

## ***The Menagerie***

*(Facebook excerpt written for Alliance Abroad Group)*

Not only do I work in a hotel that is haunted, but the charming place is also a menagerie of wildlife. Being in the heart of Sydney Harbour National Park, the Q Station Resort is home to a large collection of living, breathing things, none of which are human. I have never in my life, had so many run-ins with animals. Let me give some examples.

The other day I was talking with a man, we'll call him Clyde, who regularly anchors his Leviathan-sized yacht at our wharf. It angers the captain of the Eco-Hop ferry, which stops several times a day for pickups, as Clyde's yacht is like a palace on our tiny beach, hogging up the wharf, but he stays there nonetheless. I was giving Clyde a ride down to the wharf and as we wound our way down the narrow, jungle-ish trails, he spoke up.

"I saw a shark at the beach earlier today."

I started and hit a pothole in the road.

"Whadaya mean you saw a shark?!" I gasped.

"Oh, no dramas mate, it was nothing big, just a little guy. Swimming off the beach."

I tried to feel calm about this fact, but simply couldn't.

"So how little are you talking?" I asked, feigning nonchalance in my voice.

"Hmmm, only like four or five feet long," he said as he ran his fingers through his dishelved, mangle of a hairdo that I am always itching to cut.

"WHAT?!" I nearly slammed on the breaks. "THAT'S HUGE!"

He looked at me like I was being a namby-pamby and as he retreated into his rich yacht a few minutes later, I vowed that I would never swim on our beach. Come to think of it though, most of the beaches here have cordoned off areas with shark nets. It's simply the norm to expect that sharks will come creepin' along at some time. I suppose the locals just swim with a prayer in their hearts and fingers crossed! I know I will next time I go snorkeling.

Apart from the sharks (I've also seen sting rays and jelly fish here) there are the spiders. Remember the Huntsman Spider I talked about? The one as big as my outstretched hand? They are definitely a permanent fixture of the place. Don't get me started on those. My manager has dubbed one of our buses, Blinky, the 'Tarantula Bus' as several of us have found a Huntsman crawling around the exterior of the bus. None of us want to drive the bus now, and it's always a relief when I get to drive Bob, or even the old ghost-tour bus, Bill, for the day.

As a side note apart from Q Station—my flatmate dragged me out into our backyard the other day to show me a spider he found on our tomato plants. It was a teenie, tiny little Redback spider— it looked innocent enough until he told me it was a highly venomous arachnid, similar to a Black Widow Spider, with a bite that would send one straight to the emergency room. I made him squish the thing immediately.

Then there are the birds (Gah! Everyone should know by now how much I hate birds). I've seen Cockatoos and these green parrot-y looking things and tons and tons of Magpies. These are not ordinary Magpies like they have back in the States. These things are double the size and are plain mean. I've seen them attack large possums and foot-long Blue-Tongue Lizards here on the resort. It's like they were bred by the Devil himself. I've also been told twice now by different people, to stay away from the Magpies (as if I needed reminding). Apparently they have been known to attack humans, going for their eyes, blinding them. There are stories on the news stations here occasionally about the malicious birds attacking some poor soul along the Northern Beaches area, which is where I happen to live. I even read a newspaper article yesterday, advising the public to wear wide-brimmed hats and sunglasses and to carry umbrellas during Magpie nesting season, to ward off attacks. Of course, we have heaps of the birds at the hotel.

Then there are the furry little creatures— Rabbits (we all know what happens to rabbits when they cross my path as I'm driving!) bandicoots and possums. Just yesterday, I had the most knee-slapping funny thing happen in regards to the possums.

Our hotel reception is located in a separate small building, at the top of a hill among the bushes. From there guests are driven down in one of the giant shuttle buses to the cottages or bungalows lining the harbor. It's honestly one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen, but being in Australia, in the middle of a National Park makes for regular encounters with wildlife. At night, we have to remember to shut all the doors as all the furry creatures tend to come out then, and the last thing we need is a lobby full of rabbits.

Last night I forgot to close the doors.

It was around 8:30 pm and as I was finishing up some paperwork, a taxi pulled up outside. A moment later through the open lobby door came a harassed looking woman in a business jacket, short blue skirt crinkled from the long ride and stilettos. She click-clacked her way over to the front desk.

"Here for a check in?" I asked sweetly. She nodded her head.

"Can I get your surname please?"

"Yes it's Holloway," she said impatiently. It was obvious she was tired and just a little bit confused about being dropped off in bush-land. "I'm here for a work conference tomorrow."

As I gave the woman her registration card to fill out, I suddenly saw movement behind her.

It was a ringtail possum.

Feeling my insides being squeezed uncomfortably like Playdo squishing through a child's hand, I opened my mouth to warn her, and then shut it. I had a feeling she would scream if she saw the creature, as big as a small house cat with a pencil long tail, slinking along on the carpet behind her.

Not knowing what to do, I began to quickly explain everything to the woman as she finished filling her card out.

"We offer complimentary shuttle around the site, anytime you'd like a lift simply dial '9' from the phone in your room. Your conference will be meeting in Building P—" The possum had scampered closer to the woman— "Um, building P3 which is here on the map," I diverted her attention downward to the map I had thrust down on the counter as a distraction.

Miss Holloway looked up at me with a small frown. "So, this is kinda outdoorsy, right? Like is it safe here?" I watched the possum run a small lap around the coffee table. "Because I will be walking around and I need to know that it's safe."

I swallowed and looked past her shoulder. Seeing my eye movement, Miss Holloway turned to look over her shoulder, mere milliseconds after the possum scooped its way under the leather sofa. She looked back at me, confused, and I literally breathed a sigh of relief.

"Yes it ABSOLUTELY is safe here. I mean there is wildlife, we are in Nature after all," I gave a little laugh and smile which she didn't return. I quickly handed her the room key. "Alright, if you'll just step OUTSIDE now, the bus will be along shortly to pick you up and take you down to your room."

Miss Holloway gave me an affronted look, at being told she needed to wait outside. I grinned, showing off all my pearly whites and pointed to the door.

As soon as she stepped outside, I looked over to the sofa. The possum was still hiding and I knew I'd have to wait till she was gone before I could do anything about it. The instant my duty manager, Jasmine, picked up Miss Holloway and started off down the hill, I ran to the sofa. Feeling as if I was about to be murdered, I bravely moved the end of the sofa. The possum darted out, I gave a little cry, and it raced past me and on out the front door.

Thankful, I sat there alone in the lobby and laughed. A few minutes later I heard Jasmine pull up. Deciding to go outside to tell her the hilarious story, I found her staring in fear upwards at the tree right outside the door.

"Matt, what on EARTH is that thing?" She said in a terrified whisper, pointing upward into the braches.

I looked up and nearly jumped. Hanging off one of the low-hanging branches was a Flying Fox. My first one I have ever seen in person.

With a head shaped exactly like a foxes, it screeched and spread its bat-like wings at us. It had skeletal, human- looking arms a gun metal grey color and I was instantly frightened.

Jasmine and I rushed back into the lobby and I slammed the door on the animal kingdom.

“Matt, sometimes I feel like we work at a zoo,” said Jasmine as she clutched protectively the charm looped on the gold chain around her neck, meant to ward off ghosts.

All I could do was laugh again, and I realized that despite all the bizarre things I’ve witnessed, I wouldn’t trade a minute of any of this craziness. It’s all simply too fantastic and will be the things I laugh about for years to come.

Between the ghosts and the animals, Q Station is a very unique hotel to work at indeed!