in the new Darwin Centre.

Waterloo - On the opposite side of the Thames from Westminster. it features the Waterloo train station, where the Underground links with British rail services, and the Eurostar to Paris. There is also the IMax theatre, and the London Eye. This is a huge ferris wheel with spectacular views of the city.

Lambeth - An old, historic area near Waterloo. It has the Lambeth Palace which was the royal seat in the 1600s. The Imperial War Museum has a history of the world's wars from the 20th century. There are many interactive exhibits, including World War II trenches, the London Blitz, lots of war guns, tanks, and fighters, a German V2 missile, a James Bond room, and a Holocaust exhibit. This is probably the best and well-presented museum I have seen.

Kensington is the borough where Earls Court is located. it's quite affluent, has all streets are tree-lined Victorian terraces. Some houses are run-down, others are nicely renovated, others are turned into flats. Rooms in flats can be sublet, and many young expatriates live in these expensive dark rabbit warrens.

West Kensington - a poorer area, with a black working-class population. Earls Court has many hotels, some hostels, and the high street has many shops. There is also an exhibition centre. It is dominated by tourists.

Knightsbridge - many designer shops and snobby people. The Kensington High Street offers many great shops. Oxford Street, on the other side of Hyde Park, is huge, and is said to have the largest concentration of shops in the world. There is a great range, even though many franchises are repeated, like four Gap stores.

Tuesday December 3 2002

I moved to the Earls Court Hotel. All is well. The toilets are clean and feature flushing mechanisms. I start to think about what I'll be doing in the next few weeks. Employment in December was not looking promising. I decide to go see Julian in Budapest for Christmas and New Years, as originally planned. Within a couple of days, I would have been interviewed for a 3-month contract that I was likely to get, as well as for a low-income London office role over Christmas. I was kicking myself. I could see that job adverts were going to dwindle over Christmas, so I decided to spend the following week with Stuart in Basingstoke.

Tuesday December 10-17 2002 – Basingstoke, United Kingdom

I moved back to Basingstoke. We went to the Chineham Arms for lunch at 1300h with Stuart's friend Alec. We end up leaving at 2300h when the pub shut.

Staying in London would have been pointless. Only one suitable job was advertised this week. December looked grim. The evening was spent at a pub in Basingstoke called The Bounty, where amateur guitarists can perform. It was mildly interesting for me, even if the cigarette smoke was noxious. Europeans smoke like chimneys. The next day we went for a bike ride through Basingstoke. The rest of my time was spent on the Internet, looking for work, or learning about Sun and Veritas Clustering.

Wednesday December 18 2002 - London, United Kingdom

Tomorrow I fly to Budapest! I was lucky to be able to leave my big black luggage at Stuart and Melody's house, while I packed the items which I actually used into my brothers and my backpacks. It was a pleasure to leave 20 kg behind. I will be returning on January 9 to house-sit while they are on an Australian trip. I considered myself quite lucky.

Stuart drove me to Basingstoke station, and I was lucky enough to catch a new comfortable express train to London. It was a fine day, so the view of the countryside was superb. Once at Waterloo, I fumbled around until I found the Bakerloo tube line, and caught it to Paddington Station. At Paddington I went to Westbourne Terrace, then found the Senator Hotel.

Charmain at the Earls Court Flight Centre had organised me a room here for the night. The idea is to spend the night in Paddington, then catch the Heathrow Express train at 0500h tomorrow. In just 15 minutes, I'm in Heathrow. This is the best way to make my 0700h flight. Charmain is a legend.

I had doubts about this hotel. I saw a demolition area, eerie whitewashed Victorian terraces, an Eastern European receptionist, and a tired, dingy look. It reminded me of Hotel Boka. My room was great! For £32 I got a double bed, clean large room, TV, bathroom, and toilet. I was really happy.

I went for a walk to pass the time. I went down Oxford St, checking out shops and eateries along the way. I went down Edgware Road and to Marble Arch. It's an arch with a nice big black gate, an entrance to Hyde Park. I went to the Next shop in Oxford St since it's my favourite store, to inspect their jackets.

They had lots of cool gifts on display, so I got a gift pack for Julian. I walked back to Paddington, stopping at Safeway for some breakfast food and snacks, then at Paddington Station to ask about catching the Heathrow Express train. I found where it was, and purchased a ticket in advance. I went back to my hotel, then went to a Malay take-away. I got a delicious deluxe Nasi Goreng with chili curried Haddock.

I went back to my hotel for the evening, making sure to give cheeky smiles to the receptionists.

Thursday December 19 2002 – Budapest, Hungary

At 0400h, I woke up. My flight to Budapest is at 0745h. I planned to catch the London Heathrow Express train as soon as I could. I quickly ate breakfast and checked out. I got to Paddington station just in time to board the 0510 Heathrow Express. It was a comfortable fifteen minute ride to Heathrow. It was another 10 minute walk from the tube to the terminal check-in. The terminal was full of travellers. At the Malev check-in, I was stuck in a queue which wasn't moving. We were asked to check in at the adjacent Alitalia counter. Ironic. At the boarding gate, it was a half-hour wait before boarding time. I spotted a young Hungarian family arriving just in time to board. They had a young daughter and an infant son who looked a little stressed. He brought back painful memories of Zoe.

There was a twenty minute delay due to problems on the plane. Once on the plane, it did a couple of laps before settling down at the end of the runway. Apparently there was air traffic congestion over Europe, so we were delayed for forty minutes. Many aeroplane streaks were visible criss-crossing the skies. Eventually the plane took off! Hungary here I come. The young family was sitting behind me. Europe was totally overcast, I could see nothing. the only thing I could make out was leaving the English coast. The infant spent half the trip screaming and crying. The daughter, sitting behind me, kept herself occupied by kicking the seat. The cooked breakfast was lovely. When the pilot announced that we were over Prague, I looked out in excitement at the sea of clouds below. I thought the pilot was a tosser. Two hours later we were about to land at Ferihegy, the Budapest airport. The fields around it looked eerily white, I didn't think why. The children upped their screaming and kicking. Finally we landed.

In Ferihegy, the customs lady gave me a suspicious look, having an Italian passport with an Australian address must be a novelty to her. After passing through, I thought she was practising her Italian swear words with her workmate. Always appreciated. Twenty minutes later, the luggage was released on the carousel. We were the only flight, so why the delay? Then I was really excited since I got to go find Julian!

I emerged into the terminal into a sea of people holding name signs. It disillusioned me. I wandered around, then was surprised to see my surname on a sign! I instantly noticed that it was spelt wrong. Obviously it Julian trying to rub me the wrong way. The sign bearer was a nice looking girl. I recognised her as Alexsandra, his girlfriend. I was very glad to meet her, it was a good first impression. Once I had introduced myself, and Julian showed up, we went to meet Drilona and Riolla at the check-in desk. They are friends of Sandra who were returning to Albania for Christmas. Luckily everyone could speak English, even some Italian! I was impressed. After they departed, Julian and Sandra took me for my first ride on Hungarian public transport. I was amazed to see everything covered in snow!

The bus ride was dirty, bumpy, and cold. The only link to the city's public transport was this bus. We got off at Kobanya-Kispest station, the end of the subway line. Julian hates this station. There were lots of gypsy stalls and homeless people. It was appalling. Sandra made an effort to sort out a travel card for me, and got a two-week pass. The pass gave me unrestricted access to all Budapest metro transport, with no paper tickets. On the metro (dirty, noisy, windy) Julian and I went to Hatar Ut station while Sandra went home to Klinikak station, a few stops away.

