

Inter Pacific Rally Exchange Canada 2015-Learn McNamara

So the trip of a lifetime all started with “that flight”. Wait I tell a lie, technically it started with the Melbourne flight but the reality of it all didn't set in till we were passengers of “Air Canada”. We boarded in our baggy greens and after 15 hours of sitting, 5 movies and only 15 minutes of sleep we touched down in Canada. Hooray we were there right? Well not quite. As it turns out Vancouver Canada is about the same distance from Toronto, our final destination, as Perth is from Sydney. Another 5 whole hours! As we were ushered onto our final flight to Toronto by our ever-vigilant manager Michele, I started to think that some of the time spent riding the day I left Tasmania could have been better replaced with sleeping.

Once seated in row 28, seat A, another window seat, thanks PCA, I had only one thing on my mind, sleep. As the tarmac and buildings disappeared so did any promise of sleep. I was flying over one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. I didn't want to blink let-alone sleep. A blanket of snow capped mountains jutted into the atmosphere as the plane soared just above. Had we accidentally jumped on the local scenic flight at Vancouver? I wasn't sure. Pulling my nose from the window an hour later I turned to Imogen who was beside me only to find she was studying. After 22 and a half hours of no sleep! Was she super human? I could barely string a sentence together at this point let-alone study, and medicine nonetheless. Gob smacked, I turned back to my own important study ‘*cough cough*’ of ‘Finding Nemo’.

Touch down! Finally we had made it. We staggered to the luggage carousel to collect our stuff. After hauling my suitcase, or the Taj Mahal as my father had called it, off the belt I noticed something peculiar about the people surrounding us. They all had dogs! Apparently in Canada, wherever humans go dogs can too. I had a feeling I was going to like Canada.

We swiftly exited the airport and started to hunt for our shuttle bus. After 5 or so hot laps of the pick up lane and several visits to the information lady sitting at the booth we were finally able to flag down a driver, packed in our luggage and climbed aboard. As we drove we all sat in awe of our bus driver, as somehow amongst the labyrinth of roads and cars he was able to navigate us safely towards our hotel. It was during this time that I first experienced what I like to call *Head-on-phobia*. As we turned a tight bend on the wrong side of the road I held my breath. This bus driver, that only five minutes ago I had full confidence in, was going to kill us! As we rounded the corner my stomach sank there was another car approaching in the opposite direction. I closed my eyes. Much to my surprise when I opened them again I was still alive. The car had passed us safely. Apparently Canadians drive on the opposite side of the road to us Aussies.

Once we had arrived at the *Sheridan Hotel* we grabbed our luggage and door keys then headed straight to the rooms for a well-deserved shower. We were under strict instructions not to sleep, as it was only 4pm and we needed to beat the jetlag by sleeping all through the night. That was a challenge. When Six o'clock

rolled around we removed the toothpicks from our eyes and took a short walk to an all you can eat restaurant for tea.

Although tired, once we entered the double doors of the restaurant our eyes were wide open. Rows upon rows of cuisine greeted us and before too long we were all on our sixth plate, apparently airplane food is not all that sustaining. After sorting out the currency and tipping regime we paid up and started our walk/roll back to the hotel. After saying our goodnights we finally headed to bed for sleep.

Though expecting a 10 o'clock sleep-in, our confused body clocks had other ideas. At 5:30 we were all awake watching the sunrise over a smoggy outskirts of Toronto. After waking up the rest of the team, well just Jayden actually, we all headed down for breakfast. While some opted for the traditional Canadian breakfast of pancakes and maple syrup others, still feeling the aftermath of the previous nights antics, tucked into a simple fruit salad and cornflakes. Afterwards we all headed to the pool for a swim before we were to pack up and get ready to head off to meet the other teams.

As we exited to hotel into the 30-degree heat a minibus that more resembled more a limousine greeted us. We piled in and left the outskirts behind. We were headed for the big city. Once we had reached our destination, *the university of Toronto*, we were directed to the dorm where we were to be staying. After being met at the door by the beautiful Jacqui Dennis, our trips organizer and advisor, we were sent to find our rooms. After an hour of chatting and lounging in the only air-conditioned room, which happened to be mine, score, we headed down to meet the New Zealand team. After a few awkward 'hellos' we were soon sitting on the grass in the uni's courtyard laughing as both teams had our first Canadian wildlife experience of meeting a squirrel.

Next to arrive were the Americans and funnily enough the Canadians were the last to arrive. Their late arrival turned out to be a common occurrence throughout the trip with them being last on the bus most mornings. After a quick hello us Aussie kids went for a walk around the Uni before heading to bed. Although only spending 4 days together we already felt as though we had known each other forever.

