

Visiting Paradise Part I: A man & his Conference are soon parted

By Kim Lehman

It's nine o'clock on Wednesday night, Day One according to the Official Conference Program. The only scheduled event is a Get-to-Know-You-All Cocktail Party which I have decided not to attend—I haven't really brought anything cocktail party-ish to wear. So, I am sitting alone in one of the restaurants that form part of the total Conference venue experience of Conrad Jupiters Casino, on the Gold Coast, Australia. I am enjoying something the menu has described as a Traditional Cornish Pie. I have to take the management's word for this, not having any information on which to base a comparison between the chicken and mushroom pie in front of me and any genuine item.

Becky the waitress arrives to check on my progress and I strike up a conversation. I enjoy conversing with the locals. They have a more realistic view of a place than any transient, and can always provide an invaluable picture of the landscape. Rather importantly, if you are in a strange place they can tell you which districts to avoid. But here, ensconced within the shiny rooms of the Casino this is not critical, though I did hear that one had to be careful in the corridor outside the hairstylist's.

Becky and I gaze out over the potted plastic plants towards the electrically throbbing entrance to the gambling floor. There is a remarkable array of human entertainment on display. Multi-hued tourists constantly ebb and flow. Baggage laden porters scurry about. Two women pretending not to be hookers stroll and chat over a cigarette. A transvestite leans against the unmarked glass tube through which a loaded elevator squirts every few minutes.

"Last week the security guys dragged an old lady out by the feet. I swear, by the feet. There she was, little hands waving about, little white handbag trailing along behind," Becky tells me.

"What did she do wrong?"

"The security guys told me later that she threatened another punter with a pair of scissors." Becky pauses for dramatic effect. "And this is the really spooky bit... she did it because they were about to use her favourite poker machine."

I am not surprised by this feisty old person's attachment to a gambling machine, and the Casino management shouldn't be either. Everywhere you go in the Casino you are bombarded with colourful enticements noting the wonderful and exciting times that can be had when one participates in what is surely an activity ranking alongside bungee jumping and crocodile wrestling for adrenalin production.

Even here in restaurant land every item on the table relates to gambling. I had a job to find the menu. In the end it turned out to be a combined menu and Keno card. The complementary chocolate on the pillow, a favourite service embellishment of the

world's swank hotels, is transmuted here—it's a gambling chip that snuggles up on your Jupiters pillow. I had a nibble of mine, just in case the management had thought gambling chip shaped chocolates were a good marketing idea. Unfortunately not.

I ask Becky what she thinks of the transvestite that doesn't seem to be able to interest any of the middle aged holidaying Rotarian couples, or indeed any Conference Delegate, in exploring the depths of their sexuality.

"That's Phillipa," says Becky. "She's nice. We go to the gym together sometimes. And she's not a transvestite. She's well on the way to having the op... that makes her a transsexual."

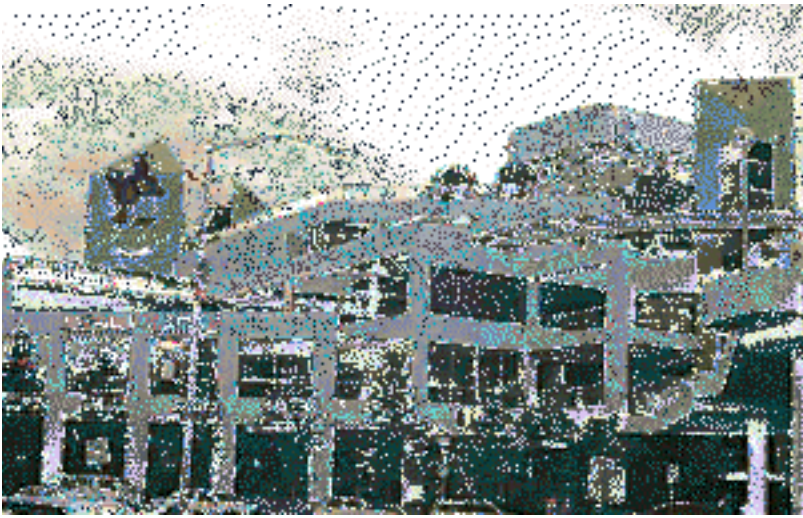
I decide not to enquire any further about Phillipa's current level of maleness, or mention her present occupation, and instead ask about souvenirs. Where can a person acquire choice souvenirs for family and friends back home?

