



SYDNEY — I used to feel sorry for the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The giant arch was the city's pride for decades after it opened in 1932, the most impressive feat of engineering the nation had ever seen. It had taken thousands of workers almost a decade to join the north and south shores of Sydney Harbor with 52,000 tons of steel held together with some 6 million rivets. For years afterward, the handsome arch that locals call the Coathanger was the premier Aussie icon.

Then in 1973 the Sydney Opera House arrived and the Coathanger was pushed aside, at least as far as Australian pride and joy went. Sure, it was still a national symbol, but it became a bit of a frowsy older sister by comparison, and I felt bad

for the old girl.

The drab gray span was instantly outshone by architect Jorn Utzon's gorgeous structure, which sat gracefully right on the almost always impossibly blue harbor, its dazzling and brilliant white pavilions spread like billowing skirts at a ball.

But these days, the great, gray bridge is frumpy no more. Over the past eight years, more than a million people — including locals, tourists, and A-list celebrities — have clambered over the steely structure and looked down on the city, including that flashy opera house. Turns out the Sydney Harbour Bridge is now quite glam.

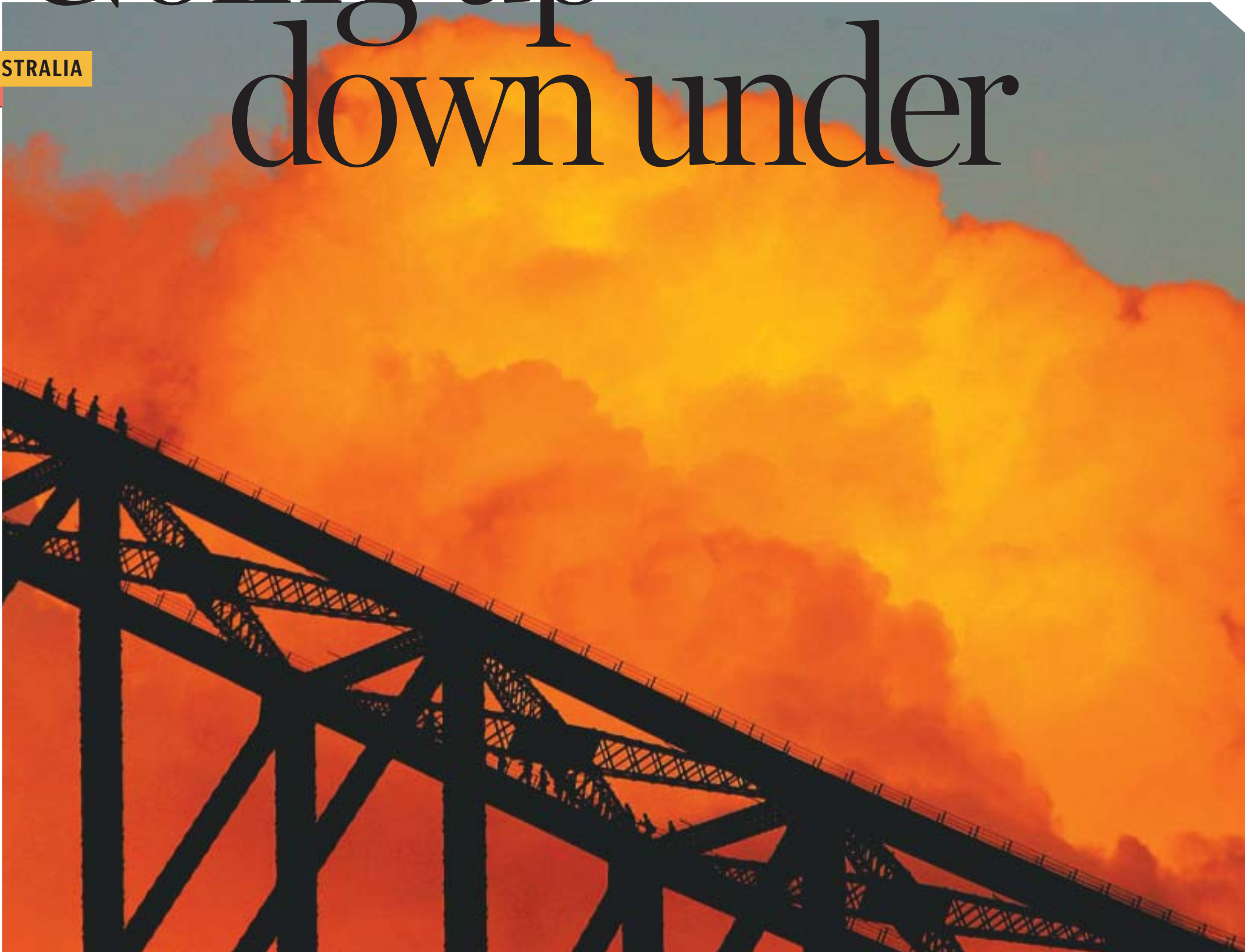
I grew up in the southwest of Sydney, a good 40 minutes away from the neighborhoods where

