

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK SIXTEEN, (MT ISA):
BROKEN LESDARS: WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY
(AND A BOWL OF PEA & HAM SOUP) MAKES...

*"I can summarise it in one word for you: sh*t... You can write that 100 times, and that would be accurate..."*

And so we have "David's" response to my question about what life was like in Mt Isa for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Indeed this was the impression I was given of Mt Isa before I arrived on yet another leg of my "oh my god, you are not seriously going there, you'll be run out of tour" national tour of regional, rural and remote Australia.

Yet soon came clarification.

"It's hard being one of the only city-oriented gay guys in a rural area..."



I was interested in what would bring Brisbane-born and bred David, who joined the military at 19, to a rural mining town area where there are so many bad stories of homophobia and non-heterosexual life.

"I really wasn't thinking at the time... I probably wanted to get out of Brisbane more than anything... I thought working in a rural town might be fun and I wanted to keep a friend company..."

Not only was he swayed by the offer to spend 12 months with his good (straight) friend in Mt Isa, David also held a curiosity for rural

Australian life.

“I’d never really been out to a rural area before...I’d always been fascinated with rural areas and how they operate...Just from watching the Royal Flying Doctor Service on TV and just the way that emergency services differ from the city...”

Working as a local medical health professional, David had an interesting journey to that role. Raised in a military family that included significant time spent in South East Asian countries, he decided at 19 to follow in his father’s footsteps and joined the army. When I asked if he’d been concerned beforehand that being gay might not be compatible with military life, David was clear.

“The fact that I grew up in a military family, I knew a lot about the workings of the army and knew that wouldn’t be a problem...Not in the Australian Army anyway...You’re not encouraged to talk about your sex life, but...They’d ask if I had a girlfriend, then I’d say no, then they’d ask if I had a boyfriend...There are quite a few gays in the army...”

It was during this time that David came out to his father, although it seems that he’d known since David was 18.

“My dad knew I was gay since I was 18...He found sites on the internet before I knew how to delete histories and that...He didn’t say anything for years until I came out...He said he pretty much knew...”

Before long David felt a need to change career paths.

“I got sick of the discipline and strategic planning side of things and felt I’d done all I could do in the military...”

His next move was not what his parents might have expected.

“I worked in [male] sex on premises venues...Dad didn’t really know what they were...I said, ‘I work in a gentlemen’s club’, but he doesn’t care about what I do if it’s not in the army...Mum wasn’t happy because she works in pathology so knows all about what can happen there...”

When I suggest later that David could write a book about his experiences, he laughs.

“Yeah...Memoirs Of A Jizz Mopper...The first line could be, ‘I certainly wasn’t born into the life of a jizz mopper...’...”

Moving to Mt Isa has meant that David’s social life has changed somewhat from his time in Brisbane. He expressed concern about whether he might be the only gay in the mining village.



“It was probably my biggest worry...I actually talked to my friend about it...He assured me there were plenty of gays in The Isa...He said that yes, I would get sex from somewhere...”

So whilst there seems to be non-heterosexual life in “The Isa” (as locals call it), it differs to David’s experiences in metropolitan Australia.

“Very much they are very underground and sheltered and they don’t need to be...I can’t go out and socialize like I used to like I did in Brisbane...There’s less opportunities to make friends because it’s kind of integrated into the straight scene...So you might say they lose their identity...”



Noting that Perth and Darwin’s gay nightspots are tending towards a mixed environment of gay and straight patrons, I asked if this was a model that worked.

“If it is a model then it doesn’t work...For the gays, there are no real opportunities to express themselves...”

Having only been to be a “mixed” venue in Darwin a few weeks before, I read with some concern that “Shane” (see Adelaide, Kimberleys and Darwin blogs) would have as his Facebook status update this week:

“Shane” is is not a fan of mixed gay/straight nightclubs...A bunch of insecure straight men make point of hugging and kissing their girlfriend so that everyone knows they’re not a poof...And a whole lot of straight women who have come to gawk and say, “ahhhh how cute”...

