

Lesson 2 Traveling Green

Exploring Nature in Australia

This past summer, I had the remarkable opportunity to spend a month in Australia. My uncle, a wildlife biologist conducting research on Australian animals, invited me to join him on an ecotour. Knowing that I was passionate about animals and nature, he thought this would be a great experience. Upon arriving in Melbourne, I was greeted by the chilly air, a sharp contrast to the humid heat I had left behind in Korea. Realizing where I was made me even more excited about my adventure ahead. My trip to Australia was filled with visits to remarkable places and encounters with incredible nature. I will share four of the most memorable destinations from my journey.

PHILLIP ISLAND: The Penguin Parade

Our first destination was Phillip Island, which is just a two-hour drive from Melbourne and is famous for its "penguin parade." This unique parade features little blue penguins, measuring only 35 to 42 centimeters in height — slightly bigger than a bowling pin! When we arrived at the beach, we were guided to carefully designed viewing platforms to avoid disturbing the penguins. We were also prohibited from taking photos, as bright lights and sudden flashes could frighten them.

The penguin parade took place in the evening when the penguins returned from the ocean to the shore. The penguins leave their burrows early in the morning, spend the day fishing, and then come home to feed their young and rest. Everyone watched silently as these little two-legged creatures returned home. Hundreds of penguins, each incredibly cute, created an unforgettable sight! We even saw some baby penguins come to greet their parents, which was a heartwarming sight.

After the parade, we explored the visitor center, where we saw colorful penguin jumpers placed over toy penguins. These jumpers played a significant role during the big oil spill of 2001. They kept the penguins from swallowing the oil that stuck to their feathers. It was touching to learn how many people cared about the penguins and tried their best to protect them in creative ways.

THE GREAT BARRIER REEF: Underwater Wonder

One of the sites I was most excited about was the Great Barrier Reef, the world's largest coral reef system. There are several regions you can visit to see it, and I chose to explore Lady Elliot Island in the southern region, which is known for its beautiful coral reefs and manta rays.

As our plane approached land, I spotted the Great Barrier Reef, stretching as far as I could see. The water was different shades of blue and green, depending on the depth of the sea and the coral formations underneath. Endless patches of white sand added to the breathtaking scenery. It was so beautiful, and I couldn't wait to dive into the crystal-clear water!

As I wanted to explore the coral reef more closely, I went snorkeling. The first sight that greeted me in the water was manta rays. Even though they are endangered, I witnessed many mantas gliding elegantly through the water. I also encountered sea turtles and a school of tropical fish. It was the coral reef, however, that impressed me the most that day. It was a spectacular burst of colors and life! My uncle later informed me that many parts of the Great Barrier Reef, especially in the northern region, suffer from coral bleaching, which turns the reef white. I felt bad when I heard that and hoped the reef would recover soon.

KAKADU NATIONAL PARK:

A Living Cultural Landscape

Kakadu National Park is the largest national park in northern Australia. Although the trip was long and tiring, the park's natural beauty immediately revitalized us. The landscape resembled an ocean filled with green eucalyptus trees, and the air was incredibly refreshing! Perhaps the only drawback was that being in a remote region, we had no Wi-Fi connection. However, we quickly adapted and embraced the quiet and peaceful vacation atmosphere.

One of the highlights of our visit there was our tour led by Victor, an Aboriginal guide. He explained that Kakadu has been home to Aboriginal people for over 40,000 years. He also introduced us to rock art sites depicting Aboriginal stories. One drawing that I found particularly interesting was done in an X-ray style, illustrating the insides of a fish to show which parts were edible. Other fascinating drawings showed things like a spirit creating lightning and a hunter holding a spear.

Kakadu is also famous for its saltwater crocodiles, as there are around 10,000 living in the region. They are the largest of all crocodile species and grow up to six meters long! While crossing the Yellow River, we spotted over 30 of them! Being able to see them right in front of me was an experience that I will never forget.

ULURU: A Mysterious Rock

Our final destination was Uluru, the largest rock in the world. I've longed to see it in person ever since I came across a picture of it a few years ago. When I finally laid eyes on Uluru after an exhausting train ride, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Could this gigantic mountain really be a single piece of rock? From a distance, it looked like a huge red dome, providing an amazing contrast against the clear blue sky.

The next day, we walked around its 10-kilometer base. Along the way, we saw numerous caves, some of which displayed a distinct gray hue. My uncle informed me that Uluru was naturally gray, but that its iron content had oxidized over time, giving it its iconic red color.

The highlight of our visit was the sunset. Prior to my trip, I had learned that the color of the sunsets at Uluru changes over time based on the sun's position and the intensity of sunlight. When I finally saw one, the colors transformed from red to deep orange and then to purple as the sun sank below the horizon. It was impossible to find words to describe the beauty I was seeing. It was the most memorable night of my entire journey.