

A timely reminder of what we have in Australia – from an American perspective

“There’s a lot to admire about Australia , especially if you’re a visiting American”, says David Mason. (David Mason is a Writer, a Professor, and a Poet Laureate of Colorado)

More often than you might expect, Australian friends patiently listening to me enthuse about their country have said, "We need outsiders like you to remind us what we have." So here it is - a small presumptuous list of what one foreigner admires in Oz.

1. Health care.

I know the controversies, but basic national health care is a gift.

In America , medical expenses are a leading cause of bankruptcy.

The drug companies dominate politics and advertising.

Obama is being crucified for taking halting baby steps towards sanity.

You can't turn on the telly without hours of drug advertisements – something I have never yet seen here.

And your emphasis on prevention - making cigarettes less accessible, for one - is a model.

2. Food.

Yes, we have great food in America too, especially in the big cities.

But your bread is less sweet, your lamb is cheaper, and your supermarket vegetables and fruits are fresher than ours.

Too often in my country America , an apple is a ball of pulp as big as your face.

The dainty Pink Lady apples of Oz are the juiciest I've had.

And don't get me started on coffee.

In American small towns it tastes like water flavoured with burnt dirt, but the smallest shop in the smallest town in Oz can make a first-rate latte.

I love your ubiquitous bakeries, and your hot-cross buns.

Shall I go on?

3. Language.

How do you do it?

The rhyming slang and Aboriginal place names are like magic spells.

Words that seem vaguely English yet also resemble an argot from another planet.

I love the way institutional names get turned into diminutives - Vinnie's and Salvos - and absolutely nothing's sacred.

Everything is an opportunity for word games and everyone has a nickname.

Lingo makes the world go round.

It's the spontaneous wit of the people that tickles me most.

Late one night at a barbie my new mate Suds remarked: "Nothing's the same since 24-7."

Amen to that.

4. Free-to-air TV.

In Oz, you buy a TV, plug it in and watch some of the best programming I've ever seen – uncensored.

In America , you can't get diddly-squat without paying a cable or satellite company heavy fees.

In Oz a few channels make it hard to choose.

In America , you've got 400 channels and nothing to watch.

5. Small shops.

Outside the big cities in America corporations have nearly erased them.
Identical malls with identical restaurants serving inferior food.
Except for geography, it's hard to tell one American town from another.
The "take-away" culture here in Australia is wonderful.
The human encounters are real – people love to stir, and stories get told.
The curries here are to die for.
And you don't have to tip!

6. Free camping.

We used to have this too, and I guess it's still free when you backpack miles away from the roads.
But I love the fact that in Oz everyone owns the shoreline and in many places you can pull up a camper van and stare at the sea for weeks.
I love the "primitive" and independent camp-grounds, the life out-of-doors.
The few idiots who leave their stubbies and rubbish behind in these pristine places ought to be transported in chains to a penal colony.

7. Religion.

In America, it's everywhere – especially where it's not supposed to be, like politics.
I imagine you have your Pharisees too, making a big public show of devotion, but I have yet to meet one here.

8. Roads.

Peak hour aside, I've found travel on your roads pure heaven. My country's "Freeways" are crowded, crumbling, insanely knotted with looping overpasses - it's like racing homicidal maniacs on fraying spaghetti!
I've driven the Hume Highway without stress, and I love the Princes Highway when it's two lanes.
Ninety minutes south of Bateman's Bay I was sorry to see one billboard for a McDonald's. It's blocking a lovely paddock view. Someone should remove the MacDonal'd's Billboard.

9. Real multiculturalism.

I know there are tensions, just like anywhere else, but I love the distinctiveness of your communities and the way you publicly acknowledge the Aboriginal past.
Recently, too, I spent quality time with the Melbourne Greeks, and was gratified both by their devotion to their own great language and culture and their openness to an Afghan lunch.

10. Fewer guns.

You had Port Arthur in 1996 and got real in response.
America replicates such massacres several times a year and nothing changes.
Why? Our religion of individual rights makes the good of the community an impossible dream. Instead of mateship we have "It's mine and nobody else's".
We talk a great game about freedom, but too often live in fear.

There's more to say – your kaleidoscopic birds, your perfumed bush in springtime, your vast beaches.

These are just a few of the blessings that make Australia a rarity.
Of course, it's not paradise – nowhere is – but I love it here.
No need to wave flags like the Americans, and add to the world's windiness.

Just value in Australia what you have here and don't give it away.