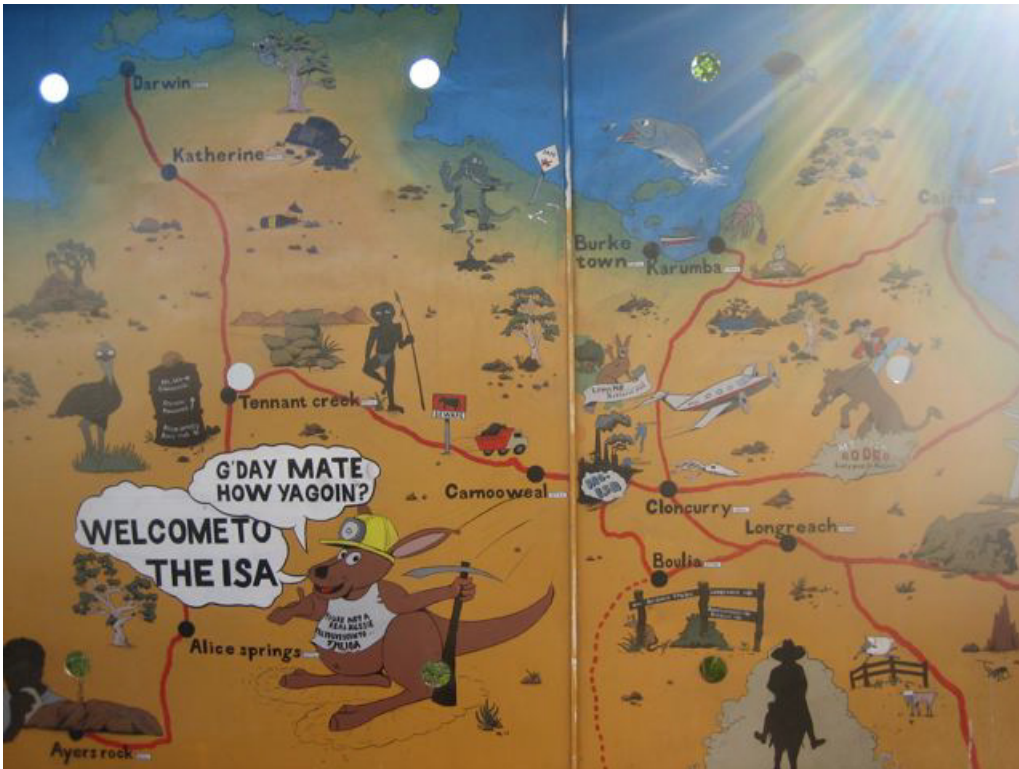


He would add:

And to top my Darwin clubbing experience off, on my way into the city I had a bottle thrown at my head from a moving car accompanied by “FAGGOT” ... Luckily my ninja-like reflexes or their crappy aim insured my safety...

Yet my “going out” experiences in Mt Isa were relatively uneventful, perhaps even tame (more on hitting The Isa nightlife later). Following my interview with him, David would ask if I wanted to come to the movies as he had been wanting to watch a particular movie. At first customarily paranoid about blurring the personal and professional, I decided to tag along.

Once in the cinema I took in the previews. Then it happened. The movie trailer for a new installment of a movie franchise with impossibly attractive teenage vampires came on. SLAP! David, without possibly even knowing it, had slapped me hard on the arm, saying “Oh my God!”.



I laughed to myself. Am I in Mt Isa or with a younger gay friend sitting in Melbourne’s Jam Factory movie complex? For a few hours in an Mt Isa cinema I would escape to a place that seemed very far away from rural Queensland.

Coming to Mt Isa I was mindful that it was infamous for it’s Mayor, John Molony who put out an invitation to “ugly girls” or “beauty-disadvantaged” women to come to the town. His rationale was that men outnumber women in the town five to one, and that this would mean they could find happiness with a local man.



Locals were blunt when discussing their “beloved” Mayor.

“[Groans]...He is straight from the 1950s: racist, sexist and homophobic...In his mind he’s still in the 1950s...He grew up in Camooweal [west of Mt Isa] where they probably were chaining up Aboriginals by the ankles...It’s unfortunate that the people who vote [in local elections] here are the locals that are born and bred...”

If you would believe popular opinion, then it’s difficult to for men to meet single women in The Isa. Yet this was not my experience whilst going to one of the local gyms. Standing waiting for a group fitness class to commence, I had the attractive young female instructor approach me and proceed to flirt with me outrageously. Only the week before I’d had a similar experience in Alice Springs. When approached by anyone and subjected to flirting I typically start blushing and responding to any question very nervously and invariably with one-word mumbles. I fear that this did nothing to communicate very clearly that I was gay (I thought my long soccer socks and the attendance of a group fitness



class might trigger it) and so I might have made the situation even worse.