Once at Hatar Ut (another dirty gypsy-prevalent station) we had to catch another bus Red 54 to Julian's street. Fifteen minutes later we were at Naszod Utca. Julian's father was there to greet us. After such a long trip, and seeing the state of the footpaths, I was happy not to have brought my luggage.

Julian's father prepared a Hungarian style Goulash for dinner. It was great.

Afterwards, we left again for Pest. The standard trip into Pest involves catching a bus to the Hatar Ut metro station. Then it's about ten stops to central Pest. We can either get the Red 54, which goes straight to Hatar Ut. If we get the black 54, it takes a different route so we can get off at Hatar Utca (Utca means 'street'). Then we can get either bus 99 here, or the tram 52, which follow Hatar Utca, down to Hatar Ut (Ut means 'place'). I always hoped we'd get the tram. This line used old Soviet model trams. They were built in the Eighties, yet the design seemed to be from the Twenties! They were loud, noisy, and rattly. When this tram accelerated, it would groan to life and rattle. Once it reached Warp Zero (ie, 40 kph), the driver would change to third gear. The carriages vibrate as if they had reached their resonant frequency, the noise from the carriages and the struggling engine was deafening, the carriages begin to warble uncontrollably due to bad wheel alignment, and I dissolve into uncontrollable hysterics.

The Budapest public transport system is old and outdated, in desperate need of a refresh. Some tune-ups and a wash wouldn't hurt either. However, all services were frequent and reliable. I never saw any broken down utilities, let alone buses called 'Special'.

We were meeting Sandra, who was spending time studying for her end of year exams. We walked to Ferenciek Ter, down Vaci Utca, and to Vorosmarty Ter. Ferenciek Ter is a commercial square in Pest, with an old Catholic church there. Vaci Utca is the fashion street with lots of high street shops. Vorosmarty Ter is a nice public square. Since it was Christmas, there were many stalls selling ornaments, handcrafts, foods. Since it was subzero temperature, Sandra was eager for some Gluwein. It is German-style boiled wine, sweetened with spices like nutmeg. It helped to warm us up. Since I wanted to find warmer clothing for winter, which was expensive in Britain, after some time we went to the Westend shopping centre. This is a big, modern Western shopping mall in Budapest. I was impressed. There was all sorts of clothing shops for every budget. I was after a heavy winter jacket. After finding one which I liked, we went to look for a better one. At a quarter to 9, fifteen minutes to closing time, we went back to the shop for my coat and a nice cardigan. To our amazement the shop was closing. I walked in and asked if it was too late to buy the goods. A shop steward approached quickly stating "there was absolutely no way they were open for business". Unbelievable. No business should refuse a sale, under no circumstance. Julian stated that it was an example of Hungarian service attitudes, where the customer is not appreciated.

We left Westend in disgust, and caught the Metro back to Klinikak to take Sandra home. She lives in a medical student dormitory, a ten minute walk from the station. The area was rough so we would walk her home often.

We then went back to Julian's house and to sleep. Quite a long day. I presented him with the Next shower radio and bath set, I couldn't believe how much he liked it.

Friday December 20 2002

We slept until 1100h. In the subzero weather, it was evidently easy to do so. Today, as with most days, we managed to get out of the house by 1300h. Sunset is at 1600h, so often we would spend time in the cold dark.

We were in shopping mode. We went via Metro to the Mexikoi Ut station, to an adjacent shopping centre called Arkad. Apparently this area is one of the roughest in Budapest. This complex was

great! Much like Westend. Lots of nice slothing shops, cafés, restaurants, jeans, electronics. Julian found a knife shop which sold items like kitchen knives, pocket knives, samurai swords, even medieval swords and shields!

After two hours of window shopping and finding many jackets, I eventually settled for a jacket from the Replay store. This is an Italian fashion label, apparently highly regarded. The two-layer black denim-look jacket was really warm and practical. The sale price helped. The salesman was a friendly helpful guy. A big change from yesterday. I think Julian was more excited about it than myself.

I also got a nice black roll-neck jumper from a chain called Budmil. This jumper was classy. Over the next couple of weeks I would notice the number of Budmil clothing people wore on the Metro. It was overly colourful, with geeky tasteless patterns. Amusing!

We left Arkad. Julian took me to his favourite place at the Castle district in Buda. All buildings were 18th century and Baroque, with porcelain painted tiles roofs. His favourite street, on the edge of the Castle district, overlooks the oldest, historic part of Buda, with the hills as a backdrop. We took photos of the panorama as the sun was setting. We spent some time there, then walked over to see the St Matthias church and the Fisherman's Bastion. From here there are views of all Pest and the Danube. At night, the view was amazing. It was a nippy -11°C that afternoon, so we didn't stay long. We walked longer around the Castle district, and around the Palace. It's a beautiful old building with lots of great monuments around. There was an archaeological dig, possibly of a previous palace under King Bela's reign in the 13th century. There was a huge eagle statue with an enormous wingspan. The palace, which is now a Hilton Hotel, was stunning. There was a citadel which had many signs of gunfire, cannonballs, and shrapnel from previous wars. We walked down from the Palace down outside its wall, which took us down to the riverbank. The view was amazing.

We walked across the Szechenyi (Chain) Bridge back to Pest. Since we were freezing to the point of being dangerous, we had to go somewhere warm. Julian found the John Bull Pub, an English-style pub! It was quite authentic. We had some coffee while thawing. Julian ordered a hearty goulash soup. We stayed there a long time, then went to see more of Pest, including the enormous Szent Istvan Basilica! Enormous. We went back home after that since we were going out for dinner.



Illustration 7 Buda hills behind the Castle district

The interior of the basilica is being renovated. It has a baroque architecture, lots of gilded columns, and a statue of Szent Istvan behind the altar. He was the first king of Hungary, from the Arpad Dynasty.

I told Julian that I would treat him to the Greek restaurant which I knew he liked. He had booked a table at the Taverna Dionysos for the three of us. Sporting my new warm jacket, we went to Klinikak station to meet Sandra at 2230h. We all went to Ferenciek Ter, and after a brisk walk to the riverbank in the cold, we were at the Taverna. Julian had booked a table next to the dance floor,

since there would be live Greek music which Julian and Sandra were dying to see. To their disgust we were given a table at a corner of the restaurant. After a protest from Julian, we were later moved to a suitable table. Sandra did lots of dancing, including a table dance! A good night was had by all. At 0330 we headed home, and were lucky enough to catch the last bus to Klinikak. After leaving Sandra, we caught bus 99 back to Hatar Ut. There was no transport after that, so it was a 50 minute walk back to Julian's house.



Illustration 8 Sandra and Julian at Taverna Dionysos

A most enjoyable evening.

Saturday December 21 2002

Up bright and early at 0630h. Julian had an 0830 appointment for a checkup at the medical centre at Sandra's Semmelweis University. We went to Klinikak, and were luckily only five minutes late, given that half the travel time was spent waiting for transport. Sandra met us there. We went to the medical centre.

This place scared me. There were dual-coloured old walls which had obviously been repaired many times. Exposed pipes were everywhere, including the peeling asbestos insulation. I especially liked the Sputnik-style light fittings in the foyer.