The next morning we grabbed our backpacks and were headed for the CN tower in the heart of Toronto. To get there we initially had to experience the subway for the first time. After the ordeal of distributing tokens, which wasn't made easier by someone forgetting their age, an honest mistake considering I had once gone a whole year thinking I was nine when I was in fact I was eight, we were through the gates and headed for the platform. As the train scooted in and the doors opened all 22 of us pushed our way on which was no small feat considering the doors were only open for a fraction of a second.

After we made our way through the maze of platforms and onto the street we were met by a sky of reflections. Dominating the mass of skyscrapers was a building taller than the rest, the *CN tower*. We arrived at the security check at the base and presented our bags for inspection. Then it was into the sniffer machine. I was a bit concerned at what it'd be sniffing on me considering I was a Tassie girl straight out of winter and had been walking in 25-degree heat all morning. Nonetheless we all passed security and were soon herded onto an elevator and shot up 500m to the viewing platform. The doors opened and we were greeted by panoramic views of the city. After a stroll around the circumference of the glass wall, and a million of team selfies on the see through floor, courtesy of Abbey, we headed back down into the gift shop and out onto the streets where we made a beeline to all you can eat sushi for lunch.

The next day we packed our stuff and headed to the front of the uni where a big yellow school bus greeted us. Much to us Southern hemisphererians delight, the tourists we were, we took millions of photos of the machine we thought only existed in really trashy American college movies. Ignoring the Canadian and American's amusement we boarded and conversation turned to the Canadian wildlife, bears specifically, after all we were going to be camping for the next three nights. Even though we were assured that bears would not eat us I was still a little concerned about the raccoons. Sir David Attenborough himself once told me that you had to look out for those pesky raccoons.

Upon arriving at *woodwind south* we were not greeted by the Canadian wilderness I had been expecting but by post and railing fences around neatly groomed paddocks and a huge inside stable and arena complex. We quickly tossed all the bags off the bus, got the rundown from the complex's owner, choose our tents, and headed in to check out the set up and pet some ponies. After five or so days without contact we were all starting to have horse withdrawals. Not only home to 20 or more horses the stables were also the abode of one super cranky, aptly named, Poopie the lama. Poopie stood patiently as we Aussies bombarded him with photos and pats. It was decided that he had had enough when an ominous gargling could be heard coming from his throat and he was soon sent to his paddock.

The next day was a fun competition day where we competed against the other countries over the course of a dressage test and a showjumping round. This was particularly nerve racking, as it was the first time our coaches were to see us ride. First up was the dressage test. My mount Kwanza the Warmblood x Standardbred was a good girl and responded nicely to her new rider. Unfortunately the rider had a brain fart, which resulted in an error of course. Nonetheless we completed a nice test for a decent score. The rest of the Aussies we not as lucky as to have an experienced mount like Kwanza. Jayden, Abbey and Imogen all got dealt green horses. With their exceptional riding skills and brilliant coaching from Judy and Michele, they were able to complete the test with little fuss and put up good scores.

Next was showjumping. My mount, Indi the black Warmblood, was a beautiful girl and although a little difficult to mount, we warmed up nicely and put in a nice clean showjumping round. The other Aussies also did well with only 4 faults between us all. After un-tacking and hosing the horses down it was time for a fun relay. The relay involved rolling 4 bandages, bandaging a leg each putting two plaits in our pony's mane, assembling a bridal and tacking a horse up. After all this the last person to go had to ride the pony to a bucket of water balloons and throw them at their teammates. The team that had the most hits in the least amount of time was declared the winner.

After a few minor mishaps including wrongly rolled bandages and bridle that fell apart when the reins were used it became apparent that our team's horsemanship skills were not all that great when under pressure. The Americans came home with the win even after clocking up the first incident report after Emma was thrown to the ground thanks to the stubborn pony they were dealt. While us giggling Aussies, still amused by our spectacular mess up, were awarded last place.

After the relay came a quick dash to move all the tents inside onto the arena. There was a storm coming and we were told we didn't want to be part of it. After all the gear was inside the scores of the days were calculated and we were awarded third place for our efforts following our NZ friends and the Americans. Leaving the Canadians with the wooden spoon after a tough day.

Day turned to night in a matter of minutes as we settled in all ready to experience the full force of a Canadian summer storm. Most of us stayed indoors watching the lightening dance across the sky. The slightly more adventurous headed outside for a more organic experience but after only a few seconds were running for cover drenched from head to toe. As quickly as it came the storm cleared. Day wrestled the sky from the storms dark grip and we were on our way to the town of *Barrie* to enjoy some ice-skating. After a few detours due to fallen trees we arrived only to find that a power failure had closed the rink.

