

One year around Australia

with the kids

MEET the family who did the big lap of Australia.

A French woman, her husband from New Zealand and their two girls, Natasha (12) and Yasmine (8) embarked on a one year trip around the Australian continent in their new home, a double decker bus on 10 wheels. They left behind their routine life in Sydney where they settled in 2000 to tour the biggest island of the world.

TEXT and IMAGES by I. Antonetti

WITH their Microlight licence just in hand, they started the big trip in January 2007 taking with them a Microlight plane, also called a trike, two motorbikes and four bicycles. The parents improvised as teachers for a year with the efficient help of the Sydney Distance Education Primary School.

Interview with Isabelle and Shane.

"the best thing we ever did!"



TheTravelMag: what is involved in the preparation process before embarking on such a long trip with the kids?

Isabelle: it is best to be well prepared and we had one whole year to do so. We started doing a lot of research to find a suitable motorhome. The plan was to finish the renovation of our house and sell it to finance our trip. I bought books and maps and made a rough plan of the itinerary and set up a website which ended up being in French and in English so both our families could follow our adventures. We enrolled the girls in the Sydney Distance Education School, which is entirely free by the way and available to all Australian residents for one year. Our eldest daughter was to start year six and we had made up our minds that it would be the last opportunity for us to travel and take the kids out of normal school. We found our dream motorhome, did a test drive in the outback of NSW for two weeks. We also got two motorbikes and last but not least, we started learning to fly a microlight following a crazy idea that seeing Australia from above would be really awesome. It is also very important to have a plan in place for when you return.

TheTravelMag: what inspired you to do this one year long trip with the family around Australia?

Isabelle: we arrived in Sydney in 2000 and I started immediately working full time at the French Embassy's trade section while Shane was busy taking care of the girls and doing some property development projects in Brisbane. When we had holidays, we usually spent time either in France or in New Zealand to visit family and friends. We had little opportunity to visit Australia. It was always in the back of our minds that we would one day do the big lap. When my time at the embassy was up at the end of 2005, I decided to resign to make this dream possible and to stay on in Australia.



"It is important to be well prepared!"

TheTravelMag: did it all go according to plan?

Shane: it did. We got the motorhome, travelled a few more times to Tumut to continue our Microlight training. I did some work on the bus to suit our needs better. We found the right motorbikes. I designed a trailer to fit all the "toys" and had it tailor made. We finished the renovation of the house just in time to sell it before we left. We then moved into the bus and were based at a Showground in Sydney's Northern Beaches for a couple of weeks before our departure. We visited the Sydney Distance Education Primary School with the girls, met the teachers who explained how it all worked. The girls were very excited.

TheTravelMag: since you mention the distance education, can you explain how it worked?

Isabelle: it is extremely well organised and efficient. We received the first month of work for each girl the day we visited the school, year 6 and year 3. Then we simply advised the school a week or so in advance in which town the next packages should be sent to and we would collect them at the poste restante. Each pack contains the work to be completed in all subjects normally taught at school for a fortnight. The parents get their explanation booklet. The students need to read a few books to complete the exercises in English. Some exercises were required to be answered orally and that was done with a cassette recorder. Once completed, we would send the packs back to school for correction. The teachers would record their comments on the tapes. A bit of planning was involved to figure out where we would be to collect the next lot of new work together with the corrections of previous weeks. We worked pretty hard. We had to follow the NSW calendar and the State's holidays. The girls did not always like it and missed the interaction with other kids but it was really worth it. Natasha developed a passion for reading during our time on the roads.



"The freedom that comes with travelling in such a vehicle is priceless".



TheTravelMag: what was your actual itinerary and what was/were your favourite spot(s)?

Isabelle: the voyage started in Sydney. We travelled clockwise around Australia, following the coast on Highway One and finished the trip again in Sydney one year later. We travelled inland NSW to Canberra and Tumut where we obtained our Microlight licence and collected our trike. We also crossed the continent from the north to the centre. Tasmania is the only State we could not visit this time. Our favourite spot? We get this question all the time and it is the most difficult to answer. Australia is blessed with many very beautiful and contrasting landscapes and the beauty of a place can be enhanced or somewhat diminished by other factors like weather or an abundance of insects for example. But to try and give you an answer, the more rugged and isolated areas are an extraordinary experience. We really enjoyed the northern parts of Australia in WA and NT and loved Alice Spring and the Red Centre. Australia is beautiful almost everywhere with some rare exceptions. We did more than 36,000 kilometres without counting the numerous bike rides and walks! Plus a few miles with the trike!



TheTravelMag: tell us more about the way you travelled and why you chose a bus rather than a camper trailer or other setup. Would you change anything?

Shane: camping is not exactly our cup of tea, so we decided to go for a spacious double-decker bus, fully equipped with bathroom and kitchen. We had plenty of space, that was fantastic. The freedom that comes with travelling in such a vehicle is priceless. The bus was autonomous with regards to electricity and water, which allowed us to stop wherever we liked and avoid expensive and noisy caravan parks. The whole family had to manage water and electricity consumption with great care.



We filled the water tanks -about 500 litres- once a week on average. Water was filtered for consumption. We learned to function with the bare minimum. If we could do it again with the kids, we would probably exchange the motorbikes for a small 4X4. As much as Isabelle and I enjoy riding motorbikes, having the girls on the back for long and hazardous rides on corrugated roads proved to be challenging.



TheTravelMag: What is it in such an experience that makes it so unforgettable?

Isabelle: it's about the freedom to enjoy the outdoors, stay longer or leave as you please. It's about meeting fantastic people along the way. It's about discovering, learning and experiencing. We have been to many wonderful Museums and we have added culture to the landscape and places. It all comes together in the end. We were blessed with great weather all around the continent apart from one storm. We have not experienced anything worse than a spider bite, some minor mechanical problems and being bogged. The spirit of the outback is strong and unique. It's imprinted in us.

"It was the best experience ever and a truly enriching one on all levels".

Shane: no day resembles the next. It is highly satisfying. We have made some good friends on the road and discovered a whole new world. We all learned a lot about the Aboriginals, their culture and history, about the Australian fauna and flora. The girls cuddled dingoes and wallabies, saw goanas, eagles, crocodiles and much, much more... We discovered the desert. We were very active, bushwalking, riding our bikes or motorbikes on a daily basis. It was the best experience ever and a truly enriching one on all levels. We hope our story will inspire other families to embark on such a wonderful adventure!