Julian had an irregular heart beat. It was a 3 hour wait, at three different doors, for three different tests. It was quite impersonal and aggravating. Many people were waiting at different doors. I'm sure that some doors had nobody in the rooms. What I found annoying was a doctor leisurely showing up at 1100h for work, parade tauntingly in front of waiting patients in the corridors, talking at length on the mobile phone, while carrying a Sisley bag. Life is hard for the average Hungarian. In the end, Julian's irregular heart beat was found to present no danger.

After this ordeal, Sandra took us to the medical student's cafeteria for lunch. We had Knudeln and chicken with vegetables.

We returned home, to join Julian's father. We were going to the Tesco hypermarket at the outskirts of the precinct. I was surprised to find Tesco in Hungary! Other European chains with a presence here were Auchan, Spar, and Smatch.

There are bus services which take passengers straight to Tesco. The hypermarket was huge. It sells electrical, home electronics, clothing, sports equipment, car accessories, hardware, alcohol, and groceries. The complex also had an arcade of other shops. It's an ordeal to carry shopping home on the bus, but it is bearable, and many people do it.

I found a lovely bunch of big green bananas. Most bananas in Europe are imported from the Caribbean. Thinking like an Australian, I grabbed a bunch so we'd have ripe bananas in a couple of days.

We stayed home for the rest of the evening and watched videos on computer.

Sunday December 22 2002

We woke up at midday. By 1500h we were ready to go somewhere! Very lazy days. We left Julian's father, who was busy watching Channel 7, the Russian language channel. We went to Ferenciek Ter, and walked down Vaci Utca to Vorosmarty Ter. We walked around all the Christmas and folk stalls. I was starving, so we shared a large sausage with crusty bread. It was a cold night at 1700h, so this made up for it!

We walked across to Andreassy Ut, which is a lovely Pest boulevard. It had a very classical feel about it. For Christmas, all the trees were covered in lights. It's a long street, so the effect is fantastic. Under this road runs the M1 line, the first Underground in continental Europe. It resembles a cute tram, and all stations were small and cheerful.

The Opera House is on the boulevard. It has a great Romanesque facade with statues of famous artists on the top. At the end of the boulevard is Horos Ter (Heroes Square). This is a fantastic plaza, with a tall column of angel Gabriel, seven horsemen representing the Magyar tribes, and the twelve kings of Hungary, from the Arpad to the Hapsburg dynasty. There is a museum and art gallery on the sides. The park nearby has a lake, which was frozen over, and doubled as an ice-skating rink.

We caught the Metro back to Ferenciek Ter, then walked to the Danube. Our plan was to do a long walk along the river. It was a cold pleasant night. We walked north, past old Pest, past the glorious Parliament house, past Julian's old apartment building on Nefurdo Utca, and onto the Liberty Bridge. From there we went down onto Margitzsag (Margaret Island) in the Danube.

There were very few people, and the island is at its best in the summer. It was delightful all the same! It has parks and gardens, outdoor restaurants, concert halls, even a ruin of a 13th century abbey. We emerged an hour later at the other end of the island, onto Margaret Bridge. From here we caught a train back to Nyugati and made our way home. I was exhausted. Mr Kondrusik made delicious crepes filled with soft cheese.

Monday December 23 2002

Julian took me to his old workplace in Buda. It was a long bus ride across the other side of the city. Buda, in my opinion, has nicer districts than Pest. Pest is great for its public life, but Buda has better housing and environment. Every household has a dog, which will bark at anyone who walks past. A

loud stupid dog also doubles as a security system, apparently.

We went to the office of DB-R, which creates electronic solutions for its banking industry customers. I was introduced to a few people and told of DB-R's background. Nobody was interested in me though, nor I in them, really. Julian went to see the boss to help him in his search for work. Julian was impressed that he received a nice thermos as a Christmas gift.

We trekked back into Pest and decided to go up to the Children's Railway, in the hills of Buda. This was a trip to Moskva Ter in Buda, then a tram ride to the edge of the suburbs, in the hills. These new, modern, Czech trams were a ride on clouds compared to my beloved tram 52. There are no gypsies on the streets of Buda. It was dark by 1540h, since it was close to the shortest day of the year. Plus it was cold, and pitch black. There was lots of fun fresh snow around.

We went over to the Mammut complex. This is another big western shopping centre with a floorplan in the shape of a Mammoth. There is also a small memorial here for the 1956 uprising. We found the Smatch supermarket and bought fresh rolls and drinks to take with us.

At the top of the hills is the Children's Railway. This is a miniature railway which snakes around the peaks of the Buda hills. The attraction was shut, since it was winter. We looked around the area for a bit, which was fun, being dark and snow-covered. We went to the train station and devoured our fresh rolls with ham, cheese, and hot paprika paste. A man came out to see us if we needed assistance, but it seemed more like he was watching us. Being observed is common in Budapest, in shops, museums, supermarkets, cinemas. It is an intrusion of privacy. After eating, we went for a good hike into the woods. The snow was up to our ankles, which was uncomfortable. Trekking through snow is definitely a great way to burn energy.

We had to go back down to Westend shopping centre to meet Sandra. Today is the last full day of Christmas shopping, since tomorrow everything is closed. We walked around for Christmas presents and last minute Christmas groceries from Smatch.

Now is a good time to mention how extroverted many Hungarians are. They are obviously not very bright, living in an isolationist society. With newfound material freedom, they try hard to look flashy, wearing the latest fashion labels (known of only in Hungary), strutting instead of walking, with big boots, big fake fur and leather jackets, mobile phones hanging around the neck, and a compulsory overdone fake tan which is really sunburn, but they can't see that. All this glamour while they travel on the Metro for 110 forint. I got for myself some great deserving underwear and socks from Aranypak, an underwear store.

Julian coined the term 'Sollisuka' which loosely translates to 'Solarium bitch'. It describes the pretentious overcooked, yet rather attractive, Hungarian lasses. Sandra's term for them was a 'Bitch with a license'.

At nine, we returned home. My bananas were still green.

Tuesday December 24 2002

Christmas Eve. Shops are shut. Sandra came to sleep over for the Christmas period, which was great. We spent the day watching the delightful Russian channel, and watching DivX movies on computer. Sandra and Julian went out to a party.

Wednesday December 25 2002

Christmas day! Báldag Karácsony! My first Christmas away from family and friends, and I really felt it.

In the morning we caught bus 99 which took us through lovely industrial areas and shabby gypsy housing, past the new huge theatre which is under construction. Then we caught a connecting tram, which meandered along the Duna, until it reached the centre of Pest! It was a short walk to the Greek Orthodox church on the esplanade.

This was my first Orthodox Christmas. I was quietly observing the proceedings and the various ceremonies. It lasted two hours and was conducted in Hungarian, Greek, and Russian. The iconostas hiding the altar was stunning. It had scenes from the bible and the apostles, and was painted in the 19th century.

There were a number of comely Greek tourist lasses who attended mass. They provided a suitable distraction. They were quite *bulldog legjob* (my version of Hungarian, *báldag* means 'happy', and *legjobb* means 'best').

After mass, snacks were served in the nearby church hall. We met some of the parishioners who were most friendly. One young girl impressed me. Once she figured out that I wasn't Hungarian, she avidly switched to English and was very hospitable. She even offered some 'Korean food', namely sushi. I tried to correct her, but didn't have the heart. Her mother also introduced herself. We exchanged contact details, as is the custom in Hungary.