The following day was spent exploring the markets of the town and relaxing on what the Canadians liked to call a beach which was actually the side of a lake. We spent the next morning shopping before we said a sad farewell to the people of Woodwind South and boarded our yellow bus to start our journey to the very endearing *Blue Mountain Ski Resort of Collingwood*. After a couple of hours of driving we arrived and were welcomed by a luxurious hotel complete with very, very, comfy beds. Excitement that night was high as the following day was to bring zip lining and caving. Adrenaline was high the next day as we walked amongst the trees, threw ourselves off platforms, zoomed between treetops along the zip lines and squeezed between the walls of caves. Seeing wild deer in a clearing as we hurtled down the final zip line topped of the day in spectacular fashion.

After exploring the village the next morning we headed to the beach for a few hours of volleyball, swimming and paddle boarding. Throughout the afternoon one Australian team member may have forgotten to apply sunscreen. As I boarded the bus two thongs short of when I arrived, Paige the New Zealander made the comment that she had never seen a wild Tasmanian lobster before. From the beach it was back to the dorms of the university of Toronto.

Although given a free time we all decided to go to *Casa Loma* the following day. After a very long 5-minute walk, thanks to the NZ team coach Emma and her trust in Google maps, we arrived at the entrance of the impressive structure. Hours were spent exploring the masses of beautiful period-decorated rooms, manicured gardens as well as the secret underground tunnel that lead for nearly 400m to beautifully mastered mahogany stables. Although I could have spent all day soaking up the history we cut time short so we could return to the dorms to get ready for the medieval times festival.

We donned our formal attire and headed to the station. After catching a bus to the edge of town we arrived at Medieval Times. Not quite sure what to expect we all funneled inside receiving different coloured hats to divide us into teams. . As we made our way to the arena we caught up on some gruesome knowledge of medieval torture devices, which, incidently, had some of us feeling a little sick. We took our seats and the show began. And what a show it was. Andalusians and Freisians danced performing moves such as piaffe, passage and capriole. It was then onto some jousting as we all egged our teams representative on but, alas, to no avail. After the show we caught a taxi to the dorm and hit the sack.

Next on the itinerary was *St Lawrence food markets*. The over crowded and under ventilated building had some feeling a little claustrophobic so we headed across the street and into a café for a sit down and some lunch. From there we headed to *Ripley's Aquarium* to regroup. After wandering through the underwater world we grabbed some goodies from the gift shop and went back for our last night in Toronto.

Excitement was high as we travelled to *Dreamcrest Equestrian Centre* for the maple leaf cup challenge the following day. The competition was an ODE run in short course format. For this event we competed in scrambled teams. My team was lucky enough to have USA coach Allison Hartenburg in control . Once assembled in our teams and given the run down form the owner of Dreamcrest, Olympic rider Ian Roberts, we were sent off to find and organise our horses. After gear-check we had twenty minutes to get to know our horses and unfortunately during this time my first mount appeared to be lame. But not to worry we soon brought our reserve horse in. At only 15 hands high Libby the chunky Clydie cross was not only new to me but new to everyone else at the centre, having only been there for less than a week.

After a few arguments in keeping Libby moving forward we entered the arena and produced a nice test and remarkably I even managed to remember the whole test! Next was the short course jumping that comprised of eight show jumps followed immediately by a shortened cross country course. Being the third person in our team to go I had plenty of time to warm-up. Although a little unsure, Libby jumped all the warm-up jumps and we were ready to hit the ring. After clearing all the show jumps convincingly we headed up the bank and onto the cross-country course. All was going well until it came to jumping the ditch. After having a bit of a look, my not so trusty stead decided the ditch was too big and cat leaped and set me flying in the opposite direction.

Only after being checked out by the paramedic did I find out that Libby had probably never been out on cross-country before. Feeling a little sorry for me after my unplanned dismount, Ian Roberts himself took me out on cross-country for a lesson. Before long we had Libby jumping like a star and I picked up a few tips to use at home along the way. After a long day the placing's were awarded and we boarded the bus and headed towards our final destination of *Guelph*.

The next few days at Guelph were spent visiting markets and tack shops. During this time we were also treated to a horse drawn tour of a Mennonite maple farm, and a wonderful BBQ dinner at *Twisted Pine Farm* which is Dana Balfour's, the Canadian coaches, property and riding school. Amongst all of this two of the highlights of our time in Guelph would had to have been the trip to *Canada's Wonderland*, a theme park where all us thrill seekers were able to scream and laugh while riding some of the biggest coasters in the Northern Hemisphere, as well as a trip to *Niagara Falls*. After standing in ore as we watched millions of litres of water fall over the horseshoe shaped falls we were treated to a walk behind the water as well as a boat ride to the base of the falls.

