

TRAVEL



The old-fashioned pleasure of train travel adds to the excitement of a trip to Dubbo Zoo.

Two by two to Dubbo Zoo

Travelling out west on a train and braving the wilds of Dubbo proved the perfect way for WILLIAM VERITY to bond with his son.

THINGS WERE GOING WELL UNTIL WE came to the bongo.

"What's a bongo?" inquired the seven-year-old. "No idea," I replied.

The animal turned out to look like one half of a pushmi-pullyu from *Dr Dolittle*, an antelope-type creature, harmlessly chewing the cud in one corner of its pen.

Was it my imagination, or did it have an evil twinkle of foreboding in its doey eye?

Much more interesting than the bongo were the otters, on the left a little way along the gravel path at Taronga Western Plains Zoo.

They were frisky creatures and the children giggled with abandon as they ran up and down the enclosure, trying to keep up with the excitable animals.

When the otters dived into the water we could see them through the glass, fur flattened and sleek as they shimmied their way to the other side.

Such a good time was being had that I only just caught sight of our tour guide as she disappeared around the curve in the path and back to our waiting coach.

"Come on, we need to get going," I said to my son.

We set off back towards the bongo and, like idiots, we turned left when the path diverged.

One of the great advantages of joining a coach tour is that you don't have think for yourself.

All the planning is done for you, so when you arrive at the zoo on the outskirts of Dubbo you find yourself swept from one feeding to the next.

The meerkats came first; funny little creatures related to the mongoose who scurry about on all fours before abruptly stopping and lifting themselves up on their hind legs for a good look around.

There there are the giraffes - strange and beautiful creatures who seem to float above the ground as they canter in unison.

Or Cuddle, the only African elephant remaining in Australia as all others are Asian. However at 42 years old she is not long for this earth.

Cuddle is a charmer, an accomplished performer who waved to the crowd with the tip of her trunk, stacked tyres and pushed heavy logs in return for snacks from her keeper.

The disadvantage of a coach tour, of course, is that there is little room to think for yourself.

So when your tour leader disappears, with your group in tow, you're in trouble.

With panic rising, suppressed for the benefit of the boy, we found ourselves at the African Picnic Grounds - a very Australian barbecue area where we had morning tea an hour previously.

Soon enough, we were lost in the wilds, surrounded by tigers, lions, meerkats, a bongo and - the most dangerous animal of them all - hippopotamuses.

The boy couldn't take any more and refused to budge, sobs drowning out the chattering of the gibbons nearby.

Eventually, he was persuaded back to the entrance kiosk, where I found a stray \$2 coin in my pocket and we buy the only thing we can afford for lunch - a \$1 lolly bag each.

Taronga Western Plains Zoo is undoubtedly the major tourist attraction of Dubbo, a central west town which owes its existence to the confluence of the Macquarie and Talbragar rivers and the Mitchell and the Newell highways.

But the package offered by Countrylink includes more than that - a trip through the town's civic sights - the Old Dubbo Gaol, the Western Plains Cultural Centre, a Japanese garden, an Aboriginal sacred site on the banks of a river and (purportedly), Australia's best pies.

We were also treated to an optional extra, a trike tour of the town courtesy of former policeman Peter Judd, owner of Trike Adventures.

He's an affable and informative guide who drives well within the capabilities of his two-litre, Volkswagen engine.

Though the tour lasted only an hour (he offers other options), it was more than enough to orient ourselves. Dubbo is a thriving town, though not a complicated

one to navigate.

When you book through CountryLink it can be said that your journey is your destination.

While trains have never quite entered the Australian psyche in the way they have in Europe, or even America, there is still something romantic about boarding a train in Sydney that stops at places with names like Rydal, Tarana, Stuart Town and Geurie.

It's an old-fashioned pleasure, and a joy to be making a journey that doesn't involve security checks, endless waiting around, or \$70 imposts on baggage.

On a train there's a sense of community and relaxation that you miss entirely as a motorist.

You are thrust together with strangers, engendering camaraderie.

With them you see the country in a way not unfamiliar to travellers in the 19th century, and pass through some grand old stations dating back to the glory days of rail.

Three days was enough to see the coast from the perspective of the bush, and enough for a father to feel closer to his child.

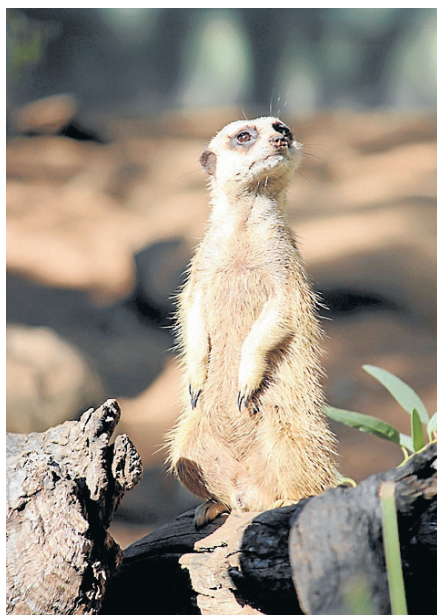
■ William Verity and his son travelled on the Dubbo Zoo Country NSW Escape courtesy of CountryLink.

Trip tips

■ CountryLink offers the three-day Dubbo Zoo Country NSW Escape from \$404 per person twin share.

■ Price includes two nights accommodation, entry to Taronga Western Plains Zoo, coach transport in Dubbo as well as visits to Old Dubbo Gaol, the Western Plains Cultural Centre and the Japanese gardens.

■ Details: 13 28 29 or countrylink.info.



A meerkat, one of the zoo's many attractions, takes a good look around.