BRIDGE, Page M5

Going up down under

AN INNOVATIVE ARCH OF STEELY BEAUTY BECOMES A HEIGHT FOR MANY TO CONQUER
BY YVONNE ABRAHAM / GLOBE STAFF

AUSTRALIA



DAVID GRAY/REUTERS, JEAN-PIERRE PIEUCHOT/THE IMAGE BANK (TOP)

A cloud at sunset hangs over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the people climbing it. At top, the single-span arch bridge meets the harbor's other star, the Sydney Opera House, on the left.

His every delivery is out back

YOU CAN FLY ALONG TO THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PORT AUGUSTA — A rusty old refrigerator rested on its back in the desert. It was the only sign of human habitation on the burnt-orange landscape, at least as far as I could see — and I could see for quite a distance. Matthew Poole lifted the door of the fridge and dropped in a canvas sack full of mail.

"It'll stay dry in here," he said and secured the door.

It will *stay* dry? We were surrounded by parched desert in 110-degree heat of an El Niño summer. I figured that sack ought to be well protected inside the rusting hulk of metal. But, as I soon

discovered, nothing is as it appears in the desert.

That fridge was the communal mailbox at a remote cattle station, which turned out to be nearby but hidden by the bush and rolling terrain. And Poole, who was wearing a flight suit, was the local mailman; in the outback, the job description includes flying.

Each week, Poole covers more than one-third of the continent and four deserts on the world's longest mail run, a 1,480-mile plane trip that takes him to scattered cattle stations and mining towns. His twin-engine Aero Commander soars over areas completely inaccessible

MAIL RUN, Page M4



The outback cattle station Dulkaninna has a raised metal drum for a mailbox.

KARI J. BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



PHOTOS BY STEW MILNE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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Far and away the remotest route

► MAIL RUN
Continued from Page M1

sible by car. Towns and communities along the route are so remote it would take a week to reach many of them by four-wheel-drive vehicle. By plane, it takes Poole two days to make 21 deliveries.

For \$477 per person, up to two passengers can go on the mail run each week for a unique adventure. The trip departs Port Augusta in the state of South Australia on Wednesday morning, stops for the night in Birdsville, a town in southwestern Queensland, and returns to Port Augusta on Thursday afternoon.

Along the way, passengers can meet people who live in one of the most inhospitable regions on earth. Mulka, a cattle station along the mail route, has set records for being the driest permanently inhabited place in the world. It averages four inches of rain a year.

What I didn't realize until I arrived — the only passenger that week — was that it was a unique time to visit the area. Typically, the deserts of central Australia don't get much rain, but it had been an unusual season. Many of the deserts had flooded and Lake Eyre, which is normally a dry salt lake, was half full.

"So we can't make all the stops because the airstrips are too muddy," Poole explained, as we boarded the plane in Port Augusta that morning.

Poole ran through his safety check and wiped down the dew-covered windscreen with the cuff of his sleeve. At 8 a.m., he radioed Melbourne Centre air traffic control to let them know we were taking off and due at a town called Leigh Creek at 8:50 a.m.

We soared over the rust-colored earth and patchy scrub, the wet roads below us glowing in the sun. A morning haze crept through the mountain valleys and hung veil-like over a southern section of the Flinders Ranges. To the east, pockets of rain formed little puddles on the bronzed earth, and a chain of trees snaked across the landscape.

This was not the type of desert scene I had expected. Instead of smoothly textured sand dunes, there were bushes and scrub grass, winding creeks, and plenty of salt lakes. The water in Lake Eyre looked inviting and thirst-quenching — and has five times more salt than ocean water.

"It'll bloody kill ya if ya drink it," one Aussie told me. At 8:50 a.m. sharp, we arrived at Leigh Creek, where Poole loaded canvas mailbags into the belly of the plane. Leigh Creek is the so-called last stop of civilization before the truly rugged outback. People heading onto unpaved roads such as the Birdsville, Strzelecki, and Oodnadatta tracks load up on supplies here: car batteries, spare tires, and jugs of sunscreen, not to mention gas and water.

So we headed for Moolawatana, a small sheep station near the South Australia Dog Fence. This fence is the longest in the world and runs 3,293 miles across three states. It averages 6 feet high and was built to keep dingoes — a wild dog of Australia — away from sheep farms.