Message to straight men in The Isa wanting to meet fit young women: go to group fitness classes at the gym and just stand there and wait!

Lamenting and questioning why women were seemingly throwing themselves at me and that all the local men wouldn't know I was alive, I kept going to the gym to extend this humiliation.

The first person I talked to at the gym that week was “Jill”, the staff



member that day on the reception counter. I looked into Jill's eyes on the first day and saw something familiar: a haunted look. In Jill's eyes I saw a depth that most could never know with a story that most would never hear. I noticed this because it is something I see in the eyes of many LGBT people, almost like a sadness, even a hopeful sadness (which is all an ongoing developing theory in my head).

A few days later I found myself after a group fitness class sitting on the stage with Jill. Everyone had left, and she immediately apologised for not leading a good enough class. Not agreeing with her yet understanding her perfectionist tendencies, our conversation would turn into a long debrief about Jill's time with the gym, some ongoing dissatisfaction and not knowing where she was at with living in Mt Isa.

As I sat there looking across the empty room I thought, "How do you always find yourself here?...Yet again a D&M with a seeming stranger..." I half-laughed to myself.

Only knowing the basics of my tour, Jill asked for details of a radio interview I had given. How did it go? Which station? I mentioned it was Melbourne's JOY94.9FM and she nodded almost knowingly and smiling. Still I did not click.

"So is this something you are doing off your own bat?..."

I said yes, explained it was a national challenging homophobia tour and gave her one of my business cards.

"Homophobia?...I didn't know you were here for that..."

I talked a little about trying to explode some of the myths about LGBT life in regional, rural and remote Australia, including trying to highlight all the positive stories.

"Yeah...Everyone was worried when I came up here and I thought I'd have to be really quiet about sexuality..."

Oh. Then I realised. Again I half-laughed to myself. My "lesdar" had been temporarily broken.

Jill told me that when she first arrived in Mt Isa she was surprised that there was an openly gay instructor.

"He was really very confident...It surprised me that he was so accepted by everyone..."

Certainly Jill came to Mt Isa less confident about what it might hold for her. Describing herself as "lost" in metropolitan Sydney after a break-up, Jill answered the call of a friend who had broken her collarbone.



“She said, ‘Come up and stay here for a few weeks and get away from it all’...”

Yet Jill almost didn't get there. Standing at the bus station watching the bus to Mt Isa filling up, she called her friend in hysterical tears.

“I'm not coming...”

“Why [Jill]...”

“I can't...I've seen the people getting on that bus...I'm not getting on the bus if they are the type of people in Mt Isa!...”

“[Jill] get on the bus!...”

Jill would rebook herself on a later bus and find herself in Mt Isa. Nine months later, Jill is not leaving anytime soon.



“Mt Isa is like a half-way town for people who are lost or running away from something...”

Jill clearly included herself in this category. “Jon”, a former cattle rustler, would agree.

“The Isa is like a half-way house...[chuckles]...”

A young gay man who had been born and bred in The Isa, Jon invited me for drinks at the two main watering holes in the town. I went somewhat reluctantly, mainly because a member of the local police force had said of one of them:

“We send a van to sit out the front of [the venue] because we know



that brawls are going to happen...It's actually a very violent town... [Gay men] do get bashed but they are not reporting it...If they are coming to the [police] counter, the only gay male officer is often sent to deal with it..."

When I mentioned if the Queensland Police Force had a local Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer (GLLO), the response was no.

"We really need to have one here..."

[N.B. A conversation would ensue that included giving details of GLLO contacts which I was assured would be followed up.]

But back to my going out experience in The Isa. Jon had been working on a cattle station until only recently. Deciding to do this soon after finishing high school, his parents were unsure if it would be a good idea. Yet for Jon, out as gay to family and friends in high school, it was essential.



"I really needed that time away to get my head together and work out that I was actually gay...It was just what I needed even though my parents were worried that a male-dominated environment like that would not be the best place for me to work it all out..."

Refreshingly Australian in his accent, Jon told me how he came out to everyone on the remote cattle station after 6 months. By all accounts it was taken well. Jon knew it was "all good" after an incident where all the cattle station workers headed into Camooweal (west of Mt Isa on the Barkly Highway) one Saturday night.