We went home and had a great Christmas lunch. That evening we watched Christmas celebrations on satellite TV in various languages, then watched Bridget Jones diary on computer. It was great!

Sandra brought me a postcard-size Christmas jigsaw puzzle. It provided hours of fun, given that we couldn't go outside...

My bananas were still green.

Thursday December 26 2002

Boxing Day. Most places of Interest in Budapest are closed. In the evening we decided to go somewhere out of desperation.

We went to Liszt Ferenc Ter, a boulevard off of Andreassy Ut. Some fashionable cafés were open there. In the summertime, there are many market stalls along the street.

We settled for one café. In the non-smoking corner, we looked at the Pesti Est to find a movie to watch. The Pesti Est is a weekly pocket guide of entertainment and events in Pest. It's free, informative, and available everywhere.

We caught the Metro to Arpad Hid station, and went to the Duna Plaza shopping centre. There is a

cinema in the complex. We paid 1260 Forint to watch Abandon. This is about \$10 AUD. In London, a movie ticket can be £13, or \$37 AUD.

In Hungary, cinema prices can vary between theatres. You are allocated a seat, which can cause problems if you don't like your seat.

We saw Abandon, which was made for US teenage girls, and had a scary ending. Later we wandered about the shopping centre for an hour, then went home, escorting Sandra back to Klinikak.

At home, we checked on the bananas. They were still green.

Friday December 27 2002

Another lazy day, waking up at midday. Today was a business day, and we weren't doing much anyway. I decided to get a haircut. Julian told me of a hairdresser at the Tesco hypermarket. It's within walking distance, so I decided to make it a mini-adventure.

I walked to Tesco, leaving the suburb, and walking down a road between fields down to the rear end of the hypermarket. It was a pleasant -7°C and freezing.

After defrosting, I found the hairdresser. The lady who cut my hair understood just enough English. It cost me 2100 Forint, or \$17. Cheaper than London!

I wandered around the complex, since I decided to get a new pair of jeans. I managed to trip the alarm at Tesco, by exiting through a closed checkout. Loud sirens went off at all twenty checkouts. I showed my bags contents to the closest security guard, who explained what I did wrong.

I went to the French 'La Halle' shop to see what they had. I found cool underwear and found cool flared jeans which I didn't get. Flared pants in Hungary are called 'Trapez' because of the trapezoid shape.

I then found a bookshop, and got a book on Hungary for my parents. The sales lady, like most people, spoke to me in Hungarian, once she realised that I was foreign (the English-language book naturally served no hint) she immediately shut up. Europeans will not speak another language unless they absolutely have to. Western-style cafés and restaurants are reasonable in English or German. Street beggars are also surprisingly multilingual.

I walked back home. it was only -4°C so I wasn't totally freezing.

Mr Kondrusik reminded me that my bananas were still green.

Since we had little fresh food, we all later returned to Tesco for a serious shopping bout for the New Year period. Another bus trip with bags. On this trip, we had the pleasure of a homeless man in front of us engorging a huge raw sausage. Classy.

Saturday December 28 2002

Julian spent the morning out with Sandra. Sandra was flying to Albania the next day to spend New Years with her family.

I was in the mood to see Roman ruins. There used to be a Roman settlement near Buda. I caught the Metro to Batthyany Ter and figured out that I had to catch something number 86. I expected it to be a tram, until bus 86 appeared! I rushed to catch it. I knew I had to look for a Roman Amphitheatre, except I didn't know how far away it was or what one looks like.

The bus passed a snow covered open area with a few little brick walls? I guess that this had to be it. The complex was a good acre in size. Snow covered everything, but the layout was clear. There were pavilions, a central circus, and a stage. It was great. Julian then rang and we arranged to meet at the Westend complex.



Illustration 9 Roman amphitheatre in Buda

I made my way back, catching the nearby HEV train, and headed for Nyugati station.

At Westend, Sandra was looking for gifts for her family, including jeans for her brother, which proved difficult. I got to model jeans for Sandra, which was lots of fun. I found a good pair of 'designer Hungarian' Vigoss pants at a reduced price.

We all went back to Julian's house for a dinner, since Sandra was leaving tomorrow, Julian and Mr Kondrusik would soon go to Poland, and I'd be returning to London.

I was starving and ate plenty. It turned out to be quite a heavy dinner. That evening, we left to take Sandra home. We had to run to the bus stop since we were about to miss the last bus to the Metro. We made it just in time, we were short of breath.

We took Sandra home, then returned to Hatar Ut. It was cold, -2 degrees but otherwise a pleasant night. It was midnight so even the gypsies were home. The snow that had been everywhere for the last couple of weeks had disintegrated. The ground was dry and puddles were frozen. We did another legendary walk back to Julian's house, so 50 minutes later, we were home.

A well-deserved walk. Unfortunately I went to bed feeling as if I still haven't digested. I slept poorly, and spent the night in the bathroom, emptying myself from both ends.

Sunday December 29 2002

I struggled to get up at midday, since I was completely drained. I forced myself to eat some breakfast.

Julian had gone to escort Sandra to the airport. When he returned, he decided to take me to Bekesmegyer.

We caught the Metro to Batthyany Ter and went to the HEV counter. Since Bekesmegyer is a town outside of city limits, a 200 Forint ticket is needed.

While we were waiting in the ticket queue, Julian's ex-girlfriend Kati came to see him, out of the blue. The HEV line is her train home. Kati is a great girl; she is the reason why he moved to Budapest. Her presence caught Julian off-guard. The ticket salesman patronised him for his lack of clarity when ordering a ticket. I was having no attitude; I slapped my travel-pass on the glass, grunted 'Bekesmegyer', paid and got my ticket with no incident. I was very happy to see Kati again, and she soon went on her way.

The train trip took 20 minutes. Bekesmegyer is a historic town north of Buda, originally occupied by Serbian migrants. It had old church, old cottages, cobblestone roads, and tiny alleyways into the back streets. Really nice. In one side street, we went to a café popular with local art connoisseurs. Lots of local artists live in Bekesmegyer, and they liked Hungarian folk art and music.

This café was nice and warm. The Hungarian folk music was playing loud, and obnoxious, with a fast tempo violin playing non-stop. We ordered teas which were very nice.

We returned to Buda; I was exhausted and slept on the train. I needed Imodium. Julian remembered an all-night chemist near the Margaret Bridge, so we went there. By reading some of the signs, he figured out that the chemist can be called by pressing a button. I got my Imodium and I was impressed.

We progressed straight home. I was exhausted. I struggled through a plate of boiled rice and went to bed.

Monday December 30 2002

I woke up feeling more positive. I had a normal breakfast at 1100h.

We went to Pest to see the sights. We walked the streets, Julian showed me lots of bars, cafés, old buildings, it was really great. We went to Deak Ferenc Ter to see the architecture. We went to Kalvin Ter. The National Museum is here. There is a Calvinist church. Apparently the Kalvin café next to it is very good. We found one gay club, a crappy Hungarian sports bar, a Dutch pizza chain, a derelict bathhouse, and a wartime memorabilia shop.

We relaxed at the Big Ben café, and enjoyed hot tea. This was an English style teahouse, with photos of London and Big Ben paraphernalia. Without tea we got lovely stale shortbread Big Ben's.

