

A smaller group than usual departed Parramatta on Sunday March 18 for a week's stay at the Bellingen Valley Lodge. Numbers were down this year, as some of our regular tourists could not join us owing to various reasons & commitments. However I must say I find it hard to believe that we cannot fill a coach with 49 members when we have in excess of 6,000 members in Sydney U3A. Every new person who joins us is always extremely happy with the tour, the price and the friendly way they are welcomed by everyone.

We were the first tour group welcomed by new owners at the Lodge who only took over in December 2017 & have managed it by themselves since January this year. I mention this because they were so welcoming, friendly, efficient, and professional. Nothing was too much trouble for them. The new chef provided us with the best meals we have experienced in a small country hotel.

This trip was the 21st birthday for the holidays Greater Western U3A has organised for Sydney U3A members. We viewed a movie depicting all holidays from 1997 until 2017 and celebrated with a birthday cake (home made by the chef) on our last evening. On display was also a map depicting all the towns visited on these holidays along with group photos from the various holidays they were taken.

On Monday, our second day, we enjoyed a tour of Bellingen where we experienced the unique character of the town and the charming countryside. We then travelled to Dorrigo relishing the views and lush rainforest on the way. After lunch we were given time to explore the town before travelling to the Rainforest Centre on the edge of the escarpment. After a brief talk by a ranger we were able to take in the view all the way to the coast from the skywalk. Some members took in a short walk through the rainforest; unfortunately we didn't have the time to do the longer walks. The centre was set up with informative displays depicting the history of the area and the flora & fauna that can be found throughout the area. Sadly once again we were reminded of the damage we as humans are doing to the rainforests worldwide and their natural inhabitants.

The next day we headed for Grafton, stopping at Carobana near Korora Beach, north of Grafton. Carobana is a working factory and retail outlet, making a large range of carob coated products, peanut brittle & honeycomb. Carobana is a family owned & operated factory being in production since 1980. The current family owner, Jean, was easy to listen to as she talked about her family's history in the area and what led them to become a carob confectionary factory. We also learnt about the history of the carob industry in Australia and the many products that can be produced from the tree. We then enjoyed a tour of the factory witnessing the making of carob-coated liquorice, as well as seeing peanut brittle being made from scratch. Not to forget the opportunity to sample their products and make purchases. I urge you to research this industry it is very educational.

With purchases in hand we headed for Grafton and an enjoyable lunch in the park. We then enjoyed a tour of the town with a guide who was very knowledgeable about the town's history including flooding & what has been done to protect the town & its residents, local industry, buildings, current issues and the future outlook of the area. On our way back to the Lodge we detoured to the Bruxner Park lookout just North of Coffs Harbour. The lookout provides excellent views over the city of Coffs Coast. The new viewing platform at the end of a 21 metre suspended walkway provides a great vantage point over the city, the Solitary Islands Marine Park and the coastline along Coffs Coast. (See group photo)

Day four saw us heading to the new Slim Dusty Centre near Kempsey. Whilst not all of us enjoy his music we all agreed the centre is a great tribute to the man. The memorabilia and information on display was magnificently presented and enjoyed by many. After lunch we enjoyed the scenic tour of the Arakoon State recreation Area where the Historic Trial Bay Gaol is located. It was the first Public works Prison in Australia opened in 1886 & later held German internees during WW1. A visit to Urunga's Honey Place on the way back to Bellingen was enjoyed with many sampling their wares and purchasing some of their products.

We had experienced some very heavy rain whilst we were travelling to & inside the Slim Dusty Centre but not during any of our outside activities. The rain then returned Wednesday evening but didn't impact on us at all. The forecast for our Thursday visit to Coffs Harbour was torrential rain and storms all day.

On Thursday our Journey to Coffs was through very heavy rain but once at our destination, Pet Porpoise Pool, the sun appeared. We were able to wander around viewing the areas containing a variety of marine creatures, many of who were rescued, at the park. In particular I enjoyed seeing the Little Blue Penguins (previously known as Fairy Penguins). The show was entertaining & informative. Once again the skies opened & rain fell heavily but whilst we were under shelter. After the show we participated in the feeding of the Penguins and Turtles. Some of our members took the opportunity to have an experience with a dolphin and Sea Lion and were very excited about the experience and the knowledge they gained during that encounter. Lunch at the Coffs Harbour Yacht Club was not only enjoyable but the views of the rugged coastline and beaches were amazing. We then had time to explore the town of Coffs Harbour. We returned to Bellingen where we were given the opportunity to explore this quaint town. The rain fell heavily from just before our happy hour and dinner but it didn't dampen our 21st birthday celebration and final evening together.

During the night the rain did not stop and was the most torrential I have experienced, luckily we were all safely tucked up in our cosy beds. We farewelled our amazing hosts and staff to head home and back to the reality of cooking & looking after ourselves. The local flooding of Bellingen we witnessed on our way out of town was a testament to the amount of rain that had fallen during the late evening & early hours of Friday. We managed to leave before the town was flooded. Our Coach Driver had had to drive through very heavy rain at times during the latter part of the week but the rain falling as we left Bellingen and most of the way heading South would test any driver. He handled the conditions without complaint & safely got us out of the area. On our way down towards Nabic for lunch we witnessed much flooding of low lying areas, farms, creeks, rivers and roads previously used before the bypass, that is still under construction, was built. The height of the bypass helped us to be able to head home safely. On my journey from Parramatta to my home in the Southern Highlands I heard on the radio news that Bellingen had 300mls of rain in 24hrs and that both Taree and Bellingen were flooded with some rescues having to be performed. Luckily for these regions and people the rain did ease and clear which meant the flooding did not escalate.

Whilst the end of our week was wet it didn't impact on our enjoyment of the holiday or any of our day trips. Please see the photos to help your understanding of this report.

We will be heading to Batemans Bay in 2019. Please see the advertisement for the trip in 2018's Second Semester Talks Courses & Events. There is also the flier for the trip on this website to give members an idea of what we will be doing during our Batemans Bay stay.

Diana Pine