"I didn't even hear it, but apparently some guy walked past our table



and said, 'There's that faggot that works on [said cattle station]'...If I'd heard it I would've said, 'Just leave it, it doesn't matter', but they asked this guy if he had a problem and he went away...I said to 'em later, 'Thanks for sticking up for me guys', and they said, 'Nah, you've done your time, you've worked hard, you're one of us...What you do in the bedroom doesn't matter to us mate'..."

In a romantic modern tale of gay love in remote Australia, Jon would meet a fellow cattle rustler, "Gary", who was also working out how he felt about being gay (and choosing to do so on a remote cattle station). When love blossomed the two decided to drive back to Melbourne where Gary's parents lived.

After meeting Gary's parents, Jon had an eerily coincidental experience. Showing interest in art at high school, Jon recounted how he'd worked on a project that involved trying to find if a very valuable painting was owned privately or by some public institute. Unable to find out the answer to this question when he could not locate the painting, Jon was in shock when he was at Gary's parents for the first time. In a seemingly random home far away from The Isa Jon would walk past that very elusive painting that belonged to Gary's father.

"I couldn't believe it..."

Enjoying a rather tame night at The Isa's local watering holes, I would meet one of his friends, a teacher at the local government high school. I was interested in talking to her, whilst being mindful to not hijack her downtime at the end of a working week, because of my rather lackluster and mediocre start to my own working week Mt Isa.

Out of practice given the great support of my hosts, the Northern Territory Aids and Hepatitis Council (NTAHC), in Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine, I would make the customary calls to the local schools: one Catholic, one government.

Typically I do whatever is required to bypass the administration team (exclusively women) that answer the school's phone calls. In 99% of cases it is very easy to speak to the head of student welfare who then invariably is open to a cuppa-inspired interview.

This would not happen this week. Feeling a little relaxed after such good experiences recently, I suddenly found myself explaining the project to one of the school's administration team. When it became clear that she was freaking out I reacted and agreed to speak to the school principal. I know better than most how school principals are sometimes the last people you want to talk to in a school given the regular conversations I have with welfare staff who are opposed to their principal's stance on all things affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia (before I get a flurry of e-mails I do know



there are great exceptions to the rule, but too few).

The Mt Isa school principal sat and listened before telling me off as my Grade 2 teacher might have.

“Well you certainly haven’t given us much time, have you...I mean, we are incredibly busy...”

I agreed with her (thinking, ‘You and the rest of the free world...’), explained the logistics of the tour and the cooperation of the majority of schools across regional and rural Australia thus far. That cheeky bit of leverage didn’t seem to work.

I thought that calling on the Monday and asking if anyone, including herself, might have 15 to 20 minutes that week to talk about what life is like for gay and lesbian young students might be a reasonable request (given most student welfare staff have agreed to meet within the next 24-48 hours!).



“Well I’ll talk to some of my staff and get them to call you back if they have time...”

Again, out of practice, I thanked her without asking her to call back to give me a decision either way. Instead I would be met with silence from that school: no-one called back.

When I managed to pick up the phone and do exactly the same thing with the local Catholic school (a Deputy Principal would never get back to me) I would get grumpy with the rest of the world, and then eventually myself. After such a refreshingly straightforward time in the



Northern Territory, it all suddenly felt too hard. Maybe people were right about Mt Isa. Maybe I'd end the week not talking to anyone. "Why did I even come here?..."

Taking the rest of the day to blog and do some overdue e-mails, I would pick up the phone on the Tuesday and make a series of phone calls I did not completely have my heart in. Expecting the worst, I called the Police & Citizen's Youth Centre (PCYC) and was pleasantly surprised.

The next day I would find myself seated with "Jane". Having worked in a role with local schools recently, she would immediately give me some context for the cold shoulder from the local government school principal.

"Last year [the situation with homophobic language and behaviour at the school] got pretty ugly and I think that [the principal] was very non-challenging of it...I'm very frustrated out here...I think they are neglecting it..."

Later another local said, "[The school principal] has got issues..."

Parents seem to be a barrier for progress.

"The parents here are special...Introducing anything...We find it hard to introduce anything, for example a simple international day..."

The locals, who were concerned about me directly quoting them had a number of blunt assessments of Mt Isa, the apparent "Rodeo Capital of Australia" as a place to live and the people who inhabit it. A selection of quotes include:

"I don't think they promote anything in this town unless it's a cow, a horse or a mine...You're either a miner or a cowboy...They really need to sit and watch Brokeback Mountain a few times..."

"[Locals] don't travel past Townsville for their whole lives...But they are good people, they'd give you a kidney if you wanted one, but still..."