On each table in this teahouse there were sugar servers, with four bowls of varying sugar, which rotate outward. Julian was mentioning how every time he goes there, someone spills the sugar. Within one minute I bumped a spoon and sugar spread all over the table. Julian voiced his disappointment, thinking that somehow I would be different, but this wasn't the case.

We left the café while a Sade song was playing.

We walked across Liberty bridge into Buda. We wanted to go up to the Gellertegy, the fortress at the top of Buda, with a view of the whole city.

The Gellert Hotel is allegedly the most expensive hotel in Budapest. It had a great view on the Danube. Walking up the hill, we went to the Szent Istvan church, a Catholic church constructed in a cave inside the hill. We couldn't enter because, no surprise, a mass was in progress. Church services are held daily and regularly in Hungary.

The walk to the hill top was badly lit. The darkness and slippery snow made it tricky. The views over the Danube bend and Pest were spectacular. At the top, the Liberty statues is a monument of Hungarian independence. Gellertegy is behind it. It's a fortress, with original battle damage. It's helped defend the city from past assaults. Inside, it has great views of the city, with exhibits of the history of Hungary. It was badly lit which made it hard to appreciate at night time. It was barely worth the 300 Forint entry. The views of the whole city were great. There was also a restaurant and hotel, in the old officer's quarters. A huge cannonball blast had removed a chunk of the wall. We left to walk down the other side of the hill. While we were at a lookout point with a great view of the Palace, we were swamped with a sudden barrage of Italian tourists. In fact, the whole hill was teeming with Italians. We could tell from the lovely aftershaves they were wearing. We departed to go see the statue of Gellert who overlooks Margaret Bridge. It was a long walk to it, again dark with slippery snow all the way. But it was worth it, this statue was great. Gellert (Gerald) was a Venetian monk who came to Christianise Hungary. He was killed, then canonised.



Illustration 10 Castle District in Buda

We walked down to the riverside and crossed into Pest, back to Vaci Utca. Julian took me to his favourite Thai eatery. It was good. I had a vegetarian Pad Thai. I could not digest meat anymore. Julian had a nice basil chicken. The food was good, but but as good as Asian food in Australia (or Asia!).

We went home, Julian's ex-workmate, neighbour, and landlord, Gabor, came over for a while for a chat. Mr Kondrusik prepared some more nice pancakes.

Mr Kondrusik reminded me that my bananas were still green, and suggested that they may need more sunlight.

Tuesday December 31 2002

New Years Eve. A public holiday. Everything is shut.

That evening, Julian's father was invited to the home of family friends who live in Budapest. He was looking forward to it. Julian was planning to spend the evening in Pest.

We all went to Klinikak to the apartment of their family friends. They were very friendly and extremely hospitable. They offered Julian and I to stay over for the night. It was hard to pay attention due to the bizarre transvestite antics on Hungarian Bigbrother on television.

That afternoon, in the dark, we went to see the Roman ruins around Buda. The first trip was to Aquincum, a Roman settlement in Buda. This is a neat town beautifully preserved. There are old walls, columns, statues, and a forum. Unfortunately we couldn't enter the site since it is only open during summer. It lies on the main road to Békésmegyer, and there are ruins of an aqueduct in the road divider. Elsewhere in Obuda, under an overpass, are more Roman ruins, including a big bath, plus an outdoor area where only columns remain standing. We went home, to get ready for the evening.

Julian and I graciously left, destined for Vorosmarty Ter. We walked about Pest for a couple of hours, absorbing the atmosphere that was brewing for New Years Eve. At prominent plazas like Vorosmarty Ter and Vaci Utca, there was a live concert, or skating, or dancing. Fireworks preparations were evident. People everywhere were blowing wazoo-style trumpets, which could be infuriating. Naturally all cafés and restaurants were shut, even McDonald's!

Julian spotted a new place on Andreassy Ut. It was a 'Thai baguette' café, and it was open! The place was packed, so we sat at the bar. It was good to escape the -8°C weather. We stayed for an hour for coffee. I don't think I've ever had such a good espresso. The atmosphere was pumping in there. We left at about 2330h to find a place to stand at the Oktogon. This is an octagonal-shaped plaza. Fireworks were to be launched at midnight. We stood on the boulevard median strip in shivering cold while the excitement built up around us. There was also a big TV screen here and a radio station simulcast.

At midnight the fireworks were set off, trumpets sounded, Julian was on the phone to Sandra. The energy of the moment was amazing. My first European New Years Day! Now I understood why Julian was so keen to go out.

We left soon after to find bus 54 which took a long, meandering tour from Pest out to Hater Ut, sometimes over cobbled roads. From Hatar Ut, it was another late night walk back home.

We spent the evening with Gabor then went to bed. A great new years! BUEK!



Illustration 11Happy New Year!

Wednesday January 1 2003

A very lazy morning. We woke up at about 1300h. Most of the snow and ice had disappeared from outside, exposing nice green lawns everywhere. I was fast learning to hate snow, let alone European winters!

Mr Kondrusik returned at about 1400h with a satisfied smirk on his face. He was already starting to talk about leaving for Poland.

My bananas were still green. There was some tinge of yellow at the tips. There mustn't be enough light to promote ripening.

After spending time watching interesting satellite television, we prepared a great early dinner of a risotto with vegetables. We casually headed off into Pest, trying to find something to do. Since it was cold and dark (surprisingly?) we went to Trattoria Toscana. This is a stunning Italian restaurant on the banks of the Danube. The food served looked great, but the Hungarian staff weren't hospitable, almost bothered.

We stayed for a long while, with large glasses of fantastic Italian Novello Rosso wine, and a plate of really tasty bruschetta. After a long chat, we departed into the cold. We went for a walk across the Danube into Buda, and around the Castle district.

We returned home to spend quality time in front of the computer. Julian's Internet access is free after midnight, but costs up to 6 Forint a minute during peak times.

Thursday January 2 2003

We vowed to get up early to go sightseeing in the daytime! We were out of the house by 1100h! We wanted to see Szobor Park. This involved going to the Volanbus bus station on the far side of Pest. We caught bus number 8 which headed for the Buda countryside. Nowhere was it shown how to get to Szobor Park.

Szobor Park is an outdoor exhibition at a village outside Buda. It has lots of communist-era statues on display for tourists. It's understandable that the locals don't like being exposed to the park; the Communist period was hard on Hungarians.

There were lots of great statues ranging from Lenin, general workers, unionists, Communist leaders.

Despite the grim history, this park was great! Some of the statues were large and impressive.



Illustration 12 Standard Communist era figure

We returned to Budapest and went to Horos Ter to see museums. There was the Musuem of Fine Arts, but I chose the Modern Arts Museum. It had a few interesting exhibitions, like a set of chairs which would play dance music when someone sits down. The British Turner Prize winner, 'The Nam' book, was here. There was plenty of time wasters, like a pair of jeans on the ground, or a big rubber cartoon character with a ten metre penis, or a British guy who skulled a 'yardstick' of beer, split it over his shirt, and made an exhibit of the stupid dirty shirt. The most amusing was a video of a Canadian lady who sucked her toe for 29 minutes. For a good period of time, we were followed by a museum attendant who didn't hide it. He stayed close to us and watched out every move. He looked like George Burns. Not impressed.

