

14th World Dbl Conference, Perth, Western Australia 2007

I was sitting in a large comfortable leather swivelling arm chair, drink in hand and being waited on by young women of all colours but each with an attractive smile. Was I in heaven? Well, nearly. I was in first class of an Emirates aeroplane heading for Perth, Western Australia. I don't normally travel first class but what had happened was that I had got a little lost mid way between Dubai and Perth (in the plane, of course) and had been rescued by a flight attendant. Upon realising that I had a sight problem he asked me to pick up my backpack and follow him. We got to business class and I thought "this is good" but he told me to keep walking and so we arrived in first class. When we arrived at Perth Airport he gave me a big bag of goodies and said "Welcome to Australia" and handed me over to a beaming Emirates lady. I was the first one off the flight and was whisked through Immigration. I was met by an airport worker (I had not asked for this but God works in mysterious ways) and she found my luggage on the carousel and took me through to the public area. There was a strong smell of fish everywhere and I remarked upon that. She told me that there were hundreds of incoming passengers importing fish from eastern Asia. I didn't know you could put fish in your luggage: I suppose that's a good way of getting more leg room.

It was about 1.30 am WA time and my brand-new friend, Yasas, was waiting for me. I say brand-new as I had never met him before. I found him via a mutual friend in London and as we drove through the sprawling suburbs of Perth on the way to his home in Freemantle, we found that we got on very well. I stayed with him in his home for a couple of days and on the Sunday he drove me to the Burswood Hotel in Perth. This turned out to be posh hotel and the staff were very helpful to me. I was a little alarmed at first to find that both the receptionists looked like ghosts, their faces being painted white. The Aussies are quite scared of skin cancer. The foyer and the dining room were very dark (even by normal standards) and I think this is because the Aussies reckon they have enough sunlight in their lives and are cutting out as much as possible.

I was attending the 14th Dbl World Conference, representing Sense. I have Usher Syndrome type II but I can get around pretty well. However I was persuaded to make use of guides for the Conference and I am glad about that. I've never had a guide in my life before and it is a joy to be picked up from one's hotel in the morning, taken to the Burswood Convention Centre and be helped all day. My guides were all women who normally worked for Senses Foundation (SF) the equivalent in WA of Sense. They were excellent at their job and I was very glad of them because the conference centre is enormous and (wait for it!) rather dark. Even with a guide it was difficult to track down some of the presentations which were spread all over the building.

I always enjoy myself at conferences but I have to say there were serious deficiencies at this particular event. I feel that there were far too many participants. The quality of some of the presentations was questionable and one couldn't avoid the feeling that some of them had been thrown together in order to "justify" a visit to the "lucky country".

Amazingly, the conference centre had no installed induction loop/infra-red system and one was installed especially for the Conference – and removed afterwards. It didn't work at all for the first day.

The banquet / dance was held on the Saturday night and I regret to say that the "music" was the loudest and worst I have ever heard. However, the seeing, hearing dancers appeared to enjoy themselves perhaps aided by the fact that they couldn't see or hear

each other! I think that organising the Conference was an enormous task for SF and they were overwhelmed. I must say that all the SF and Dbl people were charm itself but they do have a lot to learn about keeping the needs of people with sensory loss in the forefronts of their minds.

My paper (Identification and Control by UN Member States of Weapons Designed to Cause Blindness and/or Deafness) was presented at 9.00am on the Sunday morning and surprise, surprise... it was not a sell-out. However I do hope you read it as it is on my blog (bennettsworld.blogspot.com) and is easy to find.

After the conference I enrolled, together with Annina from Germany who acted as my guide, for a five-day coach trip with Pinnacles Tours north of Perth. I was treated very well and I shall be writing about this interesting experience. I will just say one thing now: WA is VERY big - it is about 30% of Australia's area which is some 3 million sq miles!

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