It was too wet to land at Moolawatana, so we shot north over the Strzelecki Desert, where the land was multicolored — white, red, green, rust, and spotted with dry scrub grass. From altitudes of 1,000 to 2,000 feet, we were able to see the texture and patterns of the desert landscape, the dips and bumps, the swirls of multicolored



PHOTOS BY KARI J. BODNARCHUK/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Like any civilized air terminal, the one in Birdsville has shelter, water, and separate rest rooms.



JOAN McLAUGHLIN/GLOBE STAFF

dirt, and the windblown marks that rippled the surface.

We made several more stops before passing over Cooper Creek, one of central Australia's main watering holes. The creek looked the color of pea soup because of the rain, and was surrounded by fiery orange soil.

After another stop, we arrived in Birdsville, just over the border into Queensland and on the edge of the Simpson Desert. This is a typical outback town, where kids ride their bikes up the middle of the street, local stockmen dip into the pub for a midday drink, and tourists roll through in four-wheelers.

There's a general store, a race museum, a gas station, and the Birdsville Hotel, a famous outback pub with a restaurant and rooms where mail-run travelers spend the night.

I joined Poole in the pub and as I scanned the menu, I realized

the humor was as dry as the air. We were sitting in 100-degree heat, about 600 miles from the ocean, where the mail comes once a week at most, and yet the appetizers on offer were "hot soup of the day" and "fried calamari with a spicy plum sauce." Not only that, the entrees were just about the most mouthwatering options I had seen on any Australian menu: scotch fillet with the sauce of the day, chicken breast pan-fried and caramelized in a honey and soy sauce, and kangaroo with a red currant and port glaze.

As I waited for my tomato and cheese sandwich, Poole told me the town was settled in the 1870s and now has a population of 70, "when everyone's at home." But each September, the population can swell to over 4,000 for the

Birdsville Races, two days of horseracing and entertainments that support medical services to the area.

On day two, we were scheduled to make about a dozen stops and only a few were inaccessible because of flooding. The time in between landings was anywhere from six to 20 minutes, so we rarely climbed above 1,000 feet.

We rolled across sand and scrub as we landed at Mungeranie, a cattle station that's home to South Australia's first pub, an important distinction judging by the huge sign posted there in the middle of absolutely nowhere.

Just after landing, a man with a long beard and two 11-year-old girls pulled up in a pickup. The truck kicked up a long trail of what the Aussie's call bull dust, the fine sandy dust of outback roads, and which took a good 10 minutes to settle, completely coating us in the process. We delivered a package: a birthday present to one of the girls that contained a pair of red socks with black horses on them. She was thrilled and began telling us about a birthday party she had had with 20 kids. When I asked where she found all those kids, she started pointing in every direction.

"Eighty kilometers [50 miles] that way there are two kids, at 120 kilometers there's one, at 140 there's five, and at 40 kilometers in that direction there are three . . ." she said, listing off all the partygoers. She was trying on her new socks as our plane pulled away.

As it turned out, life in record-breaking Mulka seemed bearable. When we landed there, Margie and Garry Overton, the station managers, came out to meet us. As we leaned against the parked plane, rearranging our footprints on the dusty red earth, I asked them how they survived, mentally, in such a remote and scorching place.

"I reckon some people couldn't manage it, but it's bloody excellent out here," Garry Overton said. "There's heaps of space, plenty of room to breathe and no one gets in your way. And the heat's all

If you go . . .

The best time to explore the outback is mid-April to mid-October, when temperatures are cooler, but the trip runs year-round. Pilots may not be able to take passengers when there is a lot of mail, especially around the holidays.

Channel Mail Run from Port Augusta to Birdsville

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right, you just get used to it, I guess."

Margie Overton said that without her satellite phone, she would go a little crazy. But they kept in close touch with friends and relatives by phone, and occasionally hopped a flight to Port Augusta or drove to Melbourne. Once in a while, friends came to visit, bringing with them good company and, at Margie's insistence, plenty of books. In fact, we were bringing a box of her old books back to Port Augusta.

"There's no rubbish pickup out here," said Poole, "so if something isn't driven out of the outback by truck or plane, it just gets burned."

Or, like that refrigerator, it just sprawls on its back in the blistering sun and rusts away.

We were forced to skip the last two stops because of muddy surfaces and flooding. "Maybe next week," Poole said, matter-of-factly. "Or the week after."

There is no overnight delivery in the outback, and the mail does not arrive in high water. But it gets there, eventually.

Contact Kari Bodnarchuk, a freelance writer in Portland, Maine, at travelwriter@karib.us.

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