Friday January 3 2002

Tomorrow we would go out separate ways. Julian took his father to go shopping for presents.

I left in the morning for some sightseeing on my own. I went to Ferenciek Ter as a start, and decided to see if I could get a photo of the inside of the old church there. It was 1100h. I walked in, and found it packed with a church service. I was surprised.

I stayed a few minutes, then went to a pastry shop in the Metro station. You can buy bags of puff pastries for which are quite tasty. I also bought some yoghurt and bananas at Smatch, and went for a walk along the Danube.

I went to Parliament House. 2000 Forint gets you an escorted tour of Parliament House, which looks like Gothic British Parliament House.

I went to buy a ticket, finding that the Italian presentation is at 1300h, but the English was at 1400h. Instead of having to wait an extra hour, I bought an Italian-tour ticket. I left the building returning at 1300h at the entrance gate. I was surrounded by bullish Italian tourists. I spoke to one lady translating what the security guard said to her. She just ignored me. Fine.



Soon an lady came to let people in. Italians were crowding everywhere. I showed the lady my ticket and she roughly pushed my hand away. I called her a witch. Soon she let me in though. As I was entering the building again, I heard an English-speaking presenter announcing an English tour. I switched into her group, the company was better. There was one cute girl I kept bumping into...

Illustration 13 Parliament House on the Duna

The tour was interesting for a whole minute. The history of the building was good, knowing how many square metres of carpet is has is boring. A big vase is in here. A feature of the building is the cigar holders for the members of parliament. The Hungarian Crown jewels are also here; they were interesting.

I left Parliament and went for a walk down through Pest aimlessly. I headed for the Basilica to see it in the daytime! It is quite large and impressive. I bought a religious souvenir.

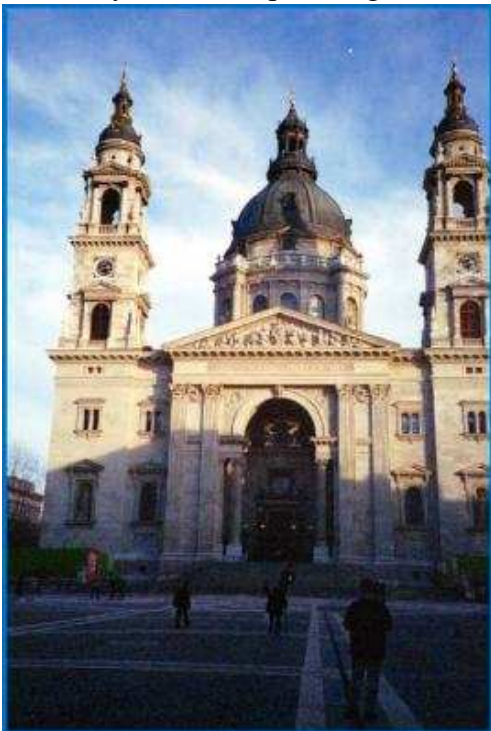


Illustration 14 Szent Istvan Basilica

I kept walking and eventually reached Andreassy Ut. I bought some pizza at a Szendvics shop, then got some bread at a Smatch.

I headed for the National Museum, via Metro to Kalvin Ter. I stayed there for nearly 3 hours, looking at the different phases of Hungarian history were interesting. There were royal outfits, articles, weaponry, and culture everywhere.

I found a great little book on Budapest in the gift shop. It had great images of the city (better than my own) and good grammar! A worthy find.

I left to meet Julian and Mr Kondrusik at Ferenciek Ter. We went to their Orthodox church for a mass dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Thankfully it was only half an hour. Julian sang with the choir this time. He had a few church friends who had intended to meet him for a coffee before they departed for Poland, but they hadn't come to the service.

We went home to dinner. My bananas remained defiantly green. My last day in Hungary was great!

Saturday January 4 2002 – London, United Kingdom

My flight was at 1030h. Julian and I managed to leave for Hatar Ut, then onto Kobanya-Kispest station. We caught the high-tech bus link to Ferihegy airport. Forty minutes later, down the bump main road, we finally got there. I had twenty minutes before the gates closed for the flight. Plenty of time. We stayed and chatted until my flight was ready to board.

The flight was good. I was surprised that I was upgraded to Business Class because of my late check-in. There is no difference between economy and business class on old Boeing planes. The meal was delicious.

As expected, I had a lovely young couple next to me, with an active boy who liked to scream. By the end of the flight, especially when he was strapped down, he screamed non-stop. A flight steward came to try amuse him. I could only smile psychotically. Ahh Zoe...

Once at Heathrow, I got out of the airport quickly, and caught the Tube back to the Earls Court Hotel.

Same old place. I was given a room with a double bed and a shower for the first night. I went to check my email, and voicemail in case of job responses. As expected, nothing.

Sunday January 5 2003

My birthday. I spent the day at the Tate Britain art gallery. Lots of British paintings from different eras and styles. The British painter Turner is prominent here. He has his own exhibition. His lifespan was during the Victorian era, and saw many important events of modern British history.

Monday January 6-8 2003

I spent lots of time ringing recruiters chasing job leads. I was expecting the market to show more promise. No luck.

I went for walks through the Chelsea borough on these days, to pass the time.

On Tuesday I went to the National Army Museum in Chelsea. It had many exhibits of army equipment and British military history. It was great. There weren't many patrons, obviously this wasn't one of the popular museums in London.

On Wednesday I was interested in seeing the London Boat Show, showing at the huge Earls Court Exhibition Centre. There were lots of boats, high-tech boating equipment, clothing, GPS units, insurance, cruises, boat renting. There were very nice boats, even canal barges! For some reason, I found the Palm Pilot GPS accessories, electronic boat consoles, sea toilets, and hydraulic boat stands the most interesting.

I departed on the 9th for Stuarts house in Basingstoke, Hampshire. I was offered to look after it while looking for work, while he and Melody were in Australia.

Thursday January 9-26 2002 – Basingstoke, United Kingdom

I spent lots of effort in my job hunt. I felt like I was making progress, recruiters rang, I was even put forward for a few jobs!

After a while, I was finding my leads drying up, delaying, or getting dubious vibes from recruiters. The pay rates weren't looking promising, not much different than Australia, there were no contracts, strict requirements, and many applicants.

I managed to get one interview, at a company called HPI. The job seemed interesting but the pay was quite low. This angered me. The job was first advertised in November, when I first came, and only now they decide to interview? Adding insult to misery, the pay offered was £10000 less than other positions. Firemen, who earn this salary, were currently on strike nationwide asking for a pay-rise.

The interview was in Harrogate, in North Yorkshire. That was nearly 500 Km away from Basingstoke. Going by train would be complicated, so I decided to arrange car hire. I spent lots of time learning British road rules and the Highway Code. I learned what I could about Motorways. I would have to go to Harrogate via the M3 to M25 London Orbital, then straight up north on the M1, then the A1M highway.

Wednesday morning I left at 0630h in my pathetic Nissan Micra rental car. I nervously drove through Basingstoke, onto the M3, and drove towards London. The speed limit is 70 mph (120 kph), but Europeans have powerful cars and easily surpass that. I drove in good time despite the bad performance of the car. I stopped for an hour at a 'Welcome Break' for Lunch. I exited the A1M via the A661 and tried to find HPI in the next town, thinking that I had reached Harrogate. The streets didn't match the Harrogate map, so I asked for directions at the local Police Station. It turned out that I was in the neighbouring town, Wetherby. Harrogate was further down the A661!