On the second last day of our time in Canada it was back to business, we trialed our mounts that were kindly given to us to use in the final IPE competition. After watching the owners round it was decided that I was to try Buddy the 15.1hh appaloosa first as, even though he had a couple of stops, he showed real talent over the fences. Imogen my Australian team mate and shortest of us all was to try Val the 13.2 hh Welsh cross. These being two of five horses we were most unsure about using. It didn't take long for Imogen to discover that Val wasn't the mount for her and after a lot of perseverance it was decided that buddy, although trying his heart out, was not fit to compete the next day. With all the others having chose their mount it was up to me to ride Val, which was going to be a challenge with me being the tallest in the team and never having ridden anything smaller than 15 hands.

The seriousness didn't last long. That night everyone was in stitches as each team performed a skit. The new Zealanders set the bar high with a musical performance detailing all the funny moments from the trip. Unsure if we'd be able to top it, we went about our skit in true Aussie fashion, by taking the mickey out of everyone. After causing tears of laughter for a second time it was decided a draw and everyone agreed that the typical New Zealand and Australian humor was not so different.

Excitement was high as we boarded the bus to *Bronte creek* for the second time. After hopping off the bus we set about finding our mounts and plaiting. Having a pony had already proved to be an advantage with me not having to stand on a mounting block in order to plait Val's forelock. Which is not one of my strong points. It was in that moment I decided that I had to get me one of these pony things. After plaiting it was time to walk the course and prepare for our rounds. After having to change my style of riding to suit a pony I was stoked to have had only one rail in the first round. The rest of the team did equally as well with the top three riders only having one rail each.

Being 30 plus degrees we Australians were all well aware of the stress on our mounts and were very careful in our horse management, making sure they were continuously walked, grazed and watered between rounds. We also warmed up as little as possible in order to conserve both riders' and horses' energy. Even with this horse management Val the super pony started to tire halfway through the second round. With a hell of a lot of might from both of us we were able to complete the round, again with only one rail. My teammates also put in a solid effort with us all finishing with a rail each.

After packing up the horses and handing out gifts to the horse owners we endured a tense wait for results. Something had gone wrong with the scoring which resulted in a huge discussion between the team managers. All the while I couldn't help but feel at the end of the day the scores meant nothing as I had had the best day riding an awesome little pony, which I was already planning on stuffing in my suitcase, for my country. With the friendship formed between all the teams I had already considered everyone a winner that day. Nonetheless we held our breath as the results were finally revealed and although quietly confident it was amazing to hear Australia called out in top spot. I was sure it was our horse excellent management that had gotten us through. We were followed by the USA, New Zealand and finally Canada. It was the perfect way to end a perfect day and a perfect trip with the best 20 something people you could ask for.

After receiving some very flamboyant rosettes and saddle blankets, that we are sure to treasure forever, we boarded the bus for one final time and headed back to Guelph to get ready for tea. As we entered the western style bistro with our countries uniform proudly displayed we were all looking forward to a big meal and a hell of a lot of fun riding the mechanical bull. After all of us were thrown from the bull, some sooner than others, we headed out the door with great sadness as the next day we were all heading home. After a manic uniform swap we all headed to bed saying goodbye to each other incase we didn't get the chance to in the morning.

Being the last to leave for the airport I jumped out of bed just in time to say a final see ya later to the teams as they headed out the door one last time. It was a day of mixed emotions, amongst the sadness of saying goodbye I couldn't help but feel ready to come home. As we boarded our flight home I knew that this would not be my last trip overseas, I had 12 special friends spread across four beautiful countries and a passport that doesn't expire for ten years. This Tassie girl is going to see the world.

I cannot thank pony club Tasmania and PCA enough for taking me on such a wonderful adventure. To all the organisers that put in tireless hours of work from arranging tryouts to arranging flights, I will be forever grateful. Thankyou to our team manager Michele for keeping us all alive for three weeks in a foreign country, no small feat with us lot! Thankyou to Judy Rose for she was not only a brilliant coach but an even better sport, putting up with our jokes and playing along with our antics. A massive thankyou has to be said to the wonderful Jaqui Dennis for spending over two years organizing an action packed three weeks for us to enjoy. I am so immensely proud to be part of the International Ponyclub movement and I hope many others are able to experience the remarkable Inter-Pacific Exchange in years to come. It has truly changed my life for the better. I will leave you with only one photo, as this is what the IPE is all about.

