

Rainforest Tour

Forget about all the superlatives. This was a life-changing day. Our guide, Pete, picked us up at 7:30 am and we proceeded to enjoy one of the most interesting days any of us had ever had.

Pete can take up to six people in his specially modified Land Rover, but this time there were only the four of us as passengers, so we got a private tour. Pete is originally from Kenya, and much of his spirit of adventure and approach to surviving in bush came from his time "as a little black boy in Africa". He is white, but growing up he was accepted into a group of dark-skinned African boys who sound like they got into no end of trouble!). He also spent time in Papua, New Guinea before coming to Australia.

Pete seemed to know every detail about Australian plants, animals and history. though he was impressed by Peter's breadth of random knowledge.

Our day started near the hotel, where Pete pulled the car off the road (it was a classic four-wheel drive car with a winch that got used occasionally, not like our SUVs that never get taken off-road), and showed us a large colony of flying foxes (huge, cute fruit bats), which were making all kinds of noise before going to sleep.

Then it was off to the rainforest, stopping occasionally to learn about aboriginal dreamtime (creation) mythology, local agriculture (sugar cane is widely grown here, but most of the resulting molasses is exported to Japan: bananas are grown here and they are actually technically herbs, not fruits: jackfruits the largest fruit in the world - are grown here) and Australian animals (there are no placental mammals native to Australia, only marsupials and monotremes, so any placental mammals you hear about – like dingoes and fruit bats – were introduced from somewhere else). Pete gave us a great appreciation for the geologic history of Australia, which has had a great influence on the plants and animals found here. At one point, all the continents were one huge land mass at the South Pole, and then they started breaking apart and drifting away, with Australia being the last to move and being out of contact with the other continents for the longest time. Australia is the only continent that has never been connected to any other continent, so the animals and plants have evolved differently.

There aren't any real (native) predators in Australia (other than crocs, which aren't all that common in most of the country), so mammals were free to rear their young in ways that aren't too safe (marsupials lug them around in pouches and monotremes lay eggs). This has led to big problems with animals being introduced which are predators (like dingoes) or which require predators to keep their numbers down (like cane toads and rabbits). For example, the longest fence in the world is in Australia: built to keep the dingoes away from the farmers in the South so they don't kill their sheep. Some of the plants in the rainforest haven't changed for hundreds of millions of years since Australia was part of Antarctica - because they haven't had to.

Anyway, back to our day. We ate a variety of things we found around the rainforest, including figs, coconut, lemon verbena, a small purple flower that tastes like mushrooms (and which is hallucinogenic in large doses), and my favorite: green ants. These ants, which have green abdomens, defend themselves by pinching with their pinchers and then dripping some ascorbic acid from their abdomens in the wound. Ascorbic acid is just vitamin C, so if you pick up an ant and lick its abdomen, you get a concentrated dose of vitamin C, which is quite sour and refreshing.

It's like skittles running around in the woods! You can also eat the ants whole (which we all did) to get even more concentrated flavor or crush them up and sniff them (which Peter did) to clear your sinuses. All in all, a very useful creature! Peter and Cassie are still finding ants to catch and lick at the hotel, though Althea thinks this is uncivilized.

We hiked through some deep rainforest, made toothbrushes out of a native plant, saw an ant that mimics a spider when frightened, saw a fern that wilts when touched, swung on vines across a stream, saw droppings from cassowaries and wild pigs, and took a dip in a secret "swimming hole" which Pete assured us contained no crocodiles. We were out for around 14 hours, which is longer than Pete usually takes, because we kept stopping and asking about everything. This blog entry is getting kind of long, but I could write pages and pages based on the things we saw, heard, felt and learned in the rainforest.

Threats to Our Survival

For the members of our family who were concerned that we would never make it out of the rainforest alive (you know who you are!), we're happy to say we did. It turns out that there are not that many things in the Daintree Rainforest (the oldest in the world) that can kill you, and we didn't run into any of them. Sure, we saw some venomous things (the coolest being 6 inch long golden orb spiders), but we didn't spot the most dangerous animal in the rainforest, which is...the cassowary! Sure, these colorful and primitive looking cousins of emus (which are also Australian) are big, but dangerous? It turns out that one of their toes has an extra long claw on it which they occasionally use to disembowel an unlucky traveler! The females are larger (around 65 kg) than the males (around 35 kg), and pretty even tempered. But the males, which actually sit on the eggs and raise the chicks, can get pretty territorial and are known to be ornery. Our rainforest guide (see next post) told us that if we are confronted by a cassowary, we should move any packs from our backs to our fronts (as shields against the claws), and be "dominant" by waving our arms around and making lots of noise. Also, never turn our backs on a cassowary. Although Peter really wanted to see a cassowary in the wild, and there was a cassowary that was known to frequent the area we were in, we didn't see her. Oh well.