It's mid-morning, Day Two. I venture off for a walk in search of souvenirs. I had attended the Plenary Session straight after breakfast, and sat through a sermon by a visiting American expert who noted that even Australia will not be immune from the influence of the latest developments in the rest of the world. The implication was, of course, that we were in a backwater and that we better get our shit together or we would be left behind. This wasn't ground breaking research as far as I could see and boded ill for later papers. I figured that I wouldn't miss any astounding learning experience if I abandoned the Conference for a few hours.

Walking out the hissing automatic doors and past the gaggle of concierges waiting for me to boss them around I feel



Jupiters Hotel and Casino complex in the foreground. Note the rather short monorail leading to the Broadbeach Mall.



The Broadbeach Mall. Visit the gym, it's worth it.

that perhaps I am not playing my part in the Great Ritzy Hotel Game. I notice few guests actually walking further than a taxi or limousine. I am an oddity to the collective concierge—a pedestrian. So I walk swiftly and pump my arms up and down, hoping they might think I am out for a bit of power walking.

I head for the Broadbeach Mall, a glorious shopping centre just over the Gold Coast Highway. Up the stairs to the walkway over the road said Becky. The best souvenirs are to be found in a first floor shop just past the gym, which is itself the first shop before you enter the building. You can't miss it. And I don't. The chrome rods gleam with sprinkled sweat, the lycra pulsates with contained bodies. Yes, this is Queensland I think. Not too many places

and woman stepping up and down from little boxes to the booming bass of dance music. I decide to walk in and out of the building a few times pretending not to look in the gym windows.

On each of my visits inside the building I fail to find any decent souvenirs. I do notice the same brand name shops as I saw yesterday in Surfers Paradise's Cavill

direct me to some part of the Casino as yet unvisited. Saving me from this embarrassment is a conveniently located monorail, kindly provided by the Casino management to connect guests and shops in a symbiotic relationship, and delivering said guest to a station on the second floor. The real reason for the existence of what must be the shortest monorail in the world is obviously to save any guest walking, but I don't care. I pay my money and park myself beside a friendly face with an Official Conference Badge pinned to their shirt pocket.

"What do you think of the Casino?" asks my new friend.

"It's okay," I say. "It's nice and shiny, there are plenty of restaurants and a nice selection of souvenirs. I particularly like the keyring in the shape of a gambling chip." And I hold up a spinning gold example.

"I like the pool, it's great, the best I've seen," he replies.

"Pool?"

Well, I think, I have been to the Plenary Session. And it's not as if I don't intend to show up for some later papers. But the sun is shining in southern Queensland and the chemically improved waters of the Jupiters Casino pool beckon.



One of the Session Rooms. I don't think I was in this one.



The commodious location for the official Plenary Sessions. I wonder where the Conference Delegates are?

Avenue Mall. They are also the same brand shops that are curved around Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport, and the same brand shops that can be found in Sydney's Darling Harbour. And, I imagine, they are the same shops

that are dotted about the globe, in places where tourists congregate of course.

It's time to head back to the Conference, but I can't face the concierge, lurking about wanting to carry my bags or

My monorailing friend is absolutely correct. There is a stunning array of pools available to the guest. I say guest because no other person could get past the security doors, the guard and the high, creeper infested fences. So, with a swipe of my keycard I am in, and first on my left is a young couple resuscitating one another in a bubbling blue ground level tub. I keep walking, past another three tubs, each hidden away in a fern shrouded alcove. Thankfully, these are inhabited by your average holiday maker couples sipping gin and tonics and trying to get a grope under the bubbles.