Wetherby is a very pretty town, so after being informed of the way to Harrogate, I walked around the town for an hour.

I proceeded to Harrogate. The Yorkshire countryside is absolutely stunning. I arrived at HPI and went for a walk around. This was at the edge of town, but it was gorgeous, and felt like Burnside or Springfield. Large houses, nice environment, and pleasant neighbourhoods.

It's a pity that the position or interview weren't suitable. HPI must have had its reservations about me. I certainly did about them, and their attitude towards this role.

The next day was hard for me. No new jobs had been advertised all week, and the possibility of more interviews was waning. My finances were running low. I was frustrated with the constant uphill battle for employment, which was looking futile.

As of the 27th I would have to find my own place, and hopefully get temporary work. All this to struggle along in London, hoping for proper Unix work. Who was forcing me to do this? Howcome was I finding it so terribly hard to get anywhere, after hearing so many past success stories from other Australians? After an amazing release of frustration, I decided that my time was up. I had given three months of directed effort, and I had no indication of something positive to show for it. If I did find work, how happy would I be to stay?

I knew that I was certainly not going to waste more time living frugally in a London hotel, seeking and pursuing futile employment and expecting a result.

I hunted around to find the soonest way back to Adelaide. Through the local Toucan Travel, I got an American Airlines flight to Los Angeles, with a Qantas flight to Melbourne. I booked a connecting flight to Adelaide, for that Tuesday, as instructed by the travel agent.

Job exploration summary -

I had applied to 231 individual offers of employment, with over 100 agencies. I got an acceptable amount of feedback from recruiters who were eager to have me in their database. Most positions I failed to be shortlisted due to not having all of the near-impossible qualifications, a large volume of applicants, or several other petty reasons. Nearly all jobs were permanent. No contracts for foreigners offered. Despite this, I managed to get eleven leads -

1. HPI – Dubious AIX job in Harrogate, as described. No luck. My thanks goes to Joel at Coyles for nominating me.
2. Perot Systems – London outsourcing Unix Support role. Perfect. Shortlisted for interview in November. They soon withdrew the position due to budget problems, hence did not proceed.
3. Penta Consulting – 3 month helpdesk contract over Christmas break in Hampshire. The only real lead. I couldn't accept it.
4. Motorola – Glen from Lorient put me forward for a role in Munich at Motorola. It would involve supporting all European software development Unix systems. It would be an English-speaking environment, requiring a software development and electronic engineering background. I fit like a glove. There were only two candidates. I never heard from Glen again.
5. MBA – Applied for a 5-month contract in Zurich, in November. Other candidates were put forward, I was not. By mid-January the role was re-advertised. The recruiter, Elizabeth, apparently had submitted two other candidates who hadn't even shown up to work! Now she wanted to know how serious I was at going to Switzerland, and how reliable I would be. I think the client lost interest in her after this. I heard no more about it.
6. Union Systems – The recruiter DP Connect, who nominated me for the Perot Systems role, contacted me about a junior Quality Assurance role at this software house in Farnborough. I was qualified, but once I read the job criteria, it was clear that I wouldn't be selected for interview. I was right.
7. Autonomy – A multinational knowledge management software company needed a Unix Systems Administrator, based in Cambridge. Fantastic! The recruiters, Evolution Jobs, rang me about this one before they advertised it! Despite eager follow up, I never heard from them again.
8. Betfair.com – The largest UK online gambling site needed three Unix Systems Administrators to manage their ever growing website, based in Hammersmith, London. After completing the initial set of competency questions, and waiting two weeks to get some response out of them, I didn't bother to wait to get the result. Time well saved.
9. GMA – Gordon, at Pathway IT London, who I was on good terms with and rang fortnightly, put me forward for ten Sun Hardware Engineer positions, along with forty others. It would have been a great opportunity, complete with Sun Training, decent wage, and travel allowance. Servicing Sun hardware in London would involve learning the city and visiting all major sites, including banks. It reminded me of my old Camtech job. A couple of phone calls later, I found that I was in the 'second batch' of candidates for GMA. I assumed this meant 'second preference'. I didn't wait in the UK to see if I was shortlisted. I was right, again.
10. Fish4.co.uk – Leading UK website which handles over 50% of web searches requested. I was

contacted by Nationwide Recruitment. They already had two candidates, but requested to put me forward in case these two weren't successful. They would contact me 'in a couple of days' if I was selected for an interview. I never heard from them again.

11. Cr dit Suisse/First Boston – Multinational bank required a Senior Solaris Administrator with three years experience and a strong technical background. Fabulous. Excellent pay. Based in the London Docklands. The recruiter, Beverley at GCSR, put me forward, but I didn't wait to hear the result. No financial institution was interested in me, since I don't have a financial background, and I'm a foreigner, even though I'm a citizen! Why should this position be any different? I never heard from GCSR again.

The classic was a message left on my UK mobile well after my departure, from an unknown recruiter. He stated that a Unix role in Germany had just become available, and I was to contact him *urgently* to be considered for the role. Such irony, such a brazen attitude. Where were these people three months ago when I needed them?

Sunday January 26 2003 - London, United Kingdom

Stuart and Melody's house was tidy. The cat, Ally, had gone home. My bags were packed, and were dangerously heavy. Time to go.

I rang the Basingstoke Cab Company to order a taxi to go to the train station. The taxi driver arrived on time. Basingstoke taxis are notoriously unreliable. The driver was friendly and well presented. The car was a gorgeous Volvo sedan, and I got to sit in the front seat! I was worried that I had ordered a private chauffeured car! The driver explained that he works for a private cab company. Phew!

Five minutes and £6 later, I'm at the Basingstoke station buying a ticket to London Waterloo. Since there was repair work on the track to Woking, there were no trains. Instead, coaches were hired to ferry the hundreds of passengers to the Woking Interchange. Forty pleasant minutes up the M3 in the dark, plus a couple more towns, and we were there.

The train trip into London was pleasant. When I got to Earls Court Station, I thought that elevators would be available to get out of the station, since they had just been installed as part of its renovations. However, not for the platform that I was on! After cursing and moaning, I managed to hoist my luggage up the flight of stairs in one go. Quite impressed with myself.

I had a booking for the night at the Earls Court Hotel again. Since there was no room to leave my luggage behind the service desk, I had to 'pull' my luggage up to my room on the first floor. At least I was given a room with a double bed and an en-suite bathroom! It still sucked though.

I went to Sainsburys to get a sandwich and a drink for supper. Then I went out for a pleasant walk around, just up to Kensington High St, in case the Next shop was open...

No shops were open. I kept walking; through Knightsbridge, Park Lane, Westminster, Whitehall. Then to get home? I followed the Thames, through Chelsea and Fulham, back to the Hotel. There were many new signs indicating the boundary of the new London Congestion charge zone. After this huge 4-hour, 22 Km walk, I collapsed in bed at 2330h.

Monday January 27 2002 – Los Angeles, United States

I woke up at 0600h to get ready.

I had found out from the Basingstoke taxi driver that he would have been able to drive straight to Heathrow from Basingstoke this morning. That would have been a good option, being about 40 minutes on the motorway. Oh well. BBC News reported a traffic jam on the M4 to Heathrow; obviously it was a busy day, and I could have been stuck in that congestion!

