



LIFE WITH BRIAN



WITH HIS TALENT FOR BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER, UNCLE BRIAN SHOULD BE ON THE FRONT LINE OF EVERY INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT. INSTEAD, HE INTRODUCES VISITORS TO THE RAINFORESTS OF NORTH QUEENSLAND. BRIDGET MARTIN JOINED HIM FOR THE DAY.

IT WAS BARELY TWO HOURS SINCE I HAD been introduced to the guy in the seat behind me but as I turned round he leaned forward, pressing his face towards me, his lips just centimetres from my own. For a moment we both hesitated and then the bus erupted with applause. The Life Saver had slipped from the matchstick clenched between my teeth and on to the one protruding from his mouth. My newfound friend then turned away from me and towards the English girl beside him, ready to repeat the manoeuvre.

Uncle Brian believes in breaking the ice. It's not enough for him to simply introduce a busful of strangers to each other. He wants them to get a great deal closer. As we journeyed south of Cairns, in North Queensland, along the Bruce Highway, in Gus the Bus (formally introduced at the beginning of the journey), a single mint with a hole in the middle travelled around our international busload. From Australian to Brit, to the Portuguese man who lives in Belgium, to the Austrian, and via a few more Brits to the

German couple in the back seat, it brought us all together – literally.

This might not work on a lot of tours, but people who join Uncle Brian for a day of "Fun, Falls and Forest" tend not to be too hung up on dignity. Can-do backpackers for the most part, they are up for challenges and this is just one of many which Uncle Brian sets us during the day.

Most of the passengers have come on Uncle Brian's tour through recommendations from friends and fellow travellers, reinforced by raves in hostel comment books. "Just go!" is the usual advice, but the details are left vague. And customers know exactly what to expect – a day of surprises.

The tour visits four swimming spots, each set in a splendid rainforest setting. We took our first plunge at Babinda Boulders. After a gentle and informative ramble through the rainforest, Brian led us back to the river and a refreshing swim.

Scarcely had we dried out than we found ourselves, at the next stop, hurtling down a natural, and very slippery, rock slide into the

clear, clean water at Josephine Falls.

Brian covers about 300 kilometres in one trip. That means long stretches of driving, particularly as we ascend, and later descend from, the Atherton Tableland, an upland plateau west of Cairns. But there will be no cries of, "Are we there yet?" on Uncle Brian's bus. His passengers are too busy having a good time to notice the long drive.

Sometimes we played orchestrated peep-boo games with people along the route. We were also given challenges, treats, games, snippets of information about the towns and countryside we passed through and music, carefully chosen to suit the surroundings, courtesy of Gus (the Bus) FM. We played pranks, and had pranks played on us by those along the route who look forward to the regular appearance of Uncle Brian's bus and the opportunity it gives them to be silly.

After lunch we climbed behind the waterfall at Millaa Millaa and sang songs as the afternoon sun converted the water spilling over the rocks above our heads to crystal. The more

extroverted among our now tight-knit group re-enacted the shampoo and Qantas ads filmed at this location.

As the sun neared the horizon, we found ourselves, at Lake Eacham, a perfectly round and exquisitely green crater lake surrounded by tropical rainforest. Those unperturbed by its 65 metre depths dived off the platform and streaked out, to the amusement of a floating pelican.

As dusk fell we clustered expectantly on the banks of yet another river, peering down at the water. We were not disappointed. A platypus popped up just a metre from the bank and waddled fluidly along the surface before disappearing, only to reappear a few minutes later. Almost until the light was gone we peered at this antipodean curiosity, overseas visitors entranced and Australians thrilled. For some of them this was their first sighting of this secretive, native mammal.

We journeyed back to Cairns in the dark but, despite having been on the go for over 12 hours, no one got a chance to doze. A talented mimic, Uncle Brian kept us in stitches with his Coach Captain and Billy Connolly imitations. Then the bus erupted into an international singsong, aided and abetted by Gus FM.

After driving for a large operation for a couple of years, Brian felt the need to offer something different. Wanting to choose his destinations – and the manner in which he visited them – he started up on his own. "I have never been so frightened and excited at the same time," Brian recalled. "But I knew everyone could have even more fun."

For five years he worked alone, but with his first child now an important part of his life, he decided to recruit some help. Carefully selected

for their sense of fun, Cousin Marissa and Cousin Darren now share the workload and are, to judge from comments in the website guestbook, if anything, even more zany.

Driving into the outskirts of Cairns, passengers exchanged e-mail addresses and made arrangements to meet later as Gus FM played us one last track – *Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life* from Monty Python's *Life Of Brian*. There could have been no more appropriate ending to the day. 🍷

Key Facts

WHEN TO GO:

Uncle Brian's tours are on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, leaving Cairns around 8am, returning about 8.15pm.

HOW MUCH:

Costs are \$85 per person, including snacks and lunch. Flash your YHA membership card when booking for a \$5 discount.

WHERE TO STAY:

Cairns Central YHA

20-26 McLeod Street, Cairns, Qld 4870
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