Having swung around in a half circle I now more or less face the entrance. But I

in Australia, or the world probably, would have a gym that has floor to ceiling windows opening out onto to busy a busy shopping mall. I stand there, immobilised by the view of slim and not so slim men

have some trouble seeing the security guard due to the Babylonian pillars and Palace of Versailles-like water spouts cascading all over the place. It is also a little difficult to work out where the different levels of water start and finish. I decide not to ponder the architectural feats any longer and sit down in a designer sun lounge for a bit of a rest.

talking a bookseller into parting with a sample or two. Maybe tomorrow night I would dine with the other Conference Delegates. Tonight I really should go and see some of the night life, in Surfers Paradise perhaps. After all I am only here for a few days. And the free books would be there next year.

especially visiting experts, like this form of respect. "Just out for a stroll are we?"

He agrees that, indeed, he is just out seeing a slice of my beautiful country.

"Fancy a beer?"

We are drinking our tenth beer.

"Aren't you supposed to be at the Conference Dinner around about now?" I innocently ponder.

I am back in my room late at night on Day Two, partaking of the delights of my mini-bar. Chocolate and vast quantities of scotch perhaps. I need this sort of sustenance—I am still shocked at what the drunk visiting American Plenary Session Speaker told me. He is, it turns out, a professional Conference Speaker. He has the same speech for every Conference he attends. He just changes the country. So, just last week he was saying in Italy that Italy 'will not be immune from the influence of the latest developments in the rest of the world'. The week before that it was Denmark. Just a month ago it was South Korea. All this, I might add, is paid for by the Conference Convenors! I am disillusioned, fooled by the passion of his rhetoric.

But that was not all. He came straight out and admitted that after his required speech he made damn sure he didn't go to any of the Conference Papers, or any of the Dinners, or any damn thing to do with the Conference. He knew that he had a limited time on the speaking circuit and he wanted to see as much of the world as possible before retiring to New Mexico to build mud brick houses.

And here I was, feeling vaguely guilty about missing the odd paper. Even thinking that maybe I should join in and stop off at the Conference Registration Desk to purchase a Conference Polo Shirt. Well, bugger that! Tomorrow I would certainly not be going near any Official Conference Event. I would make a point of not even being inside Conrad Jupiters Casino at all. I might even leave Queensland for the day.

I go out onto my balcony and cast an eye over the sparkling humanity stretching northward. The balmy breeze sends ripples across my scotch. The smell of the sea mingles with the smorgasbord a few floors below. Suddenly I know! I am here in Paradise, on a junket paid for by my employer. I smile widely as I accept the inevitable.

And then I wonder. Would the visiting American Plenary Session Speaker mind a companion for his Day Three activities?



A model lounging in one of Jupiters' pools, at night. I'm not sure why.

I wave at a passing poolside waiter. Bring me a gin and tonic, and don't spare the lemon peel I say, thinking that one thirty in the afternoon is perhaps somewhat early for drinking gin, but if it's good enough for the holiday makers in the hot tubs then it must be fashionable for lapsed Conference Delegates as well.

It's now late afternoon, and after a gold plated club sandwich, a safety wait, and numerous immersions in some of the available pools, I check my Official Conference Program and discover I have missed everything except the Day Two Dinner and subsequent Trade Display for the Official Conference Sponsors. I weigh the pros and cons of dining banquet style and then having a look around the displays, p e r h a p s

I dine at an Italian cafe in Cavill Avenue Mall, right on the corner of The Esplanade. This is the corner which all tourists must pass at least once on their holiday—to go to the beach, to shop, to walk the length of Mall for no reason. I put my feet up on the table and watch the passing parade. There is infinite variety in the human form. And it is not that I feel superior. It's just that, and this example is strolling past, I cannot see why a man whose buttocks resemble large butternut pumpkins would purchase shorts that plainly do not fit, when properly fitted clothes would be much more flattering. Chubby cheeks turns around, and it's the pontificating American Plenary Session Speaker from this very morning!

"Sir," I say, because I know Americans,



Two models on a balcony in dressing gowns. I don't think it is my balcony, but it could be.