The news also reported that the Central tube line was closed. On Saturday an engine fell out from the bottom of a train, causing a derailment. There were rumours of problems on the Picadilly line. The trains were the same model. I was about to take the Picadilly line to Heathrow! Ahh London always had some interesting news, unlike Adelaide where the news was the weather and the cricket.

I got to Heathrow quite safely with plenty of time. I was able to use the new elevators in Earls Court station. Interestingly, there were armed Policemen at Heathrow. At the American Airlines check-in, I managed to attach my new AA frequent flyer points, clarify that the connecting LA-MEL flight was with Qantas, chat about the nine-hour wait, and whether there were any screaming children sitting near me. Luckily, there weren't!

The airline agent gave me the boarding passes for both flights. I had an hour to spend, so I cruised around the shops, looking for interesting stuff. A book was definitely required, given the long wait. I got a sci-fi novel, a cool UK keyring, and a big Union Jack flag. I nearly bought a Thunderbirds magazine, and I should have got a cute mini soccerball...

When going through security, I was one of twenty 'selected' to be screened for extra security checks. I was intrigued, and asked about every check. The full body search was obviously for weapons. I didn't empty my pockets before going through the security barrier, for added excitement. Has anyone wondered how to put weapons into wallets or mobile phones? I was interrogated with questions like 'has anyone been with your luggage since check-in'. One officer checked the contents of my shoes using a mirror on a rod; apparently looking for powered explosives hidden in the balls, but all he found was a bad shoe smell.

A second lady checked my backpack for dangerous goods. After ripping out half of my dense packing, the wet toiletries convinced her off my innocence. She passed a little cloth circle around my bag, 'massaging its aura', Julian might say. The cloth was processed by a machine. I didn't wait to see what the test was for, since I had to board the plane.

My ten-hour flight to the US was acceptable. We flew over the Atlantic via Scotland, Iceland, Greenland, and across central North America to LA. Up to North Dakota, the sights were snow, snow, and snow. Idaho, Utah, the Rocky mountains, the Grand Canyon, and the Nevada desert were amazing. The food was good. AA gives lots of drinks and snacks, even has an open bar. I started reading my 'Virtual Light' by William Gibson, and had trouble following the storyline. The sci-fi was not easy to relate to, but the television series 'Dark Angel' resembled the subject matter.

I set next to a nice 19-year old from Cornwall. He was a 'professional golfer', heading to a tournament in California. Apparently celebrities like to compete in this tournament, so he was hoping to meet Clint Eastwood. It was our first time to the US. We were really excited to finally see the Hollywood sign in the hills behind Burbank.

We left London at 1100h, and arrived in LA at 1430h.

LAX was huge. Another barrage of security faced us. Firstly, all luggage must be collected even if it is bound for a connecting flight. Three people check your Immigration, Visa waiver, and passport. I was issued with a visa, since I had to transfer to another flight. Then the luggage is collected and re-xrayed, hopefully going on the correct flight. Done! I was in Terminal 4 at LAX! Everyone here was friendly and helpful, all were Hispanic.

It looked great. I walked around expecting a walkway to get to terminal 3. Once lost, was shown that Terminal 3 was a short walk to the next building. I got to go outside! I was grinning with delight. I was in the US and it was a fine, sunny Californian day! My gratefulness with seeing the Pacific sun was unprecedented!

Terminal 3 (Tom Bradley Terminal) is for International departures. It had lots of shops selling a range of stuff, and a number of restaurants and bars. Nice. The Qantas counter wasn't open yet. I had a 9.5 hour wait, so why rush? I scoped all the shops, and got two magazines and a bag of Trail Mix to pass the time. I bought Calvin Klein Be duty free. It smelt nice. I kicked myself since nobody has Lacoste outside Europe. Lacoste is the best fragrance I've smelt.

A man approached me. He turned out to be a Hare Krishna representative, giving people books for a 'Donation of the Heart'. Luckily I had no money on me. He was friendly, but he couldn't figure out where I was from, since I said that I was Australian, but I didn't look like it. I looked like a local. Plus I should stay longer in California, it would suit me. I thanked him; that was the best compliment yet! My mind drifted to working in Silicon Valley, hanging out on the beach with Amy Webber, me all buffed rich Unix surfer, her in a scant bikini...

I sat at an observation area and got stuck into my novel. I watched the beautiful red sun set over the Pacific, and the planes which were landing and leaving every two minutes. By 2130h I stopped sleep-reading and went to check in.

The terminal was packed at this time. A number of flights were leaving for Pacific destinations. The Qantas queue was full of Australians. I was looking confused so a Customer Satisfaction lady explained that since I have a boarding pass already, I can proceed to the boarding gate. Lovely.

I got onto the Qantas flight with nowhere near the complications of AA. The flight was full of carefree Australians on holiday. On the plane, I sat near an Australian father and his American son. This 10 year old next to me still needed to learn some etiquette. He constantly flayed his elbows and wriggled and played with his entertainment set. While sleeping, he curled up on the seat and often kicked my leg. Wonderful. A baby was screaming some distance away. Dangerously audible. I managed to get some sleep. The 'Q' snack bag was good, as was the overnight bag. The 'award-winning' 'Q in-flight entertainment' was nothing to write about, but at least I got to see Goldmember.

Wednesday January 29 2003 – Melbourne, Australia

Finally we land at Melbourne's Tullamarine airport at 0900h. A 14-hour flight. The pilot announced that it was Wednesday. I had a strange sinking feeling as I realised that my connecting flight to Adelaide was for Tuesday! I forgot about the International Date Line! So did my travel agent! Grr!

There was a long queue at customs. A supervising officer closely inspected my Australian passport since I had left the country for three months, visited five countries, but my passport had no evidence of that! Ha!

I collected my luggage and hurried to Qantas Domestic to see what can be done to get to Adelaide. I paid a penalty and managed to get a seat, luckily on the same flight.

My luggage was also overweight by three kilos! Oh no! I had to remove a jacket. The Qantas assistant was so charming and helpful, and gave me an extra bag to carry stuff in. She could see the 42 hour travel time was getting to me. She should be commended!

While waiting for my flight, I realised that my parents probably were waiting for me at the Adelaide airport on Tuesday as expected. I tried to ring on my mobile, but the battery went flat! I tried again, still no luck. I tried to use the payphone but had no Australian money, nor a phonecard. I tried to buy a cheap phonecard on Visa, but the amount was less than \$10 so they wouldn't allow it. I could only get Australian cash by going back into the check-in area. Too hard. So I tried a reverse charge call to my parents. Nobody was home. Amusing. I went back to my gate, slumped in my seat, and hoped for the best.

The flight was good. At least it was short. I was surprised to find dance/soul music on the entertainment channels. The old lady next to me might have thought I was a pig, since I looked quite rough.

In Adelaide, I found my father waiting for me. I impatiently collected my luggage, converted my money, and drove home fast. Finally I was at my parents house. Not the best place to be, but it's still quite good.

To summarise my trip, there were many things abroad which I wanted to pursue, and I was sore and very angry that they didn't eventuate. There were also many things in Australia which I missed while abroad. However, I am happy and alive, and an opportunity may arise in future.

Although my main goal for this trip was not entirely met, it was a fantastic experience, a roller coaster event around the world!