"It's a small town...It's like, 'Oh, you got 6 rolls of toilet paper...Last week was only 4...Is everything OK?'...You couldn't buy a condom here without 27 people knowing..."

"It's hard to find people for everyday jobs here...If you are born and bred here you know you'll get a \$90 000 job driving a truck at the mines, so why would you work for [retail chain] or [restaurant chain]... There's just too many jobs here..."

Back at the PCYC with Jane I was treated to a homemade bowl of



pea and ham soup. She explained that life would be tough for local LGBT young people, yet the adult community might have different experiences.

“There’s still so much stigma attached to stepping forward about being gay...At the same time they have good representation of gay and lesbian people here...But they could do better at being open and visible...[laughs]...I’ve just come from Cloncurry [small community east of Mt Isa] so it doesn’t feel that bad at the moment...”

Explaining my project and discussing my response from schools, Jane made it all seem very easy. One phone call later and within 5 minutes a school liaison officer would make her way down to the PCYC. That officer would then get me in direct contact with the school chaplain from the local government high school.



I sat and felt a reassuring wave wash over me. For months now I have been reminding myself to “trust the process”. When I come to a town with no contacts, the challenge is to sit for one cuppa with a local. It might take a few phone calls, but when someone finally does sit down with me they are invariably reassured and very quick to make my time contacting other locals incredibly easy. As Jane demonstrated, sometimes they will contact those people for me.

Jane was very positive about the possibilities for Mt Isa.

“In the big cities, PCYC’s are businesses, but in this town I’m hoping to make it cater to all groups in the community...Someone people can come down to have a chat with...We would definitely be open to having someone based here...”



Not that there was currently much around.

“There’s no resources whatsoever to be honest...To see a counselor you are looking at a 6 week wait...It’s so difficult to get someone to get back to you...”

Across town talking to local counselors, they had little knowledge of resources for LGBT people.

“I haven’t seen anything about this...The best I could do is probably get online if I had a young person come out...”

This clearly is having an impact on providing good quality counseling to locals.

“We counsel them as if they were straight because we don’t know the research and what else to do...”

[I would introduce them to Writing Themselves In Again research (www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay) amongst other resources.]

“I’ve very much learnt through practice: don’t assume...I’ve even made mistakes whilst counseling a couple...”

Yet there was a memory of “some training about that a few years ago...”

At Young People Ahead, a youth organisation in Mt Isa specializing in youth emergency housing and drug and alcohol issues, “Trish” and “Leigh” recalled the training well.

“There has only been training offered once in my three years here... We sent staff and the feedback was really good...They got a lot out of that...”

The feedback from this service and all the others I spoke to was that training really didn’t ever come to Mt Isa.

“Training is very limited and because we’re so isolated...”

“Mt Isa lacks good quality training...Usually there is a waiting list for training when it actually comes to us...”

Not that LGBT young people are open at Trish and Leigh’s service.

“It’s not something that comes up on the radar...Young people don’t identify any of their sexual stuff with us...Sometimes we employ staff who are gay...Some staff are comfortable with young people knowing about that, and some not...”



It was an incident with staff that forced “Leigh” to reflect on her own practice. With rumours amongst young people that some of the staff might be gay, she decided that it was time to address it at a staff meeting.

*“I know I had to have a conversation with staff and I was shaking...I was sh*tting myself...I think it’s cos I didn’t know how they were going to respond...I was just really open in saying I wasn’t exactly sure how to say it...But I worked out I was the one with the issue...Everyone else was OK< I was the one who was a mess...The feedback was great...They said I handled it really well...”*

Leigh’s experience is perhaps something that other managers might learn from.

“Now it’s OK...I’ve done it once and I can do it again...If I was to have that conversation again it would be easy...”

As another week in regional and rural Australia came to a close I thought about my new gay bff (best friend forever), the local workers who are a small investment away from doing really great work and Jill who I wanted to spend more time with (practically “raised” by lesbians in my formative baby gay years I realised I’d been missing “women who love women” energy lately).

It certainly had been a week of pleasant surprises. An appropriate quote to end goes to Jon who was surprised that I’d missed the billboard as I drove into Mt Isa proclaiming it as “The Birthplace Of Champions” given Greg Norman and Patrick Rafter were born here.

“Obviously ya didn’t do ya research, did ya?!...”

No Jon, I